

USDA DoD Fresh Program: How Schools Can Incorporate Local Produce in the Cafeteria



What Is DoD Fresh?

From the Farm to Students' Plates

The journey of produce from the farm to a student's plate involves a fascinating interplay between school foodservice directors, farmers, vendors, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and even the Department of Defense (DoD). Many schools have set goals to shorten this journey by increasing the amount of locally-sourced produce they purchase, which helps support the local economy and agricultural systems. The USDA DoD Fresh Program* can be one tool schools use to achieve these goals while also providing fresher, more nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables to their students.

How Does the Program Work?

USDA DoD Fresh Vendor Selection

Every three years, the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) administers a complicated bidding process to decide the program's vendors for each state. The vendor that is chosen can then list its items in an online catalog system called the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Order/Receipt System (FFAVORS), where schools can place and receive their orders.

USDA DoD Fresh Encouraging Local Procurement

The DoD encourages its vendors to procure as much local produce as possible by requiring the vendor to list every item's origin. Items are marked as "local" if it comes from within the vendor's state or surrounding states. Offering more local options also helps ensure a wider variety of items for schools to work with.

Below is an example of how local items might be tagged in a vendor’s ordering system to signify nearby origin and an opportunity for local procurement:

CASE QUANTITY	ITEM CODE	DESCRIPTION	CASE CONTENTS	CASE PRICE	FUND SOURCE
	14P01	Apple Any Type USF/XF 100-113 1/40 LB CS	40 LB	\$35.35	_ State _ Snack _ Fed
	18B41	Cauliflower Multi-Color 6-8 CT 8 LB CS	8 LB	\$19.38	_ State _ Snack _ Fed
	15N95	Orange Cara Pink 80CT 1/35 LB	35 LB	\$29.87	_ State _ Snack _ Fed
	15P16	Potato SWT Local 40 LB CS (Co-op)	40 LB	\$14.96	_ State _ Snack _ Fed
	14P23	Starfruit 20-30 CT 1/8 LB CS	8 LB	\$26.31	_ State _ Snack _ Fed

How the USDA Provides Funding to School Food Service Operations

School food services largely depend on two sources of funding from the USDA via the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). These two sources are:

1. **Cash Reimbursement:** Schools receive funds for providing free or reduced-cost meals to students from qualifying families.
2. **Entitlement Dollars:** The USDA Foods Program sets an annual rate, which is then multiplied by the number of reimbursable meals that the school served in the previous year. The dollar amount is then awarded to the school to be used to purchase produce already procured by the USDA.

How Can Schools Utilize the Program?

Purchasing Produce Through the USDA DoD Fresh Program

Schools have the option to use their NSLP funds to buy fresh produce through the DoD Fresh program. Here’s how it works:

- ➔ Schools decide how much of their entitlement dollars they want to allocate to the USDA DoD Fresh Program, and then communicate their decision to their state’s distributing agency (SDA). (The Department of Education and Workforce is the SDA for Ohio.)
- ➔ The SDA relays this info to the DLA, which then uploads the amount of funds into FFAVORS.
- ➔ Once the state’s total amount is uploaded into FFAVORS, the SDA allocates the requested funds to each school for use in the program. The SDA is then responsible for monitoring the schools’ accounts throughout the year.

Below is an example of how school districts might track their available funds and expenditures using multiple program allotments:

BEDFORD, VA - SCHOOL DIST. Balances		
	<u>NSLP \$</u>	<u>SFSP \$</u>
County Summary		
Starting Balance	\$500,000.00	\$500.00
Spent, Previous Orders	\$5,158.54	\$116.40
Remaining Balance	\$494,841.46	\$383.60
County Detail		
FOREST ELEMENTARY		
Starting Balance	\$0.00	\$500.00
Spent, This Customer	\$0.00	\$0.00
Spent, Others	N/A	\$116.40
Remaining Balance	\$0.00	\$383.60

Common Limitations to Utilizing the USDA DoD Fresh Program

- If left unused, the schools’ USDA DoD Fresh funds expire every June 30th. The expiration of these funds means schools need to prioritize spending them, sometimes at the expense of purchasing local produce, which can be more challenging to plan for.
- USDA DoD Fresh vendors must have the capability to supply all schools in the state. This pressure can influence them to focus on produce quantity over sourcing.
- Local schools face challenges in planning for local produce due to sourcing from various places based on student needs, produce seasonality, and availability.
- Schools may turn away from the USDA DoD Fresh Program due to produce not meeting their definition of "local", causing them to miss out on cost-efficient options. Food service directors should explore available resources and programs for success.

It’s important to acknowledge that schools sometimes find it challenging to fully leverage the program. This can serve as a call to action for all Farm to School advocates to collaborate to support our school foodservice staff in pursuing multiple and creative options for getting kids nutritious food. We can also continue to work with Farm to School partners statewide and nationally to advocate for improvements to program policy and implementation.

Other Helpful Resources to Learn More

- [USDA DoD Fresh Program fact sheet](#)
- [USDA Office of Community Food Systems | DoD Fresh fact sheet for local produce](#)
- [What Chefs Want! Local Food Connection | Local Foods Calendar](#)
- [USDA/MyPlate Seasonal Produce Chart](#)
- [USDA DoD Fresh Program history](#)
- [Additional information and background on the USDA DoD Fresh Program](#)
- [Ohio Department of Education/DLA tip sheet for school food service directors](#)
- [Ohio DoD Fresh Vendor Information](#)
- [USDA DoD Fresh Program: The Basics for Schools \(video\)](#)
- [Ohio Department of Education and Workforce website](#)

*Note, the USDA DoD Fresh Program is occasionally referred to as other names including: DoD Fresh, The Fresh Produce Program, or DoD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program.



Greater Cincinnati Regional **Food Policy Council**

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