

# Michelle Obama Wins Big Against Powerful Corporate Interests

WASHINGTON -- First lady Michelle Obama announced sweeping changes to the "Nutrition Facts" label on most packaged foods on Thursday, marking a major victory against some of the most powerful lobbies in Washington: the sugar farming and refining and processed food industries.

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebellius and Margaret Hamburg, the Food and Drug Administration commissioner, joined Obama for the announcement at the White House Thursday morning. Under the FDA's new proposal, the "serving size" of many products would be increased to more accurately reflect a typical serving, and a new line would be added to the label listing "added sugars." The rules would also make the labels easier to read, by increasing the type-size of the calorie content and the sugar content.

“Our guiding principle here is very simple: that you as a parent and a consumer should be able to walk into your local grocery store, pick up an item off the shelf, and be able to tell whether it’s good for your family,” said Obama, who has made reducing childhood obesity a cornerstone of her work as first lady. “So this is a big deal, and it’s going to make a big difference for families all across this country.”

It's a big deal for the food industry and the sugar industry as well. The FDA estimated that the new labeling requirements could cost manufacturers [hundreds of millions of dollars](#) to implement. It also estimated that the new label requirements would motivate companies to reformulate many current products by reducing the amount of added sugar, or lowering the calorie content. These reformulations could cost the food industry up to a billion dollars, [according to the FDA report](#).

As part of the FDA's process, a 90-day public comment period on the proposed changes began Thursday. It's a safe bet that the sweetener industry will lobby both the FDA and Congress to weaken the new rules, as the industry will likely pay the highest price under the modified label requirements.

Within hours of the first lady's announcement, Andrew Briscoe, CEO of the Sugar Association, pushed back against the proposed sugar labeling. "Added sugars' labeling will only distract from the focus on monitoring total caloric intake and scientifically verified interventions to deal with obesity," Briscoe said in a statement to The Huffington Post. "Consequently, the addition of the 'added sugars' subcategory will not be helpful to consumers, and lacks scientific merit."

The sweetener industry is used to getting its way in Washington. This is largely because many different kinds of sugars are produced in many different states. In Florida and

Louisiana, the sugarcane farming industry is a powerful lobbying force. And in Minnesota and North Dakota, more than [720,000 acres](#) of sugar beets are produced every year. In corn-heavy Iowa, refineries and farmers turn corn into high-fructose corn syrup, the preferred sweetener for soft drinks. These three regions add up to a lot of pro-sugar votes in Congress.

By adding a clear line on food labels for added sugars, the new guidelines will make it much easier for consumers to tell the difference between products that may look and taste similar, but contain very different amounts of sugar.

For example, a [Cherry Mixed Fruit Cup](#) from Dole currently contains 15 grams of sugar, according to the label. A similar Dole fruit cup of diced peaches with no sugar added contains one-third that amount, only 5 grams of sugar total. Under the new labels, the extra 10 grams of added sugar in the cherry fruit cup would be easy to spot, and the FDA predicts that the lower-sugar products will become more popular with consumers.

**UPDATE:** 4:00 p.m. EST -- In a statement to HuffPost, Pamela Bailey, CEO of the Grocery Manufacturers Association, said the group "welcomes" the proposed FDA rules, which she called "a thoughtful review of the Nutrition Facts panel."

"It is critical that any changes are based on the most current and reliable science," Bailey said. "Equally as important is ensuring that any changes ultimately serve to inform, and not confuse, consumers."