



TRIMESTER 2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IN TRIMESTER TWO, DAIRY COUNCIL OF CA MOVED FROM BUILDING A NEW FRAMEWORK TO WORKING WITHIN IT.

The transition from quarterly to trimester reporting was initiated in Trimester One to provide the Board with more intentional, outcomes-focused updates. Trimester Two fulfills this promise. Across Education, Advocacy, Collaboration and Thriving Organization, Dairy Council of CA (DCC) teams have moved Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) from intention to impact, with data and results reflecting their efforts.

The achievements this trimester demonstrate both breadth and depth. Highlights include the release of our 2026 Trends publication — our annual resource equipping nutrition educators and health professionals with the evidence and insights shaping food and nutrition across California and beyond. A key resource also received independent evidence-based recognition, and a community activation put milk in the hands of 800 families across 16 Southern California grocery stores. Additionally, our staff engagement survey surpassed its participation target — a small but meaningful sign that our internal culture is keeping pace with our external momentum.

The following is a detailed account of this progress: Dairy Council of CA goals, the outcomes achieved and the groundwork laid for Trimester Three.

AT A GLANCE

Mobile Dairy Classroom (MDC) Reaches 139K + Students

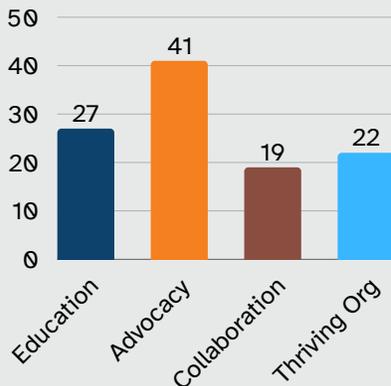
128,820 MDC In Person	10,331 MDC Virtual	94% Participant Satisfaction
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WHAT THE NUMBERS REFLECT

Behind every figure on this page is a deliberate choice — to measure not just what DCC does, but what it moves. Trimester Two's reach numbers tell a story of coordinated strategy in action: students experiencing dairy agriculture firsthand, adults accessing science-based nutrition resources and communities engaging with DCC's content across multiple platforms and formats.

When the MDC brings dairy education to more than 139,000 students across California, it connects every visit to a larger goal — it is a Key Result advancing. When publications and social media generate over 112,000 impressions, that is thought leadership that translates into measurable influence. When resources are ordered and downloaded across California by the thousands, that is dairy nutrition education reaching the professionals and families who need it most.

109 ACTIVITIES COMPLETED BY STAFF THIS TRIMESTER



OVERALL KR PERFORMANCE BY STRATEGY:

STRATEGY	TOTAL OKRs	OKRs COMPLETED
Education	6	2
Advocacy	7	5
Collaboration	6	1
Thriving Org	12	7
Total	31	15

MOVING DAIRY FORWARD WITH STRATEGIC FOCUS

16 Key results remaining

Key Results Progress **48%** Complete

RESOURCE DISTRIBUTION

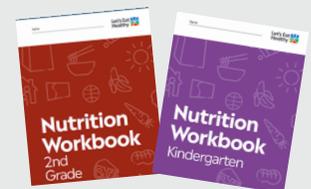
Print & Digital

216K

Total CA Prints

54,071

Total CA Digital



PUBLICATIONS AND VIDEO VIEWS

Publications

18

YouTube Channel Views

1,646,674



> Education Key Results

✓ OKRs Completed
🕒 In Progress

Objective: Advance the integration of milk and dairy foods as part of nutrition education.

Misterio del Mercado

01

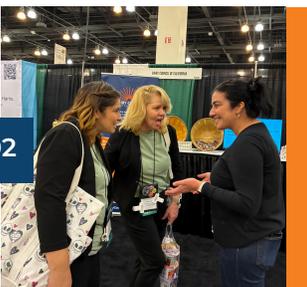


Launch 4 education tools generating 2,000+ orders
3 of 4 education resources launched to date

Highlight

Market Mystery Storybook

Updated as a dual-language digital flipbook with narrated YouTube videos in English and Spanish for K-2nd graders.



02

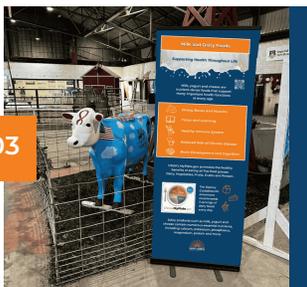


Build priority contact database +500 professionals
744 professionals added (148% of goal)

Highlight

Expanded school nutrition professional network

Engaged 1,300 attendees at the California School Nutrition Association conference and collected new contacts to grow priority audience database.



03



Mobile Dairy instructors at 90% field delivery
94% of instructor workdays spent in the field

Highlight

Mobile Dairy Classroom (MDC) featured at community events

MDC reached 1,600+ students and community members at high-visibility events like Fall on the Farm and GENYOUth Super School.



04



Increase dairy ag education activities by 10%
44% of activity goals completed

Highlight

Dairy ag education reaches 1,000+ students through Lodi USD partnership

Dairy Ag Explorers program implemented across 11 after-school sites, fulfilling a key deliverable of their CA Dept. of Food & Agriculture Farm-to-School grant.

05

90% satisfaction for Mobile Dairy assemblies



94% participant satisfaction (in-person and virtual)

06

Increase engaged influenced contacts by 20%



18,197 out of 5,000 contacts influenced on HubSpot, achieving 360% of the goal

> Advocacy Key Results

✓ OKRs Completed
 ⌚ In Progress

Objective: Advance the value of milk and dairy foods in dietary guidance and recommendations through advocacy efforts.



01



15 Conference presentations reached 3,000+ attendees

16 presentations delivered, exceeding goal

Highlight

Head Start session expands knowledge of dairy nutrition

Equipped early childhood educators with dairy nutrition science, building a foundation for advocacy.



02



2 endorsements from influential organizations

International Council of Active Aging (ICAA) Journal independently features the Healthy Eating Table

Highlight

ICAA Journal endorses Dairy Council of CA's Healthy Eating Table

In Issue 4, 2025, it independently directed its global readership to this valuable resource.



03



15 Professional Development workshops reaching 400+ professionals

21 workshops delivered, reaching 1,911 professionals

Highlight

Exploring dairy's role in healthy aging

Dairy Council of CA-hosted webinar explored the latest science on dairy's role in gut, brain, bone and muscle health.



3 digital campaigns, 500,000+ impressions

2 of 3 campaigns completed, generating 311,861 impressions so far

Highlight

National Milk Day interview garnered over 20,000 views on social media

Featured a pediatric expert from the American Academy of Pediatrics discussing dairy nutrition.



2 peer-reviewed publications, amplified via 6 media outlets

2 peer-reviewed publications completed

Highlight

Well-Nourished, Brighter Futures: Dairy Dialogue

Published in the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics - reaching 12,000 members nationwide.



Disseminate 5 thought leadership pieces, 10% engagement increase

6 pieces published

Highlight

2026 Trends publication launched on 1/5/2026

It reached 3,088 print contacts, over 26,000 email professionals, and 188,332 short social media views, targeting health educators, policy leaders, researchers and school food service professionals statewide.



2 new + 12 continued third-party publications

Featured in 3 new third-party publications this year

Highlight

Dairy Nutrition Education Featured in CA WIC Publication

DDC staff co-authored an article in *WIC Watch* highlighting culturally relevant nutrition education for parents of infants and toddlers.



Collaboration Key Results

✓ OKRs Completed
🕒 In Progress

Objective: Co-create resources, recommendations and actions to promote healthy, sustainable eating patterns.



Co-host 4 partner events, 800+ attendees, 80% satisfaction

4 partner events complete

Highlight

Partner event with Beef Council engaged 40 school nutrition leaders

Co-hosted an event with CA Beef Council at the CA School Nutrition Association conference, reinforcing the value of milk and beef in school meals.



Launch 2 co-created resources with partners

Season 2 of Let's Eat Healthy Together launched

Highlight

High school culinary classes implement creative cooking challenge

A partner educator built a multi-week cooking competition around all 4 Season 2 episodes; students created original healthy meals inspired by each episode.



3 partnerships across dairy-centric campaigns, 100% metrics sharing

2 campaigns partnerships completed

Highlight

National Milk Day retail partnership celebrated dairy

Partnered with Mother's Nutritional Center to distribute 800 gallons of milk, reaching 500,000 people through social media.



Pilot nutrition education tools with 20+ partners, achieving a 50 Net Promoter Score

48 partners piloted the tools

Highlight

Evaluation Completed for Dairy Ag Explorers Program

The pilot combined Mobile Dairy Classroom assemblies with classroom lessons, engaging 820 students across Southern California schools.

05 4 Leadership Awards, 2,500+ engagements 

Awards will be announced in Trimester Three to celebrate California leaders promoting dairy nutrition and healthy-eating initiatives.

06 Secure 2 new priority sector partnership commitments 

Secured partnership with KVCR and San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools

> Thriving Org Key Results

✓ OKRs Completed
🕒 In Progress

Objective: Building organizational capacity, equity and effectiveness.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 01 ✓ Revise and implement 3 organizational processes
10 processes updated, exceeding goal | 07 🕒 Submit 3 external funding applications
2 funding applications submitted |
| 02 ✓ OKR training for 90% of staff by 9/30/2026
All staff members completed OKR training | 08 🕒 80% satisfaction on internal communications survey
Strategic communications plan completed |
| 03 ✓ Maintain expenses within -5% of approved budget
Expenses remained within budget | 09 ✓ Develop Strategic Communication Plan + Playbook
Developed and delivered training to staff |
| 04 ✓ 2 org-wide communication trainings for staff by T3
4 trainings delivered to staff | 10 🕒 Increase annual engagement survey participation by 10%
Survey launched |
| 05 🕒 Reach 80% of org-wide OKRs
15 of 31 key results completed to date | 11 ✓ Implement 2 new DEIA/staff well-being initiatives
Implementation underway |
| 06 🕒 Staff participation in Professional Development
More than 80% of staff completed two or more professional development activities | 12 ✓ Staff engagement pulse survey, 85% participation
86% participation (goal exceeded) |



Trimester Three: Time to Finish Strong

The foundation is set. The work continues.

With about half of our OKRs complete, DCC is entering its final trimester in a strong position. Trimester Two demonstrated that the OKR framework is not merely a reporting tool; it is integral to DCC's operations. This same discipline will carry into Trimester Three, where the team will finalize the third digital campaign, highlight the achievements of LEH Leadership Award recipients and submit a third application for external funding.

The goal is to complete 80% of all 31 organization-wide Key Results by June 2026. With momentum established across all four strategies, this is not just a goal — it is a concrete plan. Trimester Three is when the full impact of the year will be realized.

Empowering Parents Through Culturally Relevant Nutrition Education: Merced WIC

In a recent collaboration between Merced County WIC and Dairy Council of California, their new Feeding Infants and Toddlers – Highlighting Hispanic Heritage Foods (FIT) resource proved to be a powerful tool for engaging participants and improving early childhood nutrition education. This 10-page bilingual booklet, developed with support from the National Association of County and City Health Officials, was piloted by five WIC nutrition assistants (WNAs) through one-on-one sessions with mothers of children under two.

Intervention Process

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach: 57 mothers completed post-session surveys, five WIC WNAs gave feedback through a provider survey, and a focus group was held to gather deeper insights. Nutrition assistants introduced the FIT resource through phone calls, in-person consults, and pre-class texts, using both print and digital formats in English and Spanish. Families received a children's nutrition book as a thank you for participating.

Meaningful Outcomes

The results were positive. All moms reported learning how nutrition impacts brain development, and 98% said they gained knowledge about nutrient-rich foods for their children.

Nutrition assistants noted that the FIT resource shifted counseling from scripted to participant-driven conversations. The booklet's visuals and age-specific guidance helped clarify topics like beverage choices and dairy introduction. Parents appreciated learning when to introduce yogurt and cheese, and how to follow their child's hunger cues.

"[The] Booklet gives something extra to families with visuals. Pictures with portion sizes are important to give more than words on a page offer."
- Nutrition Educator

Booklet Benefits

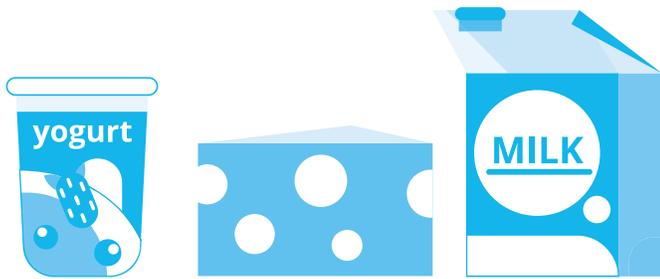
The FIT resource not only aligned with WIC guidelines but also enhanced cultural relevance by incorporating Hispanic foods and traditions. Nutrition educators found it easy to integrate into sessions, and Merced WIC identified potential for long-term adoption. No project is complete without identifying improvements which included making the booklet mobile-friendly and consolidating content.

This project demonstrates the value of community partnerships in developing and evaluating culturally tailored nutrition education. Merced WIC found they could amplify their impact, strengthen relationships, and support healthier outcomes for families.



Rethinking Dairy for Heart Health and Nutrition Equity

By Bessie O'Connor, RDN



Dairy foods such as milk, yogurt and cheese provide high-quality protein and essential nutrients in a unique nutrient package that supports healthy eating patterns.

Did You Know?

Whole-fat dairy foods, such as whole milk, yogurt and cheese have been shown to have protective or neutral effects on cardiometabolic health.

Current dietary guidelines recommend three servings of low-fat dairy a day to meet nutrient needs and limit saturated fat intake. However, emerging research shows that, whether whole-fat or low-fat, dairy foods have a neutral or beneficial effect on cardiovascular disease and related cardiometabolic risk factors such as hypertension and obesity, depending on the dairy source.^{1,2} When included in nutrient-rich dietary patterns alongside fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds and whole grains, dairy helps support nutritional adequacy across the life span, from early childhood to older adulthood, while also reducing health disparities.

Spotlight on Health Equity

Dairy foods, including lactose-free, fermented and varied fat-level products are a nutritious and affordable part of local food cultures, supporting nutrition security and health equity.

Research on dairy and cardiovascular health has largely focused on populations in Europe and North America, which have moderate to high dairy intake. However, the PURE study showed cardiovascular benefits of higher dairy consumption across both high- and low-intake regions, with particularly strong associations between milk and reduced stroke risk in lower-intake areas such as East Asia.³ Similarly, the National Medical Association emphasizes dairy consumption to reduce health disparities among Black Americans, noting that adequate dairy intake supports nutrient sufficiency and lowers the risk of chronic conditions, including

cardiovascular disease.⁴ Together, these findings highlight the importance of culturally relevant dietary guidance that incorporates flexible dairy options like lactose-free, fermented and varied fat-level products to support diverse dietary patterns, help populations meet nutrient needs and contribute to reducing health disparities.

Educating on dairy's role within balanced dietary patterns is a strategy to support community health. Both whole-fat and low-fat dairy can be included in healthy dietary patterns, shifting the focus from fat content alone to the broader context of nutritious eating patterns. Promoting flexible, culturally relevant dairy options can help diverse populations achieve nutrient adequacy, support healthy weight management and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Practical Application



To support clinical counseling, a bilingual (English and Spanish) patient handout, available to download or order at no charge, offers simple ways to incorporate dairy into culturally relevant eating patterns that account for personal preferences while furthering nutrition security and health equity.

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¹Lamarche B, Astrup A, Eckel RH, et al. Regular-fat and low-fat dairy foods and cardiovascular diseases: perspectives for future dietary recommendations. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 2025;121(5):956-964. DOI:10.1016/j.ajcnut.2025.03.009

²Akyil S, Winkler S, Meyer D, et al. Association between dairy intake and multiple health outcomes: a scoping review of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. *Eur J Clin Nutr.* 2025. DOI:10.1038/s41430-025-01639-5

³Dehghan M, Mente A, Rangarajan S, et al. Association of dairy intake with cardiovascular disease and mortality in 21 countries from five continents (PURE): a prospective cohort study. *Lancet.* 2018;392(10161):2288-2297. DOI:10.1016/S0140-6736(18)31812-9

⁴Comerford K, Lawson Y, Young M, et al. Executive summary: the role of dairy food intake for improving health among Black Americans across the life continuum. *J Natl Med Assoc.* 2024;116(2 Pt 2):211-218. DOI:10.1016/j.jnma.2024.01.026

New Resources for Nutrition Educators

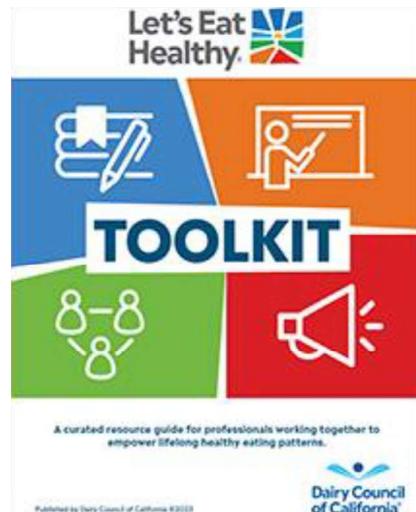
Let's Eat Healthy Toolkit

Let's Eat Healthy Toolkit. 2023. Dairy Council of California. Available for free at: <https://dairycouncilofca.org/learning-resources/our-products/let's-eat-healthy-toolkit>. Accessed July 31, 2025.

A curated resource guide for professionals working together to empower lifelong healthy eating patterns.—Dairy Council of California

As interdisciplinary teams continue to arise in complex spaces,¹ toolkits and additional resources are necessary for teams to not only align in solutions and treatments but to ensure successful interventions. The Let's Eat Healthy Toolkit provides a very structured and organized layout of engaging with professionals and updated resources that are integral to those seeking to make an impact in community nutrition.

This toolkit is broken down into 4 components: Learn, Educate, Advocate, and Collaborate. These steps highlight the need for healthy eating and nutrition security. The authors of this toolkit have conducted extensive research to provide a document that will be helpful for those looking to collaborate across teams and networks. Although much of the information and examples reference California organizations, all steps provided can be modified as needed. Sections contain definitions (i.e., nutrition security), spotlights on programs that have been successful, and quotes from stakeholders. The inclu-



sion of linked, up-to-date resources for each of the 4 components allows readers to leverage this toolkit in their respective positions.

The goals of the Let's Eat Healthy initiative, which are detailed in the learn component, set the stage for increasing nutrition security, nutrition education resources, and collaboration among community entities. It continues to delve into the foundational components that are necessary for those seeking collaboration. The quotes from former California State Senator Dr Richard Pan and Secretary Karen Ross from the California Department of Food and Agriculture further confirm the usefulness and need for this in a state's repository.

I appreciate the intentionality of wanting to educate professionals about sustainable nutrition and how it

supports health long term. Activities are strategically arranged in a way that readers understand the steps to moving forward, such as the latest trends, implementing the curriculum for kindergarten through 12th grade, and how to offer professional development opportunities. Advocating for additional materials, such as school breakfast and lunch meals, or No Kid Hungry,² share the importance of integrating resources from organizations that have been vetted throughout the years. An example from a pediatric physician, Dr Vo with the VM clinic, shares how the information can be used for training for those who are not directly in the nutrition field.

The final section highlights the need to collaborate across all sectors to achieve goals. Interactive culinary classes for district students were implemented in the San Luis Coastal Unified School District, in which the food service department connected with the Let's Eat Healthy team. This entire document provides a deep insight into how impactful collaboration can be when strategically used.

Although many of the suggested activities and resources shared throughout this document refer to California-related programs and resources, other states could leverage the work that the Let's Eat Healthy team has done and make modifications as needed. It comprehensively yet succinctly covers key topics, making it an easily digestible tool for nutrition professionals aspiring to create meaningful change.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2025.07.009>

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J Nutr Educ Behav. 2025;000:1–2

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2. No Kid Hungry. *Promising practices for starting & maintaining a school food pantry.*

No Kid Hungry- Center for Best Practices; 2023. <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/media/Promising%20Practices%20for%20Starting%20and%20Maintaining%20a%20School%20Food%20Pantry.pdf>. Accessed August 18, 2025.

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POPPY SEEDS

The Official JOURNAL for the California Child Nutrition Professional

Engage - Inspire - Grow ~ CSNA's 73rd Annual Conference Wrap on Pages 58 - 68



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THE MOBILE DAIRY CLASSROOM

CELEBRATING FARM TO SCHOOL MONTH AT YUBA CITY USD

By Chelsey Slattery, Director of Nutrition Services, Yuba City Unified School District

October was Farm to School Month, and Yuba City Unified School District's Nutrition Services Department proudly partnered with the Dairy Council of California to bring dairy agriculture literacy to elementary students through the Mobile Dairy Classroom—a fun and educational assembly that brings the farm to school!

As California's number one agricultural commodity, dairy is an important part of our state's farm-to-school story—connecting students directly to a food that's produced right here in California.

The Mobile Dairy Classroom helps students understand how milk travels from the cow to the carton through an engaging, age-appropriate presentation—complete with a live cow right on the schoolyard. The Mobile Dairy Classroom, which has been operating since the 1930s is the original farm-to-school agricultural literacy program, inspiring generations of students to learn where their food comes from. During Farm to School Month, five schools across Sutter County, CA enjoyed visits from this unique program.

This partnership was a wonderful way to celebrate Farm to School Month while supporting nutrition

education and agricultural literacy, creating a memorable farm-to-school experience for our students.

To strengthen the connection between the Mobile Dairy Classroom and our school cafeterias, the Nutrition Services team highlighted food items on our choice bars that directly tied to the lessons students learned during the assemblies.

For example, students discovered that dairy cows and humans share some dietary similarities—both enjoy pineapple! While humans enjoy the fruit's juicy flesh, dairy cows can digest the pineapple skin, which provides fiber, natural sugars, and energy to support healthy digestion and milk production.

On the day of each assembly, pineapple was featured on our choice bars, helping students make a direct connection between classroom learning and the foods they see in their school meals.

By aligning our cafeteria offerings with educational content, we aim to make nutrition education more tangible, memorable, and fun—encouraging students to think more deeply about where their food comes from and how it nourishes both people and animals.



CONNECTING THE DOTS

HOW PARTNERSHIPS IN AGRICULTURE STRENGTHEN SCHOOL NUTRITION

By: Ashley Ash, SNS, Professional Development Chair, Mother Lode CSNA Chapter 10

As school nutrition professionals, we all share a common goal—to nourish students with high-quality meals that support their health, learning, and growth. Yet, behind every nutritious school meal lies a story that begins long before food reaches our kitchens. This fall, Mother Lode CSNA had the opportunity to see that story in action during an education tour at Tollcrest Dairy in Wheatland, CA hosted in partnership with Dairy Council of California.

This professional development experience on October 2, 2025, brought together school nutrition directors, managers, and culinary leaders from across our region to deepen our understanding of California agriculture and how food groups like dairy and wheat work together to build healthy eating patterns for students.

The tour was inspired by findings from the Well-Nourished, Brighter Futures: Dairy Dialogue: Visioning Equitable and Sustainable Solutions for School Meals and Student Success Report, which identified a need for greater food and agricultural literacy among school nutrition professionals. As a chapter, we recognized the opportunity to take learning beyond the classroom—and into the heart of the farm.

“This tour gives school nutrition leaders the opportunity to see where the dairy foods they serve begin and gain a greater understanding of how California dairy farmers nourish our future,” said Shannan Young, RDN, CAE, SNS, of Dairy Council of California.

From Farm to School: Experiential Learning in Action

Our visit to Tollcrest Dairy, a third-generation family farm owned and operated by Chase Tollenaar, was both eye-opening and inspiring. We experienced firsthand how California dairy farmers combine tradition and technology—balancing animal care, sustainability, and innovation. Walking through the rotary milking parlor and hearing about water and energy conservation efforts gave us a new appreciation for the care that goes into producing the milk, yogurt, and cheese that fuel our school meals every day.

“From supporting student health and learning to advancing innovation in animal care and environmental stewardship, California’s dairy farmers are leading the way,” said Chase Tollenaar.

For many of us, this experience strengthened our understanding of the connection between farms, food systems, and the students we serve. It was a reminder that when we talk about healthy eating patterns, we talk about a system of people and practices working together—from the farmer to the school nutrition professional.

Food, Farming, and Future Leaders

After the farm tour, participants gathered for lunch prepared by Wheatland Union High School’s Culinary Arts students. Their talent and pride were unmistakable, and it was inspiring to see how

agriculture, culinary education, and school nutrition are truly interwoven in this community.

Over lunch, we heard from a diverse panel of partners representing the California Wheat Commission, high school agriculture educator, and school nutrition and culinary leaders. Together, we discussed how wheat and dairy both play vital roles in school meals—and how teaching students about where food comes from supports lifelong healthy habits.

“By connecting the dots between wheat fields, dairy farms, and school kitchens, students and nutrition leaders can better appreciate the collaboration it takes to provide balanced, wholesome meals,” said Claudia Carter, Executive Director, California Wheat Commission.

For me, one of the most memorable moments came from hearing Chef Kuulei Moreno, Wheatland Union High School’s Culinary Arts Teacher and School Nutrition Director, reflect on how engaging with agriculture deepens the meaning of our work.

“Serving food is not just about the meal on the plate—it’s about teaching students where that food comes from and inspiring them to be part of a healthier future,” she shared.

Dairy and wheat aren’t just staples in school meals—they’re catalysts for collaboration and leadership. When schools, farmers, and culinary programs work together, students see that healthy eating is a community effort. That perspective doesn’t just shape habits; it builds respect for agriculture and inspires the next generation to lead with sustainability in mind.

Professional Development with Measurable Impact

This event represented 10 school districts, one agriculture education program, and two allied industry partners—collectively reaching more than 143,000 K–12 students.

The outcomes speak volumes with participants reporting improved perceptions of dairy farming, sustainability, and environmental stewardship. Additional tour findings demonstrate:

1. 100% agreed that including nutritious dairy foods such as milk, yogurt, and cheese is essential in children’s diets.
2. 100% said learning about California agriculture added meaningful value to their understanding of local food systems.
3. 95% are now more likely to promote dairy foods in their professional nutrition recommendations.

CSNA - Poppy Seeds Magazine



4. 100% would recommend the farm tour experience to colleagues.

One participant captured the impact perfectly:

“How much care and hard work goes into taking care of cows to make sure that we get the best milk is information that would be valuable to bring back to schools.”

— April Loyola, Child Nutrition Technician, Lodi Unified School District

The Power of Partnership

The Mother Lode Dairy Tour is more than a single event—it’s a model for how collaboration among school nutrition professionals, farmers, industry partners, and educators can build a stronger, more connected food system. Together, these partnerships strengthen agricultural literacy, reinforce the value of all food groups, and inspire a generation of students to appreciate the journey from farm to plate. As the Professional Development Chair for our chapter, I couldn’t be prouder of how this experience brought people together—from dairy farmers and wheat growers to school nutrition and culinary teams. It reminded us that agriculture and education are deeply connected and that our partnerships truly strengthen each other.

When we learn from one another, we elevate our programs, our students, and our profession. Together, we’re not only feeding children—we’re helping them understand and appreciate the journey of food, the hands that produce it, and the systems that make healthy eating possible.

To access the Well-Nourished, Brighter Futures: Dairy Dialogue report and learn about school nutrition resources provided by Dairy Council of CA to visit www.DairyCouncilofCA.org/SchoolNutrition



2025 CONFERENCE REFLECTIONS

By: Alyssa McClelland, MS, Dairy Council of California

Each year, the California School Nutrition Association (CSNA) Annual Conference brings together a vibrant community of professionals united by a shared purpose—to nourish and empower California’s students. This year’s theme, Engage, Inspire, and Grow: Empowering California’s School Nutrition Leaders Through Collaboration and Innovation, beautifully captures the heart of Dairy Council of California’s work.

For more than a century, Dairy Council of California has believed that nutrition education and collaboration are essential to supporting student well-being. When school nutrition leaders are engaged, inspired and growing together, students thrive—not only in the cafeteria but also in the classroom, at home and throughout their communities.

As I reflect on this year’s conference, I am reminded of how much strength lies in partnership. The energizing sessions, interactive student engagement and tables shared with peers and partners offered countless moments that truly embodied this year’s theme.



Engaging Teams for Well-Being and Success

We kicked off the conference with a session on one of the most important drivers of program success—staff well-being—led by my colleague Maria Frye, RDN, and Lodi Unified School District’s Dr. Betty Crocker, RDN, SNS. Together, they highlighted the power of investing in people, a reminder that caring for the well-being of team members creates stronger connections, greater purpose and better outcomes for students.

Supporting staff isn’t just good for morale; it’s foundational to sustaining effective programs. Frye and Dr. Crocker offered strategies that emphasize belonging, recognition and authentic communication—key elements that help your teams grow together and bring their best selves to the work of nourishing students each day.

“Leading with self-care means leading with joy, balance and energy,” said Dr. Crocker. “When you let sunshine in—your calm clarity becomes your superpower, and your sparkle inspires everyone around you.”

Inspiring Wellness Committees to Drive Change

Another highlight was the session titled Wellness Committee Refresh: Creating Committees That Inspire Change, presented by three California Local School Wellness Policy Collaborative members: CalFresh Healthy Living–UC’s Dr. Anna Jones, Nourish Partners’ Leeza Woodbury, RDN, and my fellow team member Rajwinder Kaur, MPH. The session explored how wellness policies can evolve into catalysts for change.

When local leaders feel empowered and supported, wellness committees become more than meetings—they become movements. By bringing together stakeholders—students, educators, foodservice professionals and community partners—wellness becomes visible, achievable and lasting.

“At the CSNA conference, we focused on helping districts move from compliance to impact by rethinking how they build their wellness policy committees,” said Woodbury. “Real progress happens when those committees work collaboratively. When districts create space for others to get involved and advocate, wellness stops being a checklist and starts becoming part of the culture.”

Growing Student Engagement Through Food and Fun

At the heart of the conference, we saw how engaging students directly in food and nutrition can transform their perceptions and choices. In the session titled *Cooking With Purpose: Engage Students, Grow Skills and Inspire School Meal Innovation*, Kaur joined Juan Valencia of Romoland School District and Dayquian Baker, a *Cooking up Change* alumnus, to demonstrate how hands-on cooking experiences empower youth, build confidence and inspire curiosity around school meals.

“When students are involved in culinary programs, they become part of the creative process behind school meals,” said Valencia. “Their input brings fresh ideas, cultural relevance and real excitement to the menu, which helps drive innovation and builds a stronger connection between the food we serve and the students we serve.”

Meanwhile, Dairy Council of California’s Sonia Fernandez-Arana, MA, and Kaur brought nutrition education to life during a Nutrition Advisory Council mini-conference. Through an interactive *Dairy Around the World* lesson and a Jeopardy-style game focused on breakfast and brain power, students learned how dairy and other nutrient-dense foods fuel their focus and energy. The laughter, excitement and sense of pride among students reminded us all, why interactive learning is so powerful. It transforms nutrition from something students are told about into something they truly experience and understand.



Collaboration at the Shared Table

The spirit of collaboration continued during *Taste, Connect and Inspire: A Shared Table* mixer co-hosted by Dairy Council of California and California Beef Council. Held at Agnes Restaurant & Cheesery, the event brought together school nutrition leaders, partners and friends for an evening of good food, great company and shared purpose.

Over curated food pairings and a lively cheese demonstration, attendees united around a collective commitment to nourish students, support educators and advance agricultural literacy. The conversations that evening underscored the strength of coming together across commodities and sectors to promote balanced nutrition and support school communities.

Leaving the conference, I felt both grateful and energized. Connections and collaborations reaffirmed Dairy Council of California’s mission to elevate the health of children and families through the power of nutrition education and partnerships.

Looking ahead, our commitment remains clear: to continue engaging with school nutrition leaders for innovative approaches to education and wellness. Growing this collective impact can ensure that every student has the nourishment and support needed to thrive—one meal, one lesson and one connection at a time.



A MODEL NEW APPROACH

DISTRICT-LEVEL INVOLVEMENT IN LOCAL SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICIES

By: Jackie Richardson, RDN, MIB, Associate Director of Nutrition Services, California Department of Ed.; Bailey Suarez, Community & School Engagement Manager, Dairy Council of California

A district's local school wellness policy (LSWP) is key to supporting campuses to fuel student growth, learning and overall wellness. Numerous studies confirm a strong link between attendance, achievement and student wellness. In fact, comprehensive wellness policies are a fundamental approach to State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond's Transforming Schools initiatives that includes a goal of reducing chronic absenteeism by 50% by 2030. Wellness policies provide the needed structure and accountability for wellness goals, and district-level participation supports consistency, compliance and strong integration of approaches across disciplines and campuses to the benefit of all students.

Federal Requirements for Wellness Policies

Local educational agencies participating in the National School Lunch Program and/or School Breakfast Program must establish an LSWP, per Title 7 Code of Federal Regulations (7 CFR), Section 210.31. The regulation outlines, among other things, four main requirements:

- designated officials responsible for ensuring that each school complies with the policy
- broad stakeholder engagement, including parents, students, teachers, administrators and foodservice staff
- nutrition standards for foods sold and/or served to students on campus during the school day that, at minimum, meet the federal requirements for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs, as well as competitive foods (7 CFR Section 210.11)

- triennial assessments to evaluate compliance and progress toward goals, with public access to results and updates

It should be noted that while the federal regulations require a designated official to lead the wellness work, they do not specify who within the district leads the LSWP; due to regulation ties to the school nutrition programs, leadership is often assigned to the school nutrition director.

To involve the public, districts typically form a district wellness committee. The wellness committee establishes district goals for nutrition, physical activity and wellness promotion, as well as developing standards for foods and beverages provided and/or sold to students on campus during the school day. This committee often guides the implementation of these goals and measures progress toward achieving them. Both the goals and the progress report are made available to the public. And, as previously discussed, the school nutrition director is often designated to lead and facilitate the wellness committee, as well as the triennial assessment, despite the more global wellness goals of the policy.

Benefits of District Involvement in LSWP

The existing federal requirements for leadership, engagement and standards reinforce transparency, accountability and stronger links between nutrition environments and academic success. Including district involvement in the development, implementation and evaluation of the policy facilitates the creation of a common vision, consistency across all campuses, comprehensive integration and enhanced local accountability.

Administrative leadership can establish approaches to preserve collaboration, bridge the gap from policy

to implementation and more completely address potential concerns. Uniform implementation of wellness policies ensures that all school sites benefit from them equally. Integration of wellness efforts across curriculum, facilities, meal service and physical education normalizes cultures and reinforces messages through multiple layers of exposure.

Los Nietos School District: Embracing Wellness at All Levels

West-Whittier Los Nietos is an unincorporated community in Los Angeles County. Established in 1861, Los Nietos School District is one of the oldest in Southern California. The district includes one middle school serving grades sixth through eighth and three elementary schools serving transitional kindergarten through fifth grade students. Total student enrollment is 1,251, with 25% English language learners and 88% of students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals in school year 2024–2025.

Under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Ramiro Rubalcaba, Los Nietos School District prioritizes culture and climate the same as it does curriculum. The district has established four core focus areas: academic excellence, innovative programs, optimal operations and community connections. Wellness is deeply integrated into each of the core areas.

Per its LSWP, the superintendent or designee convenes the Los Nietos Wellness Committee, facilitates development of and updates to the wellness policy, and ensures each school's compliance. Further, the principal of each school designates a school wellness policy coordinator, who ensures compliance with the policy. District- and site-level leadership, combined with student and school community input, has resulted in a strong, well-informed wellness policy that aims to address the needs of the whole child.

In recognition of their exemplary work, Los Nietos School District was awarded the 2025 Golden Bell Award in the category of Social Emotional Health and Wellness for their Healthy Los Nietos Wellness Committee. Awardees in this category are acknowledged for programs focusing on a holistic approach to the social, emotional and mental health and well-being of all members of the local educational agency community, including students, teachers, administrators, superintendents, board members and all other staff.

The California Local School Wellness Policy Collaborative

Established in 2011 through a partnership between the California Department of Education and Dairy

Council of California, the California Local School Wellness Policy Collaborative has long served as a statewide platform for training, technical assistance and policy alignment. Over the years, members have shaped strategies through annual surveys, workshops and toolkits developed in collaboration with the University of California's CalFresh program, the California Department of Public Health and over 20 other agencies.

The collaborative continues to support statewide efforts to strengthen wellness policies. Its current structure includes co-chair leadership from Dairy Council of California and the Nutrition Services Division of the California Department of Education. Three subcommittees include:

- Resource & Policy Promotion
- Training & Empowerment
- Communication & Outreach

In spring 2025, the collaborative gathered statewide feedback from its school wellness leaders. Respondents cited major barriers such as limited administrative support, workload burdens on nutrition services, need for administrative support, low stakeholder engagement and overlapping district policies. They emphasized the need for simplified tools, staffing support at the district level, training and cross-department collaboration. While the collaborative has used this feedback to guide training and resource development, engagement of district administrators in LSWP work and leadership would also go a long way to addressing some of the barriers identified.

Wellness Policy Tools and Resources

To assist districts, the collaborative offers a comprehensive Resource Library that includes a Triennial Assessment template, model policies, recorded webinars and a Wellness Committee Guide.

Closing

District and school site leaders actively working in partnership with students, staff and school community members are central to sustaining a culture of student wellness. With coordinated support and practical tools, districts can move the needle on student success and community health by embedding wellness into all aspects of education.

CALIFORNIA
LOCAL SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICY
COLLABORATIVE
DairyCouncilOfCA.org/CASchoolWellness



ELK GROVE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

BOARD COMMUNICATION

From the Office of the Superintendent

Date: 12/5/2025

To the Board of Education

BC No. _____

Regarding: Mobile Dairy Classroom

Prepared by: Michelle Drake

The purpose of this Board Communication is to highlight a district partnership with The Dairy Council of California and their continued support in teaching students about food literacy.

The Dairy Council of California’s Mobile Dairy Classroom brings agricultural literacy and nutrition education directly to students through an engaging, standards-based assembly featuring a live dairy cow and calf. During the program, students learn where milk comes from, how farmers care for animals and the environment, and the importance of dairy in a balanced diet. Elk Grove Unified School District has been a long-standing partner, hosting multiple Mobile Dairy Classroom assemblies each year to support agricultural education and connect students to California’s food system.

The Dairy Council of California has been a partner of the district for over 30 years, supporting nutrition education, access to standards-based curriculum, and overall wellness. The Mobile Dairy Classroom has been visiting District schools for many years. In 2023-24 they visited 9 schools, in 2024-25 they visited 5 schools and for the 2025-26 school year they currently have 4 visits scheduled, as follows:

- 01/07/2026 Marion Mix Elementary
- 01/23/2026 Sierra Enterprise Elementary
- 01/29/2026 Florin Elementary
- 03/03/2026 Isabelle Jackson Elementary

We welcome Board Members to visit during the Mobile Dairy Classroom assembly and see the sheer joy that comes to students and adults alike when they get to see a dairy cow up close.

If you have any questions, please contact Michelle Drake, Director, Food & Nutrition Services at 916-686-7735.



Christopher R. Hoffman
Superintendent

Opinion: It's time for clarity on ultraprocessed foods

Amy DeLisio

December 8, 2025

America's health crisis is unfolding in plain sight: an abundance of food choices alongside rising disease.

Discussions around ultraprocessed foods, or UPFs, reveal how access and policy shape what ends up on the plate for millions of Americans. As rates of chronic disease and childhood obesity continue to rise and disparities widen, understanding how food processing shapes nutrition and health is essential for science-based solutions.

Many families struggle to access nutrient-dense foods that support lifelong wellness, strategies to improve diet quality while meeting people's unique needs, preferences, and values are complex. Understanding how foods are produced, including the role processing plays in safety, nutrition and access is essential to improving diet quality.

UPFs are increasingly the center of the conversation around food and nutrition, from consumers to health experts and policymakers. However, a lack of understanding of what constitutes UPFs creates confusion.

Much of the food we eat today undergoes processing to improve safety, preserve or enhance nutrients, and make healthy options more affordable, benefits worth considering as we discuss the role different types of processing play in supporting health.

Research shows that some processed foods that have low nutritional value are consistently linked to poor health outcomes. However, there are many nutrient dense foods, like whole-grain cereals, canned beans, frozen vegetables and yogurt, that retain their nutritional value and have beneficial health impacts.

Pasteurization ensures milk safety and quality, enabling the production of nutrient-rich dairy foods that contribute essential nutrients across the lifespan. Fermentation, used for yogurt, kefir and many cheeses, adds beneficial bacteria that support gut health, strengthen the microbiome and provide functional benefits beyond basic nutrition.

Processing also allows companies to improve nutritional profiles-reducing sodium, added sugars and saturated fats while fortifying beneficial nutrients. Yet these innovations are often overlooked in UPF classifications that focus on the extent of processing rather than nutrient density.

As awareness of UPFs grows, policymakers are examining how definitions and regulations might shape nutrition guidance and food access. This reflects both the importance and the complexity of the issue and the need for careful, science-based approaches.

California was the first state to address UPFs by passing a law in 2023 banning synthetic food dyes from being served in schools to Gov. Gavin Newsom's executive order in January 2025 directing state agencies to assess the health effects of additives and ingredients commonly found in UPFs.

California's Real Food, Healthy Kids act, signed into law on Oct. 8, 2025, seeks to phase out harmful UPFs from public schools by 2035. The law defines UPFs as foods high in saturated fat, sodium or added sugars, and contains industrial additives like artificial colors, flavors, sweeteners and emulsifiers and tasks the California Department of Public Health with identifying harmful UPFs for removal from school meals.

At the national level, the Food and Drug Administration, Department of Health and Human Services, and Department of Agriculture jointly issued a request for information this July to explore whether a uniform federal definition of UPFs should be adopted for use in food labeling, research and policy.

In early 2026, the new Dietary Guidelines for Americans may address UPF-related recommendations which could affect foods available through federal nutrition programs, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children and the national school lunch and breakfast programs, which collectively serve more than 30 million families nationwide. These programs are a vital source of nutrition security for families and are especially critical for pregnant women and children, when proper nutrition sets the foundation for healthy growth, brain development and lifelong wellness.

Policy decisions must be informed by credible science, reflect the realities of food production, and avoid unintentionally limiting access to nutritious foods.

The food and agriculture sectors have an opportunity to lead by showing how responsibly produced foods can support balanced eating patterns and improve public health outcomes. Educating consumers and policymakers on the role of processing methods to improve safety, shelf life, and nutritional value while reducing food waste is essential.

By staying engaged and collaborating across the food system, we can ensure that nutrition policy advances health, reflects sound science and supports resilient, equitable access to nutrient-dense foods.

Amy DeLisio is CEO of the Dairy Council of California.



American Academy of Pediatrics
California Chapter

January brings a time to renew,
reminding us to keep children healthy, too.
With compassion strong and guidance
true,
pediatricians support families in all they
do.

Pediatric Insider News!

January 2026

Pediatric Pulse

Perspectives in Child Health

Early Peanut Introduction Guidelines Show Real-World Success

New Research Confirms Significant Decline in Food Allergy Rates

The question pediatricians have been asking since the LEAP trial changed practice: **Are early peanut introduction guidelines actually working in the real world?** A November 2025 study published in *Pediatrics* provides encouraging evidence that they are.

From Trial to Practice

When the LEAP trial demonstrated an 81% reduction in peanut allergy among high-risk infants who consumed peanut early, it revolutionized our approach to allergy prevention. But randomized controlled trials don't always translate to population-level impact. Implementation barriers, from caregiver anxiety to variable provider adoption, raised questions about whether guideline dissemination would meaningfully change allergy epidemiology.

Researchers from the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the AAP analyzed electronic health record data from over 124,000 children across 40 primary care practices in the AAP CCR2 network. They compared three cohorts: pre-guidelines (2010-2014), post-initial guidelines (2015-2017), and post-addendum guidelines (2017-2019).

The Numbers Tell a Compelling Story

Peanut allergy rates dropped from 0.79% to 0.53% to 0.45% across the three periods—a 43% overall reduction. Any IgE-mediated food allergy decreased from 1.46% to 0.90%—a 38% decline. Both changes were highly statistically significant (p<0.0001).

Perhaps most importantly, these reductions occurred regardless of whether children had atopic dermatitis. This supports the current consensus guidelines, which recommend early introduction for all infants at 4-6 months, without routine risk stratification or pre-introduction testing.

The study also revealed an interesting shift: **egg overtook peanut as the most common documented food allergen in the post-guidelines period.** Cow's milk allergy rates also decreased significantly, suggesting families and providers are applying early introduction principles more broadly. [Continue reading...](#)



Sushma Chamarchi, MD, MPH, CLC
Santa Clara Area Director, AAP-CA1

[Read More](#)

President's Column:

We Rise

2026 brings us the opportunity to fight passionately for what we believe in. **Maya Angelou** reminds us:

*"Just like income and like sun,
With the certainty of seas,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise."*

We are the experts who know how to care for children and help them thrive. The seeds of care we plant today will translate into health and full, meaningful lives for our patients tomorrow.

As we face new challenges, some we never imagined, let's stay centered. Let's keep doing what we do best, and let's fight with all our might. Let's continue to do what we love while countering the misinformation and disinformation that surround us. We have the power and the responsibility to set the record straight.

Our chapter is mighty. We are richly diverse, with incredible individuals doing extraordinary work. I encourage you to attend chapter chats, join in-person events, and embrace opportunities to mentor and learn from one another. There are many ways to participate, each meaningful and valid at whatever level feels right for you.

Please encourage your colleagues to join our chapter. Here is the link to join, and feel free to share: [AAP California Chapter 1 Membership](#)



Neal Patel, MD, FAAP
President, AAP-CA1

Dairy Council of California: Strengthening Community Health Through Nutrition Education

As a nutrition education and advocacy organization that advances the benefits of milk and dairy foods in achieving nutrition security and sustainable food systems, the **Dairy Council of California** has much to offer. Education, advocacy and partnerships with health professionals, educators and community leaders elevate the health of children and families by fostering lifelong healthy eating patterns.



Thanks to the generous support from California's dairy farm families and local milk processors, the organization is able to provide science-based nutrition education resources and nutrition professional development at no cost to you. With the support and collaboration of health professionals, **these programs help deliver nutrition education to 1.7 million students and families across California and throughout the United States each year.**

Elementary students learn about how milk goes from farm to grocery store at Mobile Dairy Classroom assemblies throughout California. [Learn more about the Mobile Dairy Classroom.](#)

Dairy Council of California advocates for equitable access to nutritious foods by connecting and collaborating with farmers, schools, health professionals, and communities to ensure that children and families learn how pairing fruits, vegetables, and whole grains with dairy can enhance taste, improve overall nutrition, and support physical and cognitive development while helping prevent chronic conditions. Access [Free Med-Cal approved resources in English and Spanish](#). Access [booklets](#), [handouts](#), and [all resources](#).

Dairy Council of California recently co-hosted a culinary medicine symposium at the University of California, Davis, bringing together pediatricians, nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and registered dietitians to explore dairy nutrition, innovation, and sustainability. Also, [continue reading...](#)



Dairy Council of California
Bessie O'Connor, RDH

[Read More](#)

A Message From the CEO

Building Healthier Communities Through Whole Food and Dairy



Dairy Council of California recently released its 2026 Trends report, bringing research, policy and real-world context together to help industry, health care and education professionals understand trending food and nutrition shifts. Key changes in food systems, nutrition science and public health are influencing the way people

learn about, access and experience food. The publication explores the rising demand for protein and the dairy innovations emerging to meet it, evolving efforts to define and regulate ultra-processed foods, persistent challenges in children's health and nutrition, and the growing integration of nutrition solutions within health care systems.

The latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans reinforces these themes by encouraging higher protein intake across life stages, supporting dairy consumption at all fat levels and emphasizing nutrient-dense, minimally processed foods as the foundation of a healthy eating pattern.

These current trends create an important opportunity for the dairy industry. From milk and yogurt to cheese, dairy foods are whole, nutritious foods that deliver essential nutrients that support health at every life stage, from immune and brain development in pregnancy and early childhood to preventing frailty, fractures and cognitive decline in older adulthood.

It is essential for the dairy community to work together to raise awareness of the health benefits of dairy foods and stay engaged to ensure science-based solutions are the basis for evolving food policies.

To explore these themes in greater depth, read Dairy Council of California's 2026 Trends report, with practical takeaways for dairy's role in health. Read the full report at DairyCouncilofCA.org/Trends.

To a healthier future,



Amy DeLisio, MPH, RDN

The Rise of Protein and the Return to Whole Dairy Foods

Protein demand continues to surge as consumers prioritize strength, healthy aging, weight management and overall wellness. According to the International Food Information Council's 2025 Food and Health Survey, 70% of Americans are actively seeking protein foods, making high-protein eating a prevalent dietary approach. At the same time, policy is shifting. There is a broader return to whole foods, with consumers gravitating toward simple, recognizable ingredients they perceive as real and nourishing.

Dairy foods across all fat levels, including milk, yogurt, cheese and butter, are experiencing a comeback as nutrition science evolves beyond single nutrients to reflect whole foods and dietary patterns. A growing body of research shows that whole-milk dairy is not associated with adverse health outcomes and may offer neutral to positive benefits when consumed in recommended amounts. This shift reflects greater understanding of the dairy matrix, the interaction of nutrients and structure that influences health outcomes, supporting the role of whole dairy foods in balanced, healthy eating patterns.



GLP-1s Fuel Protein Interest

The rise of GLP-1 weight loss medications is fueling protein interest. Research shows that these medications, now used by roughly 12% of Americans, suppress appetite. Thus, it is necessary for users to prioritize nutrient density by including protein to maintain adequate nutrient intake and prevent muscle loss, which is a concern with these medications. With dairy proteins among the highest in quality and digestibility, the dairy industry has an opportunity to offer an effective solution by delivering complete protein along with essential nutrients in a convenient format, helping support muscle maintenance amid limited evidence-based dietary guidance for GLP-1 users.



Guest Columns

Perspective: Dairy Nutrition

Whole foods, protein and healthy fat come into favor

Amy DeLisio

Amy DeLisio is CEO of the Dairy Council of California. She is a registered dietitian with a master's degree in public health from the University of Southern California and earned her bachelor's degree in dietetics at Youngstown State University. She contributes this column exclusively for Cheese Market News®.

Sales and interest in whole-milk dairy foods have been gaining traction in recent years, as a growing body of evidence shows that whole-milk dairy foods such as cheese, yogurt and butter may not be associated with negative health outcomes when consumed in recommended amounts; instead, they fit well within healthy eating patterns.

Most recently, whole-milk dairy foods had a big win in the newly released 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which encourages consumption of “real food” with dietary patterns built around protein, dairy, vegetables, fruits, healthy fats and whole grains, alongside a reduction in highly processed foods.

The Dietary Guidelines continue to emphasize dairy's role in healthy eating patterns, pointing to nutrients many Americans struggle to get enough of, including calcium, vitamin D and potassium. The Dietary Guidelines reflect a broader whole-food philosophy, encouraging Americans to choose whole-food sources of saturated fat, including whole-fat dairy, while keeping intake within established limits.

These positive associations with whole-fat dairy foods are not based on individual nutrients alone but rather on the dairy matrix, which includes both the nutrient and non-nutrient components of foods such as vitamins, minerals and bioactives, as well as physical structure, texture and form. Together, these elements can affect digestion, absorption and physiological functions that are important for health.

For the dairy industry, interest in whole foods creates a timely opportunity. From cheese to milk to yogurt, dairy competes well in a marketplace that increasingly rewards familiar whole foods.

- Protein is having a moment

In addition to encouraging whole foods, the Dietary Guidelines elevate the importance of high-quality protein. At the same time, interest in protein is rising among consumers. Motivated by goals related to healthy aging, muscle and bone health and overall well-being, 70% of Americans report they are seeking protein-rich foods, according to the International Food Information Council's 2025 Food and Health Survey.

Interest in protein spans generations and eating occasions. Parents are seeking protein-rich snacks for kids, often paying a premium for products labeled “good source of protein.” Teens are turning to protein bars, shakes and powders to support sports performance. This heightened interest has fueled rapid product expansion across categories from snack foods and baked goods to comfort-meal kits and convenience options. Market research projects the high-protein product segment to grow significantly through 2028.

Dairy products are naturally an excellent source of high-quality protein and are considered whole foods that are affordable and easy to prepare. Cheese and yogurt in particular are nutrient-dense options that provide the protein and micronutrients needed to maintain muscle and bone health.

Within this fast-growing protein landscape, dairy remains a leader. Dairy proteins, including whey and casein, are among the highest-quality and most digestible proteins available, supporting muscle growth and repair and overall metabolic health. The dairy industry is expanding processing capacity for whey protein and milk powders in response to rising demand, helping to support manufacturers who use dairy ingredients across beverages, snacks and sports nutrition products.

The rise of GLP-1 weight loss medications is also accelerating protein demand, as these drugs — now used by an estimated 12% of Americans — significantly suppress appetite, raising concerns about nutrient gaps and muscle loss. As a result, users are being advised to prioritize protein, hydration and fiber-rich foods to maintain adequate nutrient intake and prevent muscle loss. Dairy is well positioned to meet this emerging need. This demand is already driving product innovation, including new dairy-based beverages formulated specifically for people taking GLP-1s and functional shots made with kefir and colostrum.

- Ultra-processed foods under a critical lens

Alongside interest in whole foods and protein, ultra-processed foods are increasingly at the center of the conversation around food and nutrition. Even so, there is not a universally recognized definition of what constitutes an ultra-processed food, and not all processing should be perceived as negative.

While research shows that some highly processed foods with low nutritional value are consistently linked to poor health outcomes, many nutrient-dense foods that are processed — like whole-grain cereals, canned beans, frozen vegetables and yogurt — provide nutritional value and have beneficial health impacts. In addition, much of the food eaten today undergoes processing to improve safety, preserve or enhance nutrients, and

make healthy options more affordable, benefits worth considering when discussing the role of different types of processing in supporting health.

In the case of dairy foods, pasteurization ensures milk safety and quality, and fermentation used for cheeses, yogurt and kefir adds beneficial bacteria that supports gut health, strengthens the microbiome and provides functional benefits beyond basic nutrition. Processing also allows companies to improve nutritional profiles by reducing sodium, added sugars and saturated fats while fortifying beneficial nutrients. These innovations are often overlooked in the ultra-processed food classification that focuses on the extent of processing rather than nutrient density.

As awareness of ultra-processed foods grows, policymakers are examining how definitions and regulations might shape nutrition guidance and food access. This ongoing review reflects both the importance and the complexity of the issue and the need for careful, science-based approaches.

With updated nutrition guidance, strong protein demand and evolving views on dietary fats converging, dairy is well positioned to meet consumers' shifting expectations and play an increasingly important role in health-promoting diets.

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