

Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program gets funding boost

The U.S. Department of Agriculture will put \$158 million into the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program in the 2011-12 school year, an increase of \$48 million compared with the 2010-11 school year.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack on March 23 said the USDA will expand assistance in line with mandatory spending authorized by the 2008 farm bill.

The farm bill allowed for ramped-up funding for the program, with \$110 million set aside for the program in fiscal year 2011 and maxing out at \$150 million in fiscal year 2012.

The USDA also is adding \$8 million in unspent program funds for the upcoming school year, said Lorelei DiSogra, vice president of nutrition and health for the Washington, D.C.-based United Fresh Produce Association.

“This is a huge jump up,” she said. “Every state will be able to add another 50% more schools.”

The funds will provide free fresh fruit and vegetables to children throughout the school day, and is targeted to elementary students in low income schools in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

The program began as a \$6 million pilot project authorized by the 2002 farm bill. At the time, the pilot project only served selected schools in four states and one Indian reservation.

For the 2011-12 school year, the USDA will provide \$158 million in funding to state agencies, which then select schools to participate based on the law’s criteria. Under the law, each student receives between \$50 and \$75 worth of fresh produce over the course of the school year.

Kevin Concannon, USDA under secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, said the program serves more than 5,000 elementary schools that have significant numbers of low income children.

In visits to schools across the country, he said there is strong support for free fruit and vegetable snacks from students, staff, administrators and school nurses.

“I’ve heard nothing but the highest praise for the Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Program,” Concannon said. Students are educated about where fruits and vegetables come from and also about healthy eating, he said.

“We also know from our experience that to the extent you can educate (students), they will bring some of that back home,” he said.

Concannon said the additional funds for the 2011-12 school year should allow the program to serve an additional 600,000 to 950,000 children. In total, the program will serve 2 million to 2.5 million children fresh fruits and vegetables each school day of the year, he said.