



National Organic Coalition

March 17, 2010

The Honorable Blanche Lincoln
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Lincoln:

I am writing on behalf of the member organizations of the National Organic Coalition to urge you to include language in the Child Nutrition Reauthorization bill to remove the barriers of access to organic foods within the WIC program.

The growing body of peer-reviewed research demonstrates the human health and environmental benefits of organic food and farming practices. Therefore, our members strongly believe that all sectors of our society should have access to organic foods, particularly the nutritionally at-risk mothers, infants and children who are the recipients of WIC program benefits.

However, many states currently include explicit prohibitions on access to organic foods within the WIC approved food list used to guide WIC recipients in their food purchases. With regard to the WIC basic food instrument, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has permitted States to disallow organic foods on their approved food list.

The Food and Nutrition Service issued an interim rule for the WIC program on December 6, 2007. The rule includes a section that specifically addresses organic foods:

"5. Organic Foods

A number of commenters asked FNS to allow organic products within the authorized categories of foods in the WIC food packages. FNS points out that some organic forms of WIC-eligible foods meet the nutritional requirements set forth in current WIC regulations and are therefore authorized; this interim rule continues to authorize organic forms of foods that meet minimum nutrition requirements described in Table 4 of 7 CFR 246.10(e)(12). However, WIC State agencies are responsible for determining the brands and types of foods to authorize on their State WIC food lists. Some State agencies may allow organic foods on their foods lists, but this will vary by State. The decision may be

influenced by a number of factors such as cost, product distribution within a State, and WIC participant acceptance.”

In contrast, as described on the agency website, “organic fruits and vegetables purchased via the WIC cash-value voucher are authorized; there is not State discretion to disallow them.”

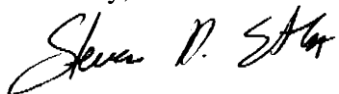
We are requesting the inclusion of a provision in the Child Nutrition Reauthorization bill to prohibit States from restricting access to organic foods as part of the WIC basic food instrument, similar to the prohibition issued by FNS with regard to the WIC Fruit and Vegetable voucher program.

We understand the quantity-based “food package” approach to the WIC basic food instrument presents different cost considerations than the dollar-based approach of the fruit and vegetable voucher program, and that this is the basis for the distinction in treatment of organic foods. However, we believe there are ways to address the cost concern, if flexibility is provided to do so.

Many natural foods retailers and others retailers who specialize in organic food and beverage sales are limited from fully serving the at-risk WIC recipients in their communities, because the limitations on organic foods and the bias toward conventional brands make it difficult for natural foods stores to be approved as WIC vendors. These retailers are eager for the opportunity to serve WIC recipients in their stores, and many would be willing to discuss price accommodations for these customers, if provided that flexibility. However, the firm prohibition of many State WIC food lists regarding certain organic products greatly limits WIC recipients’ access to the highly nutritious offering in these stores, even if the cost differences relative to conventional brands and retailers could be accommodated.

At a time when Congress and the Administration are seeking to expand access of at-risk populations to nutritious food options in their communities, the limitations in WIC program for organic foods, and the barriers to access of WIC recipients to natural and organic food retailers is counter-productive and counter-intuitive. We look forward to working with you to remove these barriers and expand nutritious food options for our nation’s most vulnerable populations.

Sincerely,



Steven Etko
Legislative Director

Contact information:
703-519-7772
steveetka@gmail.com