Congress Wants More Potatoes in Gov't Program

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In this July 30, 2012, file photo, a farm hand stands by the harvested potato crop at King's Hill Farm at Mineral Point, Wis. Nutritionists say Americans don't need more white potatoes. But Congress has repeatedly disagreed. Language accompanying a massive spending bill unveiled by Congress on Jan. 13 encourages the secretary of Agriculture to allow low-income pregnant and nursing mothers to buy white potatoes for themselves and their babies with government vouchers. The move comes a little more than two years after Congress thwarted an Obama administration effort to limit the amount of french fries in school lunches. **(AP Photo/Sitthixay Ditthavong, File)**

WASHINGTON (AP) — Nutritionists say Americans don't need more white potatoes. Congress disagrees — again.

Lawmakers are encouraging the agriculture secretary to allow low-income pregnant and nursing mothers to buy white potatoes with the vouchers they receive as part of a government program. That goes against the advice of the Institute of Medicine, which advises the government on health issues. The institute has said recipients of such aid already eat enough white potatoes.

It's not that white potatoes themselves aren't nutritious. But they're often used to make french fries, which are usually fried or baked in unhealthy fats and oils. Since 2009, the Agriculture Department has allowed participants in the federal Women, Infants and Children program to buy fruits and vegetables with their vouchers, just not white potatoes on recommendation of the institute.

Although the Obama administration has tried on a few occasions to limit the amount of money the government spends on feeding people white potatoes, lawmakers from the roughly 40 potato-growing states, backed by the potato lobby, have worked to turn back those efforts. In 2011, Congress voted to thwart the Agriculture Department's recommendation that only two servings a week of potatoes and other

starchy vegetables be served in federally subsidized school lunches. The USDA effort was an attempt to limit the proliferation of french fries on school lunch lines.

Along with the massive spending bill approved Wednesday in the House, nonbinding language from lawmakers urges Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to include potatoes in the WIC program. If he chooses not to add them, all he has to do is submit a report to Congress explaining why.

Vilsack hasn't said what he will do. USDA spokeswoman Brooke Hardison said the agency "continues to believe in the importance of basing the nutrition standards for WIC on the best science available."

Those who oppose allowing white potatoes in the federal program worry that the budget language is a sign of more pressure to come from Congress.

Concerned that lawmakers could add potatoes to WIC in a wide-ranging farm bill, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Public Health Association and other groups said in a joint statement that "to change the WIC food package because of pressure from the potato industry" could make the program less effective and that Congress should not be deciding what foods should be included in the program.

A House-passed farm bill asks the USDA to study "the economic and public health benefits" of potatoes on low-income families. There is no similar language in the Senate bill, but congressional negotiators are working to come up with a compromise bill.

Douglas Greenaway of the National WIC Association says it's "unconscionable" and a bad precedent for a food industry to try to dictate what is allowed in WIC.

"That should be dictated by science," Greenaway said.

The potato industry says it has science on its side. Mark Szymanski of the National Potato Council points out that the USDA's own dietary guidelines issued in 2010 recommend consumption of starchy vegetables. He says a potato provides potassium, dietary fiber and folate that can be helpful for pregnant women and is also economical, which could help low income mothers stretch their dollars.

The group's push to include potatoes in WIC is not about profit but "the perception that potatoes are not as nutritionally valuable as other vegetables and fruits," Szymanski said.

In 2012, more than 70 Republican and Democratic members of the House wrote Vilsack to promote the nutrition benefits of potatoes and protest their omission in WIC, saying it sends the wrong message to low-income mothers and "suggests a 'government knows best' mentality inconsistent with individual choice and promotion of self-responsibility."

Nutritionists have been continually frustrated by that argument. It's not that

potatoes aren't nutritious, says Margo Wootan of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "It's just that we are already eating too many potatoes, especially as french fries," she says, "and the government shouldn't be giving out money to help people eat more potatoes."

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