

September 2, 2026

Donald Prater, DVM
Acting Deputy Commissioner
Human Food Program
U.S. Food and Drug Administration
10903 New Hampshire Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20993

Re: Closer to Zero Cadmium Guidance and the Need for Coordinated Consumer Education

Dear Dr. Prater:

The undersigned organizations represent specialty-crop producers and handlers, other agricultural commodities, food and beverage companies, and state regulatory agencies. We support FDA's goal of reducing cadmium and other heavy metals in processed foods for babies and young children and respectfully urge the agency to release its forthcoming Closer to Zero guidance only when a comprehensive consumer education program is ready to launch with it.

Specifically, regarding work on action levels for cadmium, we are not asking FDA to abandon or weaken the guidance. We are asking FDA to pair it with the information consumers need to understand its scope, thereby reducing confusion, declines in fruit and vegetable consumption, disruption of domestic production, and economic harm. We likewise believe that a new consumer communications model for cadmium should be extended to other Closer-to-Zero goals.

Cadmium is naturally occurring and the presence of cadmium does not make food unsafe.

Cadmium occurs naturally in soil and is taken up through plant roots. Spinach, carrots, and certain other crops may absorb more cadmium through the same processes by which they take up beneficial nutrients. Research into mitigation continues, but current strategies have limited effectiveness, and low-level presence cannot be eliminated under typical agricultural conditions.

A diet rich in fruits and vegetables remains essential to health. Consumers need to understand what an action level is and FDA's role in ensuring the safety of products they rely on for a nutritious diet. Discouraging families from some food categories could undercut the benefits that FDA and the current administration are seeking to achieve.

Clear communication can prevent unnecessary economic losses.

An ERA Economics analysis¹ commissioned by Western Growers modeled consumer responses to the draft action levels for spinach and carrots. Estimated annual losses are \$91.2 million with effective messaging, \$264.6 million if confusion reaches all processed spinach and carrot products, and \$1.29

¹ OMB/OIRA EO 12866 Regulatory Review, RIN 0910-ZD09, review record RRID 1387166, "Action Levels for Cadmium in Processed Food Intended for Babies and Young Children; Draft Guidance for Industry," received May 22, 2026.

billion if demand falls across fresh and processed markets. Approximately 95 percent of impacts would occur in Western states, including 74 percent in California.

Because the fresh market is much larger than the market for processed baby and toddler foods, a broad consumer reaction would cause far greater harm than targeted enforcement. Accurate education could prevent more than \$1 billion in losses while protecting confidence in nutritious produce.

This analysis demonstrates the practical consequence of unclear risk communication. Although this economic analysis was limited to carrots and spinach, it signals potential broader economic effects from FDA's guidance that could be imposed on the food industry. Accurate education is essential and would prevent unnecessary economic losses while protecting confidence in a safe and nutritious food supply.

The first public message will shape consumer behavior.

Consumer awareness is materially higher than in January 2025, when FDA issued its final lead guidance. California now requires product-specific arsenic, cadmium, lead, and mercury results online and, when an FDA level applies, QR-code access from packages; Maryland and other states have adopted or are phasing in similar disclosures. MAHA activities - including the Commission's focus on children's chemical exposures and Operation Stork Speed's expanded contaminant testing and transparency commitments - have further elevated attention to heavy metals in foods. Consumers now encounter more test data and simplified messages, increasing the need for FDA to explain what cadmium results do and do not mean.

That heightened environment magnifies the lessons from the recent *Cyclospora* response and FDA's earlier methylmercury advisories: narrowly targeted safety messages can spread across food categories, reduce consumption of nutritious foods, and prove difficult to correct later.

FAQs or corrective statements issued later by the FDA are not an adequate substitute for a coordinated consumer education launch. Rebuilding confidence after consumers internalize a simplified warning may be difficult and slow.

A brief, purposeful delay is the more protective course.

Because cadmium risk is generally associated with cumulative exposure, a brief delay in the release of the guidance document to prepare tested communications would be less harmful than a release of the guidance without consumer education that would be expected to cause widespread misunderstanding. Importantly, a delay would not change FDA's authority to address adulterated foods or prevent other heavy-metal testing, disclosure, or enforcement activity.

The undersigned organizations therefore respectfully request FDA to take the following actions before issuing the final guidance:

- 1. Coordinate the release.** Publish the guidance and consumer education program simultaneously, with FDA, USDA, State regulatory partners, and other Closer to Zero agencies aligned on core messages.
- 2. Define the scope plainly.** Identify the covered products and populations and make clear that the guidance is not a general warning against the consumption of spinach, carrots, or other produce.

3. **Emphasize significance of nutritional context.** Explain that low-level cadmium occurs naturally, that its presence does not by itself mean a food is unsafe, and that continued consumption of a varied diet rich in fruits and vegetables remains important.
4. **Prepare for broad public use.** Develop and test messages for consumers, health professionals, media, retailers, and the produce supply chain before release.
5. **Extend this model to past and future Closer-to-Zero actions** related to other heavy metals of concern.

A paired release presents a unique opportunity for the agency to inform consumers about the potential exposure without undermining consumer trust or the need for consumers to continue consuming nutritious produce. The undersigned organizations represented here appreciate FDA's consideration and would welcome the opportunity to assist with accurate consumer communications.

Sincerely,

American Bakers Association
American Frozen Food Institute
American Pistachio Growers
Association of Food Industries
International Fresh Produce Association
National Association of State Departments of Agriculture
National Association of Wheat Growers
National Confectioners Association
North American Miller's Association
The Food Industry Association
USA Rice
Western Growers