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Wash. WIC could nix organic milk

Advocate says: Let recipients pay price difference

Cookson Beecher
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A proposal to eliminate organic milk from Washington state's WIC program has sparked anger and concern among organic advocates, organic dairy farmers, WIC recipients, and environmental groups.

A supplemental nutrition program for women, infants, and children, WIC provides coupons that participants can use to buy nutritious foods such as milk, cheese, cereal and produce.

Organic milk has been on the state's list of approved WIC foods since 2002.

But under a proposal from the state's Health Department, it will not be included in the WIC program's new food rules for 2009.

The proposed changes also include the qualifier "non-organic" on certain foods on the list, among them cheese, fruit juices and peanut butter.

However, based on competitive-cost considerations and availability, the department is proposing to approve organic fresh fruits and vegetables, a brand of organic bread, organic bulgur, organic brown rice, organic rolled oats and a brand of organic tofu.

The USDA says there's no rBST in all unflavored milk — organic or not — sold in Washington supermarkets.

Washington is the only state at this time that is approving any organic food other than fresh fruits and vegetables for WIC.

Comments

Although the comment period on this is closed, the Department of Health accepts comments year round on the WIC program. It will also be gathering and considering comments on this issue even if they come in after the deadline.

A final list of approved foods will be released by the end of October.

Why organic milk?

The overriding reason for the proposed changes comes down to cost.

Cathy Franklin, nutrition coordinator for the state's WIC Program, said that when organic milk was added to the list of approved foods in 2000, there wasn't that much of a price difference between organic and conventional milk.

But now, she said, organic milk is almost twice the cost of non-organic milk.

Another consideration is that many clients choose organic milk as a way to avoid milk from cows treated with bovine growth hormone, or rBST.

But according to the department, all unflavored milk sold in Washington supermarkets has been produced from cows that haven't been treated with the hormone.

Franklin said that although there are studies that say organic milk is safer and healthier than non-organic milk, federal commenters on this issue such as the USDA, the Food and Drug Administration, and the National Dairy Council, all say there's no difference between organic and non-organic milk.

"We're a USDA program, and we have to go along with those conclusions," Franklin said, adding that until the opposing views on this topic come through official channels, the department's hands are tied.

'Mom' power

Washington state is the only state in the nation that had included organic milk on its WIC list.

That came about when a WIC mother of six children triggered an e-mail campaign to change the policy that barred organic milk from being purchased by WIC recipients.

Dozens of WIC moms joined forces and enlisted the help of organic farmers, church groups, anti-hunger advocates, and environmental and sustainable ag organizations.

In 2000, organic milk was approved for WIC clients in Washington state, which organic advocates refer to as a "millennial decision."

Two years later, the same coalition succeeded in getting organic carrots, organic infant cereal, organic peas, organic beans and organic lentils added to the state's WIC

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food package.

Eastern Washington organic farmer and sustainable ag advocate Chrys Ostrander said the Health Department's willingness to make those changes puts Washington state in a leadership position in a national effort "to recognize and address children's special susceptibility to harm from pesticide residues present in non-organic foods."

Now he's disappointed that the department is backtracking on its previous policy.

"For us in the organic and sustainable agriculture movement, it's a matter of a level playing field for the low-income consumers who share the same concerns about healthy food and environmental responsibility as other consumers who seek out organic foods," he said. "They shouldn't be frozen out of the ability to choose what they believe is best for their families and the environment because government agencies are trying to pinch pennies."

Ostrander said the challenge now is how to make sure low-income people have the same choices as other consumers with similar concerns.

One of his ideas is to allow WIC recipients who want to buy organic milk to pay the price difference between organic and non-organic milk.

Franklin, meanwhile, said the department is very willing to have organic products on the list. But again, cost is the overriding consideration.

Availability is also part of the equation. According to federal requirements, organic foods on the WIC list must be widely available and within 10 percent of the cost of conventional food proposed to be approved.

Staff writer Cookson Beecher is based in Sedro-Woolley, Wash. E-mail: cbeecher@capitalpress.com.

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