



Grateful Grazing: A Journey Through California's Harvest Brings Together School Nutrition and Agriculture Leaders

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SACRAMENTO, Calif., Nov. 15, 2024 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- The Dairy Council of California, in collaboration with the California Beef Council and California Grown, recently hosted *Grateful Grazing: A Journey Through California's Harvest*, an immersive educational event designed to connect leaders in school nutrition with California agriculture. Held on November 14, 2024, during the California School Nutrition Association's 72nd Annual Conference, the event offered attendees an opportunity to explore the nutritional value and sustainability benefits of California's agricultural food production.

"*Grateful Grazing* provided an incredible opportunity to connect school nutrition leaders with the agricultural roots of the food served in California school meal programs," said Amy DeLisio, CEO of Dairy Council of California. "This partnership supports not only farm-to-school programming but also the nutritional health and wellness of California's students."

The event took place at Sacramento's celebrated Mulvaney's B&L, where attendees enjoyed a thoughtfully curated dining experience featuring a seasonal menu crafted from locally sourced ingredients with an emphasis on California Grown Agriculture and Kim Frinzell, Director of the Nutrition Services Division at the California Department of Education. "California Grown is all about connecting Californians with the people who grow and produce our food. California farmers produce more than 400 specialty crops. This event allowed us to connect with California school nutrition leaders who are shaping students' views about the impact and diversity of our vast food system in California as well as their preferences for fruits, vegetables, and other specialty crops," said Cher Watte, executive director of the Buy California Marketing Agreement/California Grown.

Approximately 100 attendees participated, including school nutrition directors, chefs, managers, buyers, district registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs), and other allied partners involved in California's farm-to-school programming. The event aimed to deepen participants' understanding of local agricultural production and the state's commitment to promoting nutrition security, sustainable agriculture, and healthy development for students.

“Events like *Grateful Grazing* play a vital role in bridging the gap between school nutrition programs and the agricultural community,” said Kori Dover, RD, of the California Beef Council. “California’s agriculture industry is a powerhouse, providing healthy, nutritious options that support both sustainability and the growth and wellness of our school-aged children.”

Attendees had the opportunity to explore a diverse array of California-grown foods, from fresh specialty crops to wholesome beef and dairy, reflecting the state’s rich agricultural diversity. Through this experience, the Dairy Council of California and its partners aimed to inspire school nutrition professionals to champion healthy, sustainable food choices, benefiting the health and development of students across California.

About Dairy Council of California

Focusing on education, advocacy, dairy agricultural literacy and collaboration, Dairy Council of California advances the health benefits of milk and dairy foods as part of the solution to achieving nutrition security and sustainable food systems. Learn more at DairyCouncilofCA.org.

About the California Beef Council

The California Beef Council (CBC) was established in 1954 to serve as the promotion, research, and education arm of the California beef industry, and is mandated by the California Food and Agricultural Code. The CBC’s mission is to amplify the voice of the California beef industry to strengthen beef demand through innovative promotions, research, and open communication. For more information, visit www.calbeef.org.

About the Beef Checkoff

The Beef Checkoff Program was established as part of the 1985 Farm Bill. The checkoff assesses \$1 per head on the sale of live domestic and imported cattle, in addition to a comparable assessment on imported beef and beef products. States may retain up to 50 cents on the dollar and forward the other 50 cents per head to the Cattlemen’s Beef Promotion and Research Board, which administers the national checkoff program, subject to USDA approval.

About California Grown

California Grown is all about connecting Californians and other consumers in the U.S. with the people who grow and produce their food - it’s really that simple. California leads in sustainable farming practices that benefit the environment, community, economy and uphold the state’s unique way of life. With a transparent crop input system, California growers meticulously track and report field activities. They cultivate over 400 specialty crops, supported by a diverse agricultural community contributing unique perspectives and skills. Family-owned farms constitute 93% of California’s agricultural landscape, emphasizing local support. Recognizing farmworkers’ contributions, California Farmer & Farmworker Month in dairy production. Collaborating with tech leaders and university researchers, California growers continuously innovate in production, packing, shipping and preservation methods. California is always a fresh and flavorful choice, and it doesn’t just happen in Silicon Valley. Discover more at californiagrown.org.

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Photos accompanying this announcement are available at [https://www.globenewswire.com/](https://www.globenewswire.com/NewsRoom/AttachmentNg/6d179c7b-d4a1-407d-8f2e-7ffcc279258d)

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Dairy Council of California, California Beef Council and CA Grown Host Grateful Grazing Dinner

The event hosts looked to share California's local, sustainable produced food products like milk, da...



Grateful Grazing Networking

California school food service professionals networked with representatives from California's agricu...



Secretary Ross Delivering Remarks to Grateful Grazing Dinner

California's Secretary of Agriculture, Karen Ross, address school food service professionals on the ...



WELL-NOURISHED, BRIGHTER FUTURES: DAIRY DIALOGUE

— VISIONING EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS FOR SCHOOL MEALS AND SCHOLAR SUCCESS —

Executive Summary

Dairy Council of California is hosting the Well-Nourished, Brighter Futures: Dairy Dialogue which is a state-level dialogue between School Nutrition Services (SNS) and the California dairy community to foster collaborative discussions, address critical challenges, and create actionable steps to:

- 1. Promote the Role of Dairy in School Meals**
Leverage recent USDA final rule changes to strengthen dairy's positive position within school meal programs while meeting new sodium and sugar standards.
- 2. Focus on Sustainability**
Explore strategies for waste reduction, local purchasing, and navigating new packaging laws under California's SB 54 as schools embrace sustainability.
- 3. Review the Nutrition Landscape + Visualize Equitable, Sustainable Solutions**
Engage in collaborative breakout sessions with school foodservices, dairy processors, youth, and allied organizations to envision solutions that benefit student health and foster long-term success.

To prepare for the dialogues, Dairy Council contracted with Datalink Partners to develop a pre-assessment report that identifies challenges and opportunities that will help inform the dialogues. In the Fall of 2024, Datalink conducted 19 interviews with SNS Directors and Dairy industry stakeholders.

School Nutrition Services (SNS) Director Interviews

The 11 SNS Directors interviewed came from a variety of districts, representing small and large, urban and rural districts.

Current practices: School districts employ diverse strategies to source and incorporate dairy into school meals, with some emphasizing local sourcing when available. Most districts meet or exceed having 40% of their food from scratch cooking with staffing limitations hindering some efforts. About half of the districts use central kitchens to prepare meals. Dairy procurement involves both direct purchases from dairies and third-party suppliers, with some districts focusing on sustainable and community-supportive purchasing policies. These efforts underline a commitment to quality, community engagement, and sustainable practices in school meal programs.



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Challenges and Opportunities: School districts experience a range of challenges related to incorporating dairy in their meal programs, from dietary requirements and costs to student preferences and regulatory hurdles. Ensuring that sodium maximums are not exceeded is a challenge for districts. Accommodating dietary restrictions, like lactose intolerance, adds complexity, requiring meal plan adjustments. Despite challenges, districts find opportunities and success in reducing milk waste and enhancing consumption by offering flavored milk options.

Additional Insights: Shifts with school meal programs include movement towards more scratch-cooked, fresh, and organic meals. However, there are challenges due to high costs, outdated facilities, and labor shortages. Professional development and staffing are key, with districts struggling to afford rising labor and food costs. Students favor cheese-based meals like nachos, tacos, and pizza, as well as yogurt parfaits, overnight oats, smoothies, and handheld items. Schools are creatively incorporating dairy into menus through yogurt-based sauces and cheese toppings.

External Support: Schools are focused on different goals in the coming year, including increased participation and engagement with school meal program and shifting to scratch cooking and reducing additives. To achieve these goals, districts would like to see external supports such as higher reimbursement rates to cover rising labor and food costs, unrestricted infrastructure funds for kitchen updates, and support for sustainability initiatives like local sourcing, farm-to-school connections, and food waste management programs.

Closing: SNS Directors value their partnership with the Dairy Council of California, appreciating resources like policy updates, easy-to-share content, and school-specific messaging. There is also a desire for educational programs that connect students with farms to show where milk comes from. Districts seek less bureaucracy, with advocacy needed to simplify regulations. They also recommend emphasizing dairy's role in nutrition at conferences.

Dairy Industry Interviews

There were eight interviews conducted with dairy industry members who service schools, representing diverse roles.

Product Supply: Challenges around having a new service model of reduced waste include lack of infrastructure and investment and environmental trade-

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offs will need to be made. There are, however, opportunities in a new service model including sustainability and product innovation. Very few processors are selling bulk or shelf-stable milk to school districts, typically because of costs or lack of infrastructure.

Challenges: Packaging concerns have shifted from shortages to ensuring milk cartons are recyclable. Cost is a major hurdle, particularly for organic products. Logistical challenges include limited storage space, delivery schedules with schools, and a lack of education about dairy's nutritional role. Regulatory challenges include adapting to sugar and sodium reduction rules, which impact product appeal, and complying with California's recycling laws. Nutrition regulations, especially restrictions on fats and sugars, limit options like whole milk, which some believe would boost student consumption.

Understanding the National School Lunch and Breakfast Meal Regulations:

Most of the Dairy industry interviewees are familiar with USDA's Final Rule, with many already exceeding standards. Few adjustments were needed, though it was noted that some districts have been phasing out chocolate milk due to costs, and other interviewees advocated for whole milk. Processors stay updated through industry groups like the Dairy Council of California and regulatory websites. In the next five years, trends like shelf-stable and lactose-free milk, cleaner labels, and organic options are expected to grow.

External Support: The Dairy industry interviewees would like to receive support in the areas of networking and collaboration, newsletters and listservs, and advocacy and education to meet regulatory and school needs.

Closing: Suggestions for improving partnerships between schools and the dairy industry includes better public education about school nutrition challenges, simplifying the bidding process, promoting dairy through storytelling, expanding lactose-free and other dairy options, and fostering greater collaboration within the dairy industry to ensure dairy remains a key part of school meals. Most processors find value in the dialogues as a way to advocate for dairy, learn from other stakeholders, and collaborate on solutions. However, there is a call for these discussions to be inclusive and forward-looking ensuring that all voices are heard.



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Cross-cutting Challenges and Opportunities

In general, there was a sense that the schools and dairy processors have a good working relationship, with some identified cross-cutting challenges and opportunities.

Challenges: Sodium appears to be more of an issue than sugar in meeting the USDA Final Rule. Also, while California has a high cost of living, there is no regional indexing for meal reimbursement. In addition, many districts lack the infrastructure needed to innovate and staffing shortages are an ongoing issue.

Opportunities: There are opportunities to diversify milk products, including expanding offerings of chocolate or whole milk (through regulation changes). The dairy community could find creative solutions to issues that exist, including developing innovative dispensers and different carton packages. In addition, Dairy Council of California and other organizations should continue to tell the story of dairy farming and connect students to the origins of food.

NOTE: The Dairy Council of California is prohibited from influencing legislation or government policy. The reporting of stakeholder responses in this document is for information purposes only.



EO N-1-25: CA Department of Public Health Input Form

Dairy Council of CA Public Comments - Ultra-Processed Foods

February 6, 2025

Examining the role or impact of ultra-processed and food ingredients with respect to public health:

According to the recently released the Scientific Report of the 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, most Americans across all age groups have poor quality diets, underconsume recommended food groups (fruits, vegetables, whole grains and dairy) and ultimately experience nutrient shortfalls that are of public health concern (calcium, potassium, vit D and fiber). The interest in addressing ultra-processed foods (UPF's) through policy, regulation and guidelines is an increasingly timely topic, yet many scientists and health organizations express caution to ensure credible scientific research and data drives decision-making. Currently, there is not a standardized definition for UPF's in use in nutrition research, although many thought-leader dialogues are in progress with the aim to ultimately reach a consensus.

Not all processed foods are created equal, and some are shown to be beneficial to health. People often choose food that might be considered UPF's for a variety of important reasons, including convenience, affordability, longer shelf life, ease of preparation, food safety and even optimizing nutrient content. To improve the nutritional profile of foods and beverages, food companies have innovated, reformulated and introduced new foods to reduce the content of sodium, sugar or saturated fat, as well as include certain nutrients and/or food groups to encourage increased consumption. This reformulation has required application of many technologies and processes which play a role in improving public health, yet these advances are not often considered in current classifications for UPF's.

Using dairy products as an example, processing is critical to ensuring raw milk is pasteurized to ensure safety and quality of fluid milk, and ultimately usable in making many nutritious products such as yogurt, kefir, cheese and more. Most people over the age of nine fall short of consuming the recommended three servings of dairy each day. The presence of isolated nutrients, such as added sugar, sodium or saturated fat, does not make these foods less nutrient-dense, but rather these processing methods create a wider variety of products available to meet people's individual needs for taste, cost, accessibility and cultural traditions.

Reducing ultra-processed food consumption is one singular approach to addressing the rising rates of chronic disease, but if not done with proper science-based efficacy, it may not improve diet quality and may ultimately reduce intakes of key nutrients and further reduce overall diet quality. Additionally, recommendations that are solely based on processing levels rather than nutrient-density could

negatively affect federal nutrition assistance programs, widening the gap in nutrition security for low-resourced communities and vulnerable populations.

Gaps in Research- Furthering our Scientific Understanding:

Within the past decade, various food classification systems have been developed to categorize foods based on what degree of processing they undergo, but these categorizations typically refer less to steps of processing and more to formulation (such as specific ingredients, added nutrients or additives). Despite growing interest in limiting the consumption of UPFs, there remain significant gaps in understanding the mechanisms by which this broad category of foods may play a causal role in health. Efforts to create policies and regulations based on subjective systems such as NOVA, being the most well-known, could result in consumer confusion and a negative perception of nutrient-dense foods as it neglects well-established science concepts from the food science perspective. NOVA is based on a flawed assumption that all commercially manufactured foods have lower nutritional value and ultimately lead to poor health outcomes based on the presence of specific components (such as salt, added sugar, etc.). This categorization system also assumes that consumers do not add sugar, salt or fat to unprocessed food at home, thus oversimplifying how people eat and cook in general. It dismisses the proven health benefits of dietary patterns that consist of the right balance of nutrient-dense foods at all levels of processing. From a food science perspective, food processing serves many purposes such as to improve taste, improve or preserve nutritional content, preserve product integrity and quality and confer other food attributes (both potentially positive and negative).

In a review by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, nutrition professionals are encouraged to *“question the simplicity of the NOVA system as a tool to denote healthful foods based only on processing and not also considering the nutritional quality of the foods... With food prices remaining high, it is important for nutrition professionals to communicate science-based information to patients or clients and the public on how to incorporate all types of healthful, affordable foods including canned, frozen and packaged foods — even those that may be categorized as ultra-processed by the NOVA system — into their eating pattern.”*

We believe the body of science today is insufficient to support the hypothesis that lower consumption of ultra-processed foods will result in improved diet quality; one might argue that avoiding these foods could cause health inequity by reducing the intake of key nutrients. For example, according to research published in the *Journal of Nutrition*, implementing the NOVA system in dietary recommendations could omit several nutrient-dense foods recommended in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA). This proof-of-concept study provided 91% of calories from UPF's (within the NOVA category 4) while fitting within a healthy dietary pattern as recommended from the 2020 DGA's. The Healthy Eating Index (HEI) score resulted in an 86 out of a possible 100 points, which is significantly higher than the current average Americans HEI score across age groups. The study was paramount in concluding that healthy dietary patterns can include calories from UPF's, still receive a high diet quality score and contain adequate amounts of most macro- and micronutrients.

There are multiple reasons why an individual, family or institution may choose to purchase, prepare and/or eat food considered ultra-processed, including but not limited to, convenience, time and expertise to prepare foods, food safety, storage, affordability, accessibility, flavor preferences, nutrition and lowering food waste. To determine adequate Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefit allowances, United States Department of Agriculture's Thrifty Food Program demonstrates that both processed and unprocessed foods make up a nutritious, practical, cost-effective diet prepared at home for a family of four. As these programs are critical to support nutrition security, caution needs to be exercised when considering food processing classification systems for the purpose of policy and

dietary guidance as it could price families out of otherwise healthy food options due to processing alone.

The Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act defines different types of food ingredients based on how they are intended to be used, including as ingredients that are generally recognized as safe. Direct food additives are those that are added to a food for a specific purpose and must be authorized by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) before it can be used in food. For every food additive the FDA approves, the agency issues a regulation that authorizes the uses of the food additive that meets the safety standard for food use. These regulations may specify the types of foods in which the food additive can be used, the maximum amounts to be used in those foods and how it should be identified on food labels. Manufacturers are also required to limit the amount of food additives to the level necessary to achieve the desired effect. Determining acceptable daily intake levels includes a built-in safety margin that accounts for potential uncertainties in the data and known variability within the population and vulnerable populations, such as children and people who are pregnant. To ensure consumer transparency, FDA also manages and maintains a public inventory where food additive petitions under active review are listed. Based on the rigorous food safety process already in place, further evidence is needed to understand what additives might be harmful and if current federal safety protocols and regulations align with these findings. If California's goal is to ban certain potentially harmful additives above and beyond what the FDA has approved, a rigorous process is needed to make these determinations.

Defining UPF's and Developing Categorization Systems:

Various schemes to identify foods classified as UPF's have been developed with the intent of improving the nutritional quality and healthfulness of dietary patterns. However, terminology and description of each category within these classification systems varies. The inconsistency and wide variability in definition and classification of UPF's impacts our overall understanding of the research conducted thus far, as well as its implications on human health. For example, a food considered minimally processed according to other definitions may be classified as an UPF in the NOVA system simply because it contains a food additive. According to NOVA, the intention and function of food additives is taken into consideration when classifying foods, however, the differences in function of an additive would not likely result in significant difference relevant to disease risk.

The lack of definition for UPF's in the current body of evidence was recently highlighted in the Scientific Report of the 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee which ultimately could not provide a recommendation for the DGA's on the relation between UPF's and health outcomes. Furthermore, multiple organizations and subject matter experts have noted the weak evidence underpinning current UPF research and the need for food processing classification systems to be treated with caution.

As such, we advise a comprehensive review of classification systems that use a sophisticated approach in analyzing the complexity of food products, rather than relying on simple categorizations. One example of a novel system is GroceryDB, an initiative led by Northeastern University, Harvard Medical School, University of Copenhagen and other leading research institutions. We also recommend convening a multi-disciplinary group of experts representing various sectors, including community representation, to reach an agreed upon definition for UPF's that ultimately address the complexities, risks and benefits associated with categorizing foods and beverages under this umbrella.

Recommendations:

There is a need for a consensus definition of UPF, with consistency in classification as it relates to various processing methods, nutrient density, presence of specific components, food additives and their purposes (both positive and negative).

- a. There is a need for longer-term studies on UPF, as well as studies that reflect the nuances between various UPF, processing impacts on the food matrix and differing associations with health outcomes (both positive and negative).
- b. There is a need for further exploration of the mechanisms behind UPF, with questions about energy density, hyper-palatability, non-nutritive ingredients and degree of processing.
- c. There is a need to consider inclusion of UPF-specific characteristics in dietary assessment methods and federal databases.
- d. There is a need to conduct further research on food additives, to determine whether current safety regulations and review protocols are sufficient or could be improved. Additionally, as these determinations it is important to build in transitional timelines and identify safe alternatives and ensure cost containment is considered.
- e. There is a need to evaluate the impacts of UPF policy on federal nutrition assistance programs and their ability to provide nutrition security to the population they serve understanding impacts on cost, convenience and time.

The consequences of implementing policy or dietary guidance to limit all intakes of foods currently classified as UPF's under systems such as NOVA, requires additional evaluation to fully understand the impact on people's ability to meet daily nutrient recommendations to support health without compromising food access, affordability and safety. More research is needed to better understand the potential beneficial and adverse effects of different food processing levels and methods on nutrition and health.

Processing may also have an impact on the food matrix, for which there is emerging evidence of relevance for nutrient delivery, biological response and potentially consumption behavior. A stronger evidence base, consisting of both observational studies and randomized control trials, will allow for a more balanced and critical review of how foods subjected to various processes influence human health to inform future evidence-based dietary guidance and impactful policies.

Although a nutrient-dense and balanced diet could theoretically be prepared at home each day, practical challenges such as time, cost, convenience, consumer education, storage and preparation facilities and accessibility must be considered. Factors essential to a global and equitable food supply, including food safety, waste reduction and sustainability—should be addressed in research and guidance on the classification of UPF's and the inclusion or exclusion of specific food categories in the diet.

Ensuring broad stakeholder representation is essential for creating equitable and effective food policies. It is crucial to include voices from underrepresented groups, particularly those impacted by food access challenges. Their perspectives bring valuable insights that can shape inclusive solutions, enhance community well-being and foster sustainable food systems. A truly representative decision-making process must prioritize diversity to address the needs of all constituents.

Additional Considerations:

The 2022 White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health provided core pillars meant to help identify actions that can be taken by all sectors — including the federal government; local, state, territory and Tribal governments; nonprofit and community groups; and private companies to ensure

all Americans have a safe, healthy, equitable food supply. These pillars are interrelated to how we ultimately define, classify and regulate processed foods, including:

- Improve food access and affordability: End hunger by making it easier for everyone — including urban, suburban, rural and Tribal communities — to access and afford food.
- Integrate nutrition and health: Prioritize the role of nutrition and food security in overall health, including disease prevention and management.
- Empower all consumers to make and have access to healthy choices: Foster environments that enable all people to easily make informed healthy choices, increase access to healthy food, encourage healthy workplace and school policies and invest in public messaging and education campaigns that are culturally appropriate and resonate with specific communities.
- Enhance nutrition and food security research: Improve nutrition metrics, data collection, and research to inform nutrition and food security policy, particularly on issues of equity, access and disparities.

This conference determined a whole societal commitment is needed to improve nutrition and health. Convening a diverse group across disciplines, sectors and members from the population most impacted is needed in the approach taken to address UPF's in the food supply, and ultimately to achieve the goals outlined by this historic White House Conference.

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