



MP Robert J. Morrissey, Chair
Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

May 23, 2024

Dear MP Morrissey and Committee members,

On behalf of the Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA) and Canada's fresh fruit and vegetable industry, I am pleased to share our comments regarding the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities study on Bill C-322, *An Act to develop a national framework to establish a school food program*.

CPMA supports the targets of the Food Policy for Canada to promote long-term social, environmental and economic sustainability of the Canadian food system and increase Canadians' consumption of safe and nutritious food. The fresh fruit and vegetable supply chain is a major contributor to Canada's GDP, and to job creation in rural and urban communities from coast to coast to coast. In addition to our sector's economic contributions, we also provide Canadian families with safe and nutritious food that is crucial to supporting their health and well-being.

CPMA is in a unique position as an organization representing companies from the farm gate to the dinner plate, spanning the entire produce industry. The Association's members include major growers, shippers, packers and marketers; importers and exporters; transportation and logistics firms; brokers, distributors and wholesalers; retailers and foodservice distributors; and fresh cut operators and processors. In fact, CPMA's more than 860 domestic and international members are responsible for 90% of fresh fruit and vegetable sales in Canada.

We know that Canadians are increasingly concerned with the rising costs of essentials, including fresh produce. In 2022, researchers at the University of Guelph found that more than 26% of Canadians had reduced their consumption of fruits and vegetables in the past year due to price increases¹. Even prior to recent inflationary pressures on the cost of food, year over year, Canadians are eating fewer vegetables and fruits. Although Canadian adults should be eating 7 or more servings daily, a recent report found that more Canadians are consuming just 1 or 2 servings of fruits and vegetables per day (34.1% in 2021, compared to 24.1% in 2015)². In fact, the latest Statistics Canada numbers suggest that almost 80% of Canadians over age 12 are eating less than five servings per day³. Fruit and vegetable consumption patterns among Canadian children are similar; research shows that the majority of children are consuming less than the recommended servings of vegetables and fruits per day⁴.

¹ University of Guelph, 2022

² [The Economic Burden Attributable to Low Fruit and Vegetable Consumption in Canada](#), H. Krueger & Associates Inc., 2023

³ [Statistics Canada](#), 2023

⁴ Hack, S., Jessri, M. & L'Abbé, M.R. Nutritional quality of the food choices of Canadian children. *BMC Nutr* 7, 16 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40795-021-00422-6>

Canadians' current fruit and vegetable consumption pattern is far from meeting Health Canada's 2019 *Canada's Food Guide* recommendation to fill half your plate with vegetables and fruit. This is deeply concerning, as vegetables and fruits provide a protective effect in reducing the risk for cardiovascular disease, including heart disease and stroke, and certain types of cancer⁵. Research also shows that fruits and vegetables are positively associated with higher mental well-being and better performance in schools in children.⁶⁷

At the same time, food insecurity is widely recognized to have significant negative consequences on a person's health, both mental and physical. According to the 2021 PROOF report, people who are food-insecure are much more likely to be diagnosed with a wide variety of chronic conditions, including mental health disorders, non-communicable diseases, and infections⁸. Although traditional food banks and other food-based programs provide temporary relief to some, they are an ineffective long-term solution to food insecurity, due to the stigma associated with accessing such programs, as well as the limited availability of nutritious food for program participants⁹. Government policies that are grounded in evidence and provide equal access to fruits and vegetables are needed to effectively address this challenge.

In addition to the health impacts noted above, there are also economic consequences to low fruit and vegetable consumption: as fruit and vegetable consumption has decreased, the annual economic burden attributable to low produce consumption in Canada has increased from almost \$5 billion in 2015 to close to \$8 billion in 2021, a 60% increase in economic burden related to low produce consumption¹⁰. Given the protective effect of fruits and vegetables on reducing the risk for many chronic diseases, it is clear that supporting access to these nutritious foods in all regions of the country can contribute significantly to the health and well-being of our communities, while also significantly decreasing government health care spending.

As part of our consumer education efforts, CPMA leads the [Half Your Plate](#) initiative, in partnership with the Heart and Stroke Foundation, the Canadian Public Health Association and the Canadian Cancer Society, to improve fruit and vegetable consumption in Canada to support better overall health. CPMA has also developed a youth component to the *Half Your Plate* program, the [Freggie Children's Program](#), with an in-school curriculum that was reviewed by registered dietitians and designed to encourage children to eat fruits and vegetables as part of their healthy lunches and snacks at school and to help them understand the benefits of making healthy food choices.

In addition to the efforts being undertaken by the Association as noted above, CPMA members across the fresh fruit and vegetable supply chain, from grower-packer-shippers to wholesale to retail and others, are active in existing school food programs across the country. In a 2022 member survey, 68% of respondents indicated that they support school nutrition programs, evenly split between local and regional programs.

⁵ [Fruit and vegetable intake and the risk of cardiovascular disease, total cancer and all-cause mortality—a systematic review and dose-response meta-analysis of prospective studies](#), *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 46(3), 1029–1056, Aune, D., Giovannucci, E., Boffetta, P., Fadnes, L. T., Keum, N. N., Norat, T., Greenwood, D. C., Riboli, E., Vatten, L. J., & Tonstad, S., 2017

⁶ [Hayhoe R, Rechel B, Clark AB, Gummerson C, Smith SJL, Welch AA. Cross-sectional associations of schoolchildren's fruit and vegetable consumption, and meal choices, with their mental well-being: a cross-sectional study](#). *BMJ Nutr Prev Health*. 2021 Sep 27;4(2):447-462. doi: 10.1136/bmjnph-2020-000205. PMID: 35028515; PMCID: PMC8718853.

⁷ MacLellan D, Taylor J, Wood K. Food intake and academic performance among adolescents. *Can J Diet Pract Res*. 2008 Fall;69(3):141-4. doi: 10.3148/69.3.2008.141. PMID: 18783639.

⁸ [Household food insecurity in Canada, 2021, Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity \(PROOF\)](#), Tarasuk V, Li T, Fafard St-Germain AA, 2022

⁹ [The experiences and perceptions of food banks amongst users in high-income countries: An international scoping review](#), *Appetite*, Volume 120:698–708, Middleton G, Mehta K, McNaughton D, Booth S., 2018.

¹⁰ H. Krueger & Associates, 2023

Canada is currently the only G7 country without a national school food program. CPMA has been a longstanding supporter and advocate of a national school food program and a proud member of the Coalition of Healthy School Food. **We strongly support the development of a national school food program as a critical investment in the health of our children and our broader communities.**

Existing school meal programs vary widely across the country, differing in funding and cost models, approach and objectives and food delivered. This patchwork currently only reaches about 21% of school-age children, with significant gaps in coverage depending on the jurisdiction. The current patchwork of existing programs was also reflected in the responses to our 2022 CPMA member survey, with more than 58% of respondents indicating that the programs they support are administered by an NGO and another 26% reporting supporting programs administered by a school board. It is also important to note that only 16% of respondents indicated that the programs they support are administered by a provincial government.

In order to successfully advance a national school food program that serves the needs of all children across Canada, the Government of Canada should work with the provinces and territories to expand government resources dedicated to the funding, infrastructure and/or administration of school food programs. At the same time, we know that a one-size-fits-all approach will not meet the needs of all children or communities. Instead, the national school food program framework should provide a clear set of core objectives and measurable outcomes with the flexibility for local communities to achieve these outcomes in a manner that best reflects their particular geographic and demographic realities.

CPMA was thrilled to see the inclusion in Federal Budget 2024 of \$1 billion over five years to launch a national school food program for Canada. CPMA and our members are keen to work with the government to secure a consistent supply of healthy food for children across Canada and create real opportunities for beneficial partnerships in our food system.

CPMA is supportive of Bill C-322 and the school food program framework objectives outlined in clause 2. We would offer the following comments and recommendations to further inform the Committee's consideration of Bill C-322 and the contribution it can make to the advancement of a national school food program:

- CPMA emphasizes that the enhancement of nutrition and the promotion of healthy eating practices should be a core objective of the national school food program, and that the promotion of fresh fruits and vegetable consumption is critical to meeting this objective. We are strongly supportive of the recommendation in *Canada's Food Guide* that Canadians fill half their plates with fruits and vegetables, which is reflective of the critical contributions to health and well-being made by these foods. The *Food Guide* can and should serve as a foundational resource for ensuring that school food programs across the country are based in sound nutritional science.
- The national school food program can and undoubtedly should serve to strengthen food security across the country and improve health outcomes for communities with higher levels of food insecurity. It is also important to emphasize that increasing consumption of nutritious foods at school benefits all children, regardless of income. Therefore, CPMA emphasizes that the framework guiding the program should be designed and implemented with a deliberate focus on preventing any stigma being attached with participation in school food programs.
- Affordability and accessibility are mutually inclusive and should not be separated in government policy. Affordability should not equate to "cheap or inexpensive" food, which risks driving down food costs to a level that is economically unsustainable for producers, with negative consequences for Canada's food security.

- The national school food program framework should include a core focus on mitigating any financial barriers to participation for children from coast to coast to coast. To achieve this goal, while also preventing stigma associated with participation and encouraging all children, regardless of income, to reap the benefits of eating healthy food at school, CPMA supports school food programs being open to all children, with a sliding-scale cost model based on household income. We are also strongly supportive of ensuring that school food programs are free at the point of participation and would emphasize that any application processes for parents should be designed to make participation as easy as possible.
- It is important to note that an overly complex sliding-scale model has the potential to create unintended administrative burden. The national school food program framework should provide the necessary flexibility to allow provincial/territorial governments and local administrators to implement a sliding-scale model in a manner that best meets the needs of their communities.
- Failing to provide culturally appropriate food or to account for dietary restrictions can create stigma and hinder program participation. School food programs can also offer children from different cultural communities an opportunity to learn from each other and to try new nutritious products, all of which can contribute to a lifelong healthy relationship with food.
- CPMA strongly urges the Government of Canada to work with the provinces and territories to include the promotion of food literacy and food preparation skills as a core component of the national school food program framework, to forge a connection for children between nutritious food programming at school and making healthy food choices at home for years to come. Research has shown that food and cooking programs have a positive impact on the behaviours and attitudes towards food and nutrition by kids, such as higher self-efficacy, higher consumption of fruits and vegetables, increased nutrition knowledge, and more (Thoman & Irwin, 2011). Existing successful programs such as Agriculture in the Classroom and the [Freggie Children's Program](#) can play an important role in achieving this objective.
- The national school food program should be underpinned by a framework of clear, evidence-based objectives and outcomes that are backed by consistent data collection and reporting to assess progress, as outlined in clause 5. CPMA recommends that this assessment and reporting continue on an ongoing cyclical basis to support decision-making and investments in the national school food program over time.
- At the same time, the program framework should also encourage ongoing sharing of information and lessons learned among school food programs to support the development of innovative solutions and the implementation of best practices across the country.
- In addition to the food security benefits of providing healthy food to children at school, the national school food program has the potential to incur multiple community benefits in terms of encouraging local production and fueling employment and broader economic development. At the same time, we must note that, while we are fully supportive of Canadian producers, and growing our agricultural production in Canada, it is imperative that school food programs provide a variety of nutritious and affordable food to children across Canada year-round, not just during our growing season, and not just providing foods we grow or produce in Canada.
- The national school food program framework must include as a core objective taking an integrated, inter-governmental approach to ensure adequate access to culturally appropriate fruit and vegetables,

including in northern, rural, and remote areas. All food sectors such as exporters, importers and distributors therefore have an important role to play in supplying school food programs with safe, nutritious food, year-round, in all locations of the country.

- The current patchwork of school food programs across Canada often relies upon charitable donations of product or funding, which may contribute to stigmatizing student participation. The national school food program framework must be backed with sufficient funding and resources from all levels of government, so that these programs are viewed, rightly, as critical investments for all in our school communities rather than as charitable endeavours.
- Furthermore, CPMA emphasizes that sufficient funding is essential to secure a consistent supply of healthy food and create real opportunities for beneficial partnerships between food producers/suppliers and program administrators that ensure the economic viability of supplying product to school food programs.
- Finally, transporting perishable food, including healthy fresh fruits and vegetables, can be extremely expensive, particularly in rural, remote and northern communities, and is made more complicated by the need for infrastructure to support the maintenance of the cold chain.
- Increasing overall access to a variety of nutritious food for all children across Canada, year-round, means supporting the entire agri-food value chain, including support for innovation in areas such as storage, distribution and transportation. In considering the design and implementation of the national school food program, the framework should encourage and enable partnerships with industry and other stakeholders to leverage existing expertise in logistics and procurement to support the effective, efficient supply of fresh and perishable products to school food programs.

We are hopeful that the recent success of the federal, provincial and territorial governments in negotiating agreements to support early learning and childcare can offer a path forward towards an effective national school food program.

On behalf of the fresh fruit and vegetable supply chain, CPMA is grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to share our comments on this important issue. We would be pleased to answer any questions Committee members may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. Lemaire', followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Ron Lemaire
President
Canadian Produce Marketing Association