



Chat with USDA's Janey Thornton: How 'geographic preference' will work with school meals

I had the chance to chat on April 26 with Janey Thornton, Deputy Undersecretary of Agriculture for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services.

2:45 p.m. **Tom Karst:** The USDA recently **published a rule** allowing geographic preference for food purchased for school nutrition programs. Is “local” defined in the regulation?

2:46 p.m. **Janey Thornton:** We really are living the definition up to school districts, because it depends a lot on where that school district is located in a particular geographic. For instance, it would make much more sense for somebody in northern California to include southern Oregon, in their local geographic area as opposed to Southern California. Or when several states come together (at a point near a school district) they might interpret it by so many miles radius, or just (one) state or so many states surrounding it. It is just going to depend on the school districts and what their needs are.

2:47 p.m. **Karst:** So there is no set definition of “local”?

2:47 p.m. **Thornton:** Some school districts have identified it as “Can you get (the food) to our school district in one day?” I think you are going to see it vary a lot and I think I it is good we have left it (open-ended) so we can meet the needs for more school districts by doing that.

2:48 p.m. **Karst:** Say if a district specifies a geographic preference for fruits and vegetables; for that particular bid, would they be guaranteed to get produce from that geographic preference? If there is no product available locally, would that bid be filled? If you do specify a geographic preference on your bid, can you get food from outside the preference area?

2:49 p.m. **Thornton:** It depends on how you would write the bid. Coming from a local school district, I would write the bid, and as a component of the bid, I would say, I am going to give geographic preference; I would define geographic preference, and I would say that for any vendor that bid within the geographic region that I have identified, they will be awarded X additional points on the points system that I would set up for the bid award.

2:51 p.m. **Karst:** That could be a variable value, depending on the district or school?

2:51 p.m. **Thornton:** Absolutely. You would probably also need to take into consideration whatever local and state procurement guidelines are.

2:52 p.m. **Karst:** I noticed in the rule that the USDA won't have this geographic preference when the agency buys commodities for schools. Why is that?

2:53 p.m. **Thornton:** When we purchase commodities, truly the entire country is our geographic preference and we purchase food all over the United States. We do have a standard in federal procurement at USDA that all of the food purchased must of U.S. origin. So, I guess, our geographic preference is this country.

States may also do procurement for school districts, and in that instance the state could define what their geographic preference would be. Again, depending on the size of the state, the demand for the market, you could define geographic preference within that state, or if you are in a little state you may expand to get the best (deal) for that particular purpose.

2:56 p.m. **Karst:** Have there been any estimates on costs to have this geographic preference? Would it have any impact on the costs of purchasing food for school feeding programs?

2:57 p.m. **Thornton:** It would depend on how that bid is constructed. In the best of all worlds scenario, you are not only going to get a higher quality food because it is secured locally and potentially would be a fresher product, you also are going to be supporting your local farmer. While you are doing those things, you will still get a comparable price for product from the vendor for the local school district. In other words, if I buy food and if I am doing a local preference bid, if I am going to have to spend three times the price for tomatoes obviously that won't be in the best interest of the school district and I would not do that. But if I am within comparable pricing and I can secure something that was produced locally and is probably going to be fresher product and closer to the peak of ripeness and I'm going to be helping my local farmer, then that is obviously what I would want to do.

3:00 p.m. **Karst:** Are the food safety regulations any different for the local food purchased with the geographic preference compared with other USDA commodity purchases?

3:01 p.m. **Thornton:** We recommend to our school districts that are doing the procurement that they all check, as part of the stipulation for bids, that the food supplied has been grown under safe and sanitary conditions as outlined in the Good Agricultural Practices specifications. Food safety wise, we are going to require the same caliber of safety from something locally produced as food procured from a local produce company

3:02 p.m. **Karst:** Would you require the USDA GAP inspection for all the local food suppliers?

3:03 p.m. **Thornton:** We certainly recommend that districts include that as part of their specifications, yes.

3:04 p.m. **Karst:** That would be up to the districts to decide, correct?

3:04 p.m. **Thornton:** Yes. That's true on all of their food. But obviously when you are in a school district, food safety comes first and foremost above everything else.

3:05 p.m. **Karst:** You had some statistics in the news release about the rule about the growth of local food sales. Do you think this type of policy will accelerate the growth of local foods?

3:07 p.m. **Thornton:** We certainly hope that it will. We also hope that – because we will market this to the children and the markets we serve – it will bring an even a greater awareness of important role the farmer in our society, and how important it is to keep our farmland supported because that is obviously is not just going to be our food for today but for many generations to come.

3:09 p.m. **Karst:** Many readers of The Packer are larger grower/shippers who ship produce hundreds of miles. What would you say to them? Is this a program that they should be worried about, that they will be crowded out of providing fresh produce to schools?

3:10 p.m. **Thornton:** Not at all. And you need to keep in mind that even if I am procuring food locally, we don't all live in the Salinas Valley. In most instances there are only a certain amount of food grown in a particular area, and only certain foods grown in a particular area. So there is always going to be a need for the larger distributor. I know of some school districts that are actually going through some of the produce distribution companies and having them do the procurement for them even after they have a food bid in place. I think there is a place for everybody in this system and it will be to everyone's advantage.

3:12 p.m. **Karst:** In one or two years from now, what percentage of the bids - the purchases that schools will make – how many do you think will have the geographic preference in their contracts?

3:13 p.m. **Thornton:** We have a number that are doing it right this minute. We have been in a temporary rule for the past year and we have a number of school districts around the country – particularly those with big farm to school programs overall – we have a number of them doing it already. I think the trend is there and we will see it increasing annually. I think it has been a big boost to some of our small farmers who aren't big enough to work with the large food manufacturing companies. The specialty farmers, the ones who grow for farmers' markets, are beginning to see this as a real avenue for business. I think we will see more schools plan their menus first and then even do a bid before farmers' plant, so farmers will plant for the schools.

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