



Food and Nutrition Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

DATE: February 19, 2026

MEMO CODE: SP 03-2026, CACFP 02-2026, SFSP 02-2026

SUBJECT: Incorporating Local Beef into Child Nutrition Program Meals

TO: Regional Directors, Child Nutrition Programs, All Regions State
Directors, Child Nutrition Programs, All States

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) provide nutritionally balanced meals and snacks to America's children while strengthening American agriculture. The USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) supports schools, sponsors, and institutions participating in any CNP to source nutritious, locally produced foods and serve them in program meals.

Under the leadership of Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins, USDA has recently published the [USDA Plan to Fortify the American Beef Industry](#), which outlines actions to protect our domestic beef industry, including building demand for American beef alongside domestic supply. In collaboration with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), USDA released the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030](#) (*Dietary Guidelines*), which promotes the prioritization of protein foods. FNS supports these initiatives by continuing to expand access to locally produced foods, including locally raised beef, for children receiving CNP meals. Access to the CNP

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market by American livestock producers is significant, as the combined CNPs serve over 9 billion meals a year.¹

These initiatives come at a time of growing interest in local beef by CNP operators. In the 2023 Farm to School Census, seven percent of participating schools said that beef was their top local purchase by spending, up from two percent in 2019. In the 2022-2023 school year, 23 percent of SFAs purchased local proteins with another 32 percent stating that they would like to purchase local proteins in the future.² As part of Secretary Rollins' commitment to support American beef and create healthy outcomes for American children, the Farm to School Program is committed to working with CNP operators to help them source and serve local in program meals.

The following list provides helpful resources and strategies for CNP operators and ranchers to incorporate local beef into school meals. The list covers procurement, funding resources, food safety, and crediting resources and provides technical assistance contacts from the Farm to School Program. FNS encourages CNP operators to utilize this list of resources to expand access to local beef for American students. The list is compiled into a helpful table of resources geared toward CNP operators and ranchers in the attachment following this memorandum.

Connection: FNS encourages interested CNP operators, ranchers and beef vendors to connect. CNP operators and local beef producers and vendors should focus on identifying opportunities that make local beef sales and purchases a win for all operations involved. For example, important topics to discuss may include, but are not limited to local product availability, processing and packaging, cost, transportation and delivery and challenges. The [Local Meat in Schools: Increasing Opportunities for Small](#)

¹ Economic Research Service. Child Nutrition Programs. February 11, 2025. Available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs>.

² USDA 2023 Farm to School Census. Available at: <https://farmtoschoolcensus.fns.usda.gov/census-results/census-data-explorer>.

[and Mid-Sized Livestock Ranchers and Fisherman](#) and [Selling Local Food to Schools: A Resource for Producers](#) fact sheets give examples, tips, and information for sourcing local meat and putting it on school menus.

Purchasing Strategies and Methods: CNP operators can purchase local beef using cash reimbursement or through the USDA Foods in Schools program using entitlement dollars. CNP operators can use informal and formal procurement methods and product specifications and technical requirements in solicitations to target and purchase local beef. FNS regulations at [7 CFR 210.21\(g\)](#) allow CNP operators to give preference to unprocessed, locally produced foods, including beef, when procuring these products, which is called geographic preference. This preference can be applied as additional credit or points given to this product during the evaluation of responses to a solicitation or as a product specification that a vendor must meet to be considered responsive to a solicitation. For more information, please see our recent memorandum, [Using Federal Funds to Purchase Local Foods](#), and the FNS [Procuring Local Foods](#) webpage, containing the complete collection of resources on buying locally produced foods. The webpage includes all FNS memoranda, regulations, and fact sheets on local purchasing and the USDA Procuring Local Foods for CNP Guide, which includes a chapter dedicated to buying local meat.

Food Safety: It is critical that CNP operators, ranchers, and processors understand Federal, State, local, and Tribal laws, regulations and inspection requirements that govern food safety during slaughter, processing, and food service. Please see [Procuring Local Meat, Poultry, Game and Eggs for Child Nutrition Programs](#) for details on how the Federal food safety requirements relate to State, local, and Tribal regulations and to access answers to frequently asked questions.

Food Crediting: Local beef credits the same as non-local beef. CNP operators can get information on crediting beef at the [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

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Funding Opportunity: The Farm to School Grant Program supports farm to school programming that increases local foods in school meals and connects children with agriculture, helping inspire the next generation of farmers and expand markets for producers, including beef producers. Grants are awarded on a yearly basis. To learn more about the Farm to School Grant Program, including descriptions of prior grant awards and projects focused on sourcing local beef, please visit the [Farm to School Grant Program](#) webpage. To learn more about past grant success stories, please subscribe to the [DIRT](#), the e-newsletter of the Farm to School Program.

Technical Assistance: FNS recommends CNP operators, producers, and other partners contact our [Farm to School Regional Specialists](#), who can help facilitate implementation of farm to school programming. They are in each of our regional offices and have resources and information pertinent to each state and type of partner.

State agencies are reminded to distribute this information to Program operators immediately. Program operators should direct any questions regarding this memorandum to the appropriate State agency. State agencies should direct questions to the appropriate FNS [Regional Office](#).

Sincerely,

Original Signed

Jessica Saracino
Acting Associate Administrator
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Enclosure

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Attachment: Resources for Incorporating Local Beef into CNP Meals

Audience	Resource
CNP Operator	• USDA Plan to Fortify the American Beef Industry • USDA Farm to School Census • Using Federal Funds to Purchase Local Foods memorandum • Procuring Local Foods webpage • Procuring Local Meat, Poultry, Game and Eggs for Child Nutrition Programs memorandum • Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs • Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program • The Dirt: Farm to School e-Newsletter • Farm to School Regional Specialists contact information • Meat Inspection Directory

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Audience	Resource
Producers and Processors	• USDA Plan to Fortify the American Beef Industry • Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program • The Dirt: Farm to School e-Newsletter • USDA Farm to School Census • Local Meat in Schools: Increasing Opportunities for Small and Mid-Sized Livestock Ranchers and Fisherman fact sheet • Selling Local Food to Schools: A Resource for Producers fact sheet • Crediting Shelf-Stable, Dried and Semi-Dried Meat, Poultry, and Seafood Products in the Child Nutrition Programs memorandum • Become a USDA Foods Vendor • USDA Meat & Poultry Processing Capacity - Technical Assistance • Farmers.gov Resources for Livestock Ranchers • Farm to School Regional Specialists contact information

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