



John W. Bode

Processors and Growers Unite Coalition Advocates Increased Access in Federal Nutrition Programs

You know the truth – processed fruits and vegetables are just as nutritious as fresh and have many important advantages over fresh produce. Yet, there is a popular myth that fresh produce is somehow better. That is the kind of challenge that keeps marketing experts busy.

When that myth creeps into federal policy, it is time for fruit and vegetable growers and processors to set their government officials straight about the facts. Regrettably, the myth has crept into major federal policy proposals, generally denying processed fruits and vegetables access to the fast growing school snack program. At times in the past, it has threatened processed products' eligibility for fruit and vegetable block grant monies and even USDA commodity purchases.

So, the American Fruit and Vegetable Processors and Growers Coalition (AFVPGC) was formed by a prominent group of growers, processors and trade associations, including the California Canning Peach Association. The coalition is spreading the word to government officials that processed American fruit and vegetable products deserve equal access to government programs and should never be discriminated against in federal policies.

Good objective, but the name is not very catchy – is that what you are thinking? Well, this is not about being catchy; it is a persistent, low key campaign to set the record straight and be sure key government officials understand the facts. Processed fruit and vegetables offer major benefits. Government

policy that discriminates against processed products is bad – for consumers, government programs and American industry. AFVPGC is carrying that message wherever federal legislative, regulatory and purchasing policy decisions are made.


Here are some of the messages that federal officials seem to have found particularly impressive:

- The American Dietetic Association's Complete Food and Nutrition Guide says "Research shows that canned and frozen ingredients are as nutritious as fresh – sometimes even more so."
- The USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005, says we should eat a variety of fruits – "whether fresh, frozen, canned, or dried." (More than 90% of consumers currently eat less than the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables.)
- The American Dietetic Association in its publication *Shopping Solutions for Healthy Eating* pointed out: "Canned fruits and vegetables are great to have on hand because they are similar and sometimes higher in nutrients than their fresh counterparts-and they don't spoil as quickly!"
- According to a report issued by the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in April, 2006, "More than half of total U.S. fruit and vegetable production goes into processing."
- The Produce for Better Health Foundation's new "Fruits and Veggies – More Matters" campaign encourages the consumption of all forms of fruits and vegetables: fresh, frozen, canned and dried.
- Advantages of processed fruits and vegetables include:
 - preserved at peak quality for consumption when convenient;

- o the least expensive alternative per pound of usable food served;
- o enhanced food safety due to industry handling practices;
- o easier to prepare for home or institutional use;
- o long shelf life, less waste; and
- o available year round.

Specifically, what policy issues are these messages addressing? This is a busy time. Congress is now writing a new Farm Bill. In January, 2009 a new president will take office with a new group of federal policy officials expected. Also, work is already underway in preparation for the 2009 reauthorization of the child nutrition programs, including the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. All of this is occurring in the context of soaring rates of childhood obesity and frequent news reports questioning the safety of the food supply.

You can help. Don't be shy about discussing the importance of assuring equal access of processed fruits and vegetables in all government programs and policies. Government officials, like Members and staff of Congress and officials from federal agencies, need to know what you are thinking. Feel free to use the arguments in this article to support our industry or add to the list with your own improvements. The Coalition will continue working on your behalf, but with the active support of more growers and processors we can be even more effective in protecting the interests of the U.S. processed fruit and vegetable industry.

To give us your suggestions, get further information about the coalition, or to become a member, send me an e-mail at jbode@ofwlaw.com or go to www.americanfruitandvegetable.org. 

John Bode is a principal at Olsson, Frank and Weeda. Before joining Olsson, Frank and Weeda, he served in three Presidential appointments at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. As Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Food and Consumer Services, Mr. Bode was responsible for nutrition issues, almost half of the USDA's budget and scores of rulemakings.

Here are the immediate priorities:

- **No slippage in processed fruits and vegetables access to federal food assistance programs.**

Processed fruits and vegetables have the same nutritional value, and often greater portion control, utility, and storability than fresh product. With labor costs, workspace and spoilage major concerns for food service directors, processed fruits and vegetables are greatly appreciated in the school food service market. Also, with so many school food service directors trained as registered dietitians, they understand the powerful advantages of using processed fruits and vegetables and are rarely taken in by the myth of processed product inferiority. AFVPGC will work to keep Washington policy preferences or mandates from limiting processed product access to federal food assistance programs, particularly commodity purchases using Section 32 funds.

- **Active enforcement of 'Buy American' requirements.**

Federal law requires that American products be used to the maximum extent possible in nutrition programs. However, this requirement is often ignored. AFVPGC will work to ensure that these 'Buy American' requirements are enforced, and that food program providers are adequately and effectively trained to follow the law. We have caught several policy officials by surprise when we have pointed out that school

preferences for fresh over processed is an indirect directive to stop buying American product and to increase purchases of imported produce. They simply assumed that some part of America produces an endless bounty of fresh fruits and vegetables for all the schools in America through the dead of the winter. AFVPGC is working to correct such misunderstandings.

- **Expand the School Snack Program to include processed fruits and vegetables.**

The federal School Snack Program currently allows schools to select fresh or dried product for distribution to students. Because of nutritional equivalency and the other benefits of processed fruits and vegetables, school authorities should be allowed to choose from the many processed products that offer value, variety, portion control and convenience, just as they can in other child nutrition programs. AFVPGC will work for the inclusion of processed products in this worthwhile program.

- **Modifications in the WIC Food Package.**

The food package offered to women, infants and children by the WIC program is under review. We expect a new interim final rule to be published shortly. Processed fruits and vegetables offer nutritional value at reasonable prices. AFVPGC will work to increase the volume and variety of product that may be offered to WIC recipients.