



## Bill seeks more fresh produce in school meals

Wed, Dec 16 2009

By Charles Abbott

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The government would spend \$150 million to put more fresh fruits and vegetables into school meals under a bill filed by 16 lawmakers on Wednesday with an eye to next year's overhaul of school food programs.

Congress delayed work on child nutrition until 2010, partly to round up more funding. The administration backs a \$1 billion a year increase but there is no agreement on how to pay for it.

The bill would require the Agriculture Department, which oversees school meals, to remove barriers to the larger use of fresh fruits and vegetables in school feeding programs. It also obliges USDA to promote salad bars as a way to encourage consumption of fresh produce.

Some \$20 million would be available to schools to purchase salad bars and \$100 million to upgrade cafeteria equipment. There also would be \$20 million in grants for a "farm to school" program for purchase of locally grown fresh produce.

"I strongly believe the initiatives included in this legislation are a perfect fit for the Child Nutrition Act," said lead sponsor Sam Farr, California Democrat.

President Barack Obama has a goal to end childhood hunger by 2015. Antihunger groups say child nutrition programs can play a major role in that. Nearly \$17 billion was appropriated for school lunch and related programs this fiscal year.

A National Academy of Sciences report recommended on Oct 20 that schools increase the amount of fruits and vegetables served in meals. Some 31 million children get hot lunches and 11 million eat breakfast through the school meals program.

Meanwhile, USDA announced a three-year study whether "high tunnels," also called hoop houses, are a reliable way to extend the growing season and make fresh produce more widely available throughout the nation. Hoop houses are built of metal or plastic ribs covered by plastic sheeting.

Most states are regarded as too cold for fruit and vegetable production in the fall and winter.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service said it would fund one hoop house per farm covering up to 1,278 square feet through the cost-sharing Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Farms in 38 states, from Florida to Montana, are eligible. The structures will be tested to see if they reduce soil erosion and require fewer pesticides.

"For many family farmers, including many involved in organic produce and fruit crop production, the high tunnel has emerged as a means to extend the growing season, thus increasing farm cash flow," said the Organic Farming Research Foundation, based in Santa Cruz, California.

(Reporting by Charles Abbott, editing by Anthony Boadle)



© Thomson Reuters 2009. All rights reserved. Users may download and print extracts of content from this website for their own personal and non-commercial use only. Republication or redistribution of Thomson Reuters content, including by framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Thomson Reuters. Thomson Reuters and its logo are registered trademarks or trademarks of the Thomson Reuters group of companies around the world.

Thomson Reuters journalists are subject to an Editorial Handbook which requires fair presentation and disclosure of relevant interests.