

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105179](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

USDA helps millions of children from low-income households access healthy meals by purchasing food, including seafood, for the NSLP. USDA-purchased foods represent about 15 to 20 percent of the food served in the NSLP. According to the DGA, programs, such as the NSLP, can play an essential role in providing access to healthy meals. This can help reduce the health risks children may face from consuming a poor diet. Seafood offers particular health benefits, including omega-3 fatty acids, which can aid in the prevention of heart disease.

GAO was asked to review USDA's purchases of seafood for the NSLP. This report discusses (1) USDA's purchases of seafood for the NSLP, (2) factors affecting selected states' and SFAs' efforts to provide seafood to students, and (3) USDA's efforts to help address these factors.

GAO analyzed data from USDA on food purchases, including seafood, from fiscal years 2014 through 2019; interviewed state and SFA officials from a non-generalizable sample of 10 major domestic seafood-producing states with a range of NSLP funding levels; and interviewed USDA officials. GAO excluded data for fiscal years 2020 and 2021 because of the impact of COVID-19 on NSLP participation.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that USDA develop a plan to enhance its assistance in providing seafood to students, and for USDA and NOAA to collaborate and share NOAA's vendor information. USDA and NOAA agreed with our recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105179](#). For more information, contact Steve D. Morris at (202) 512-3841 or morris@gao.gov.

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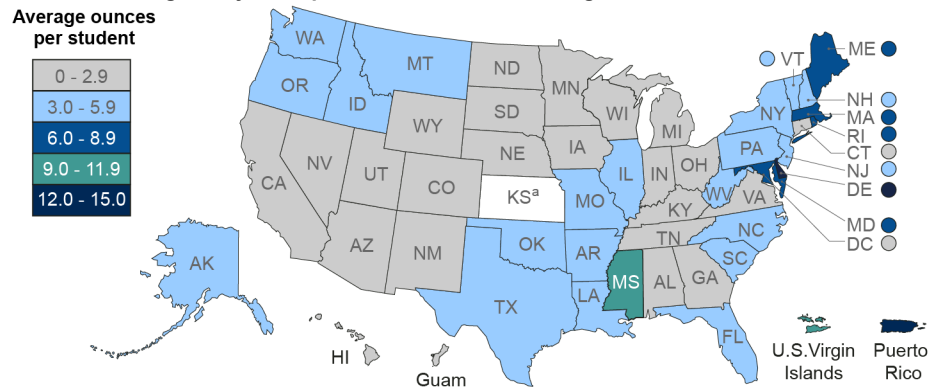
NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

USDA Could Enhance Assistance to States and Schools in Providing Seafood to Students

What GAO Found

From states' and school food authorities' (SFAs) orders, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) purchased a limited quantity of seafood compared to other animal proteins (beef, eggs, pork, and poultry) for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) for fiscal years 2014 through 2019. USDA's seafood purchases were between 1 and 2 percent of all animal proteins purchased annually for the program. Nationally, the average quantity of USDA-purchased seafood per student through the NSLP over this period was about 3 ounces per year. According to the 2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), school-age children should consume between 4 and 10 ounces of seafood per week.

Average Quantity of Seafood That USDA Purchased per Student Participating in the National School Lunch Program by State per Fiscal Year, 2014 through 2019



Sources: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-23-105179

^aKansas receives cash payments in lieu of USDA-purchased foods. Because Kansas does not order USDA-purchased food, Kansas is not represented in the seafood data reported for this program.

Officials from 10 selected states and SFAs, which operate the NSLP in schools, told GAO that several factors, such as student preference, concerns about allergens, and cost, affected their efforts to provide seafood to students. However, officials from six of 10 SFAs expressed an interest in serving more seafood, including some citing it as a healthy option. USDA officials said that at least some of the factors could be addressed with nutrition education.

USDA offers limited seafood-related assistance to states and SFAs. USDA has not developed a plan to enhance its assistance that could draw on existing efforts, such as webinars or USDA's previous efforts, including lessons learned from two USDA pilot projects. Without a plan, USDA may be missing an opportunity to enhance its seafood-related assistance.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) provides some seafood-related assistance to USDA, but USDA has not fully leveraged its relationship with NOAA. NOAA officials told GAO that it collects and maintains what is likely the most complete list of seafood vendors in the United States, but it does not share this list with USDA. Without obtaining and sharing such information, USDA may miss an opportunity to further assist states and SFAs in providing seafood to students.