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**Don't Blame School Lunches for Child Overweight Kids,
Says Agriculture Secretary**

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WASHINGTON -- School lunches relying on federal guidance and food aren't making American kids fatter, as critics contend, Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman insisted Friday.

The nutritional value of food in school cafeterias is expected to be the focus of debate in Congress in the coming months as lawmakers look at renewing school lunch and other child nutrition programs overseen by the Agriculture Department.

"We cannot blame obesity on child nutrition programs in this country," Veneman said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Veneman's department is responsible for distributing food such as surplus meat, vegetables and fruit to schools to feed needy children. The agency also provides food for breakfast programs at some schools and gives them nutritional guidance.

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine argues that school lunch is partly to blame for young people being overweight.

But Veneman emphasizes that the government is not the primary food provider for children.

"The bulk of the eating decisions, or the buying, is done by the parents," Veneman said.

On other issues, Veneman said:

- The European Union needs to lift its moratorium on biotech foods because it has led African countries to reject biotech food aid out of fear of losing markets. "I think we're looking very seriously at additional action," Veneman said, warning of a trade suit.
- Congress may give farmers more money to cope with the drought, but "we believe it should come from the \$190 billion farm bill." She said the department tried to help by declaring several drought-stricken and flooded regions as disaster areas.
- The United States should focus on signing trade agreements with individual countries, as it did last year with Chile, to open more markets. "It's important that we have multiple levels of negotiations," Veneman said. Agriculture is very export-dependent."

The debate over school lunches came as the surgeon general warned in 2001 that obesity is an escalating epidemic that affects 13 percent of children and 60 percent of adults. The announcement left many people wondering who is responsible, which foods are causing obesity, and what can be done to trim waistlines.

Jen Keller, a dietitian for the physicians' group, said school lunches offer poor choices that can lead to bad eating habits.

At schools, "you see chicken nuggets, you see pork chops, sausage pizza, pepperoni pizza," Keller said. "I think we all know that those foods aren't really healthy ones."

Keller said much of the food that USDA offers schools is provided through surplus purchases, which the government uses to help farmers facing low prices.

Livestock groups, meanwhile, take offense at being blamed for chubby schoolchildren.

"Where's the statistics, the backup that shows this is causing obesity?" said Kara Flynn, spokeswoman for the National Pork Producers Council. "It's an anti-meat attack as usual. Meat is a healthy product. Protein is something we've all read reports about, that you need."

The Food Research and Action Center, a group advocating to enroll more children in the school lunch program, said the physicians' claims "are absurd."

"School lunches meet about a third of kids' nutrient needs, and they have very definite portion sizes, and none of the portion sizes are what I would call 'super-size,'" said Lynn Parker, director of the center's child nutrition programs.

School lunches are designed to meet USDA dietary guidelines for meat, grains, dairy, fruits and vegetables. Parker said: "We're not seeing high-calorie sodas as part of lunch. We're not seeing dessert items as a large part of lunch."

Consumer groups blame fast-food restaurants, food companies and the government for America's obesity problem. And food companies blame individuals, arguing that they need to learn when to stop eating and to exercise. While people should take some responsibility for obesity, the problem also is caused by their environment, Parker said.

"It's asking a lot of a human being to face all of the temptations and all of the limitations on activity," she said.

On the Net:

Agriculture Department: <http://www.usda.gov>