

**Appendix B5.**  
**Food Supplier In-Depth**  
**Interview Guide**

**Introduction:** Thank you for agreeing to speak with us today. My name is [NAME OF INTERVIEWER] and I'm a researcher from [2M RESEARCH SERVICES OR ABT ASSOCIATES]. This is [NAME OF NOTE TAKER], also a researcher from [2M RESEARCH SERVICES OR ABT ASSOCIATES], and s/he will be taking notes during our conversation to ensure that we accurately capture all of the opinions and insights you provide us. 2M Research Services and Abt Associates were contracted by U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service, referred to as FNS, to conduct an assessment of the challenges and successes your business has experienced while working with school districts to help them meet the sodium standards. As a food supplier, the opinions and information that you provide will be critical to this effort.

**[INSERT PARTICIPANT CONSENT SCRIPT]**

In order to ensure that we fully and accurately capture the points raised during today's discussion, we would like to digitally record this conversation. Please note that this interview will remain private. There is a small risk of loss of privacy, but the research team has taken many steps to reduce this risk. Your identity and any information attributable to you will not be released to anyone outside of the research team. The recording will NOT be shared with FNS, your school district, or anyone outside the research team. We will only use the recording to ensure accuracy of the transcription. Any identifying information, such as your name or anyone else's name that may be mentioned, will be omitted from the final transcript. The recording of your interview will be deleted at the end of the study, after all data have been analyzed.

Do we have your permission to record this interview?

YES  Thank you. Do you have any questions before we begin?

NO  Okay. That is not a problem at all. We would like to ask for your patience, as we will need to take a little more time to note your responses by hand to ensure we accurately capture your insights. Do you have any questions before we begin?

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According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, no persons are required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is XXXX-XXXX. It will take you, on average, 60 minutes to complete this interview.

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[NAME OF SFA] has told us that they have successfully met the first of three USDA targets to lower sodium in school meals by school year 2014–2015, and that they worked with your company to meet these targets.

USDA's updated school meal nutrition standards established three sodium targets to be phased in over a 10-year period, with specific levels for students in three grade ranges. The Target 1 sodium standards became effective for school year 2014–2015 and set limits on sodium for breakfast and lunch offerings between 540 milligrams and 1,420 milligrams, depending on grade level.

I'd like you to please think about this SFA when answering these questions. We only need answers regarding [SFA WHO REFERRED THE FOOD SUPPLIER], even though you may be able to provide answers regarding other SFAs.

**[INFORM FOOD SUPPLIER WHAT TARGET 1 OF THE SODIUM STANDARDS IS, IF THEY DO NOT KNOW]****Table 1. USDA Sodium Targets**

Grades	Target 1: July 1, 2014  SY 2014–2015 (mg)	Target 2: July 1, 2017  SY 2017–2018 (mg)	Target 3: July 1, 2022  SY 2022–2023 (mg)
School Breakfast Program <sup>1</sup>			
K–5:	≤ 540	≤ 485	≤ 430
6–8:	≤ 600	≤ 535	≤ 470
9–12:	≤ 640	≤ 570	≤ 500
National School Lunch Program <sup>2</sup>			
K–5:	≤ 1,230	≤ 935	≤ 640
6–8:	≤ 1,360	≤ 1,035	≤ 710
9–12:	≤ 1,420	≤ 1,080	≤ 740
<sup>1</sup> Baseline of sodium levels offered in foods for the School Breakfast Program were 573 mg (elementary schools), 629 mg (middle/junior high schools), and 686 mg (high schools). <sup>2</sup> Baseline of sodium levels offered in foods for the National School Lunch Program were 1,377 mg (elementary schools), 1,520 mg (middle/junior schools), and 1,588 mg (high schools). Source: U.S. President Final Rule. <i>Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs</i> . Federal Register 77, no. 17, (January 26, 2012). <a href="https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-01-26/pdf/2012-1010.pdf">https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-01-26/pdf/2012-1010.pdf</a>			

Before we begin, in order to tailor our questions to be relevant to you, what is your position or role within **[FOOD COMPANY]**? Are you able to provide information to us at the school level, or more at the school district level?

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*Background*

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These first few questions focus on the characteristics of your business.

- Q1. Is your business located in a rural, urban, or suburban area?**
- Q2. Does your business mostly serve rural, urban, or suburban areas?**
- Q3. How many schools or school districts do you serve? [ACCEPT ESTIMATE IF CANNOT PROVIDE A SPECIFIC NUMBER]**
- Q3A. How long have you been working with these schools or school districts?**
- Q4. During the past month, what percentage of your gross sales came from sales to schools and/or school districts?**

Now we would like to discuss your efforts in helping schools/school districts achieve their sodium-reduction goals.

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*Approaches to Reduce Sodium*

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- Q5. Could you please describe the process of what your business did to provide foods to **[SFA SCHOOL/SCHOOL DISTRICT NAME]** that helped meet the current sodium standards (Target 1)?
- Q6. Did you or your company read and/or conduct any research on how to offer foods lower in sodium? What type of research did you read and/or conduct? What did you find was most helpful?

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*Relationship with Schools*

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- Q6A. Could you please describe your interactions with **[SFA SCHOOL/SCHOOL DISTRICT NAME]**? *[PROBE: HOW OFTEN DOES YOUR COMPANY TALK WITH SCHOOLS/SCHOOL DISTRICTS?]*
- Q6B. Did you or your company work with schools and/or school districts to create/provide the lower sodium foods and ingredients you offer? If yes, how so? *[PROBE FOR: WORKED DIRECTLY WITH SCHOOLS (COLLABORATIVE OR INDEPENDENT PROCESS?, FREQUENCY OF CONTACT?, ETC.), WORKED WITH PURCHASING CONSORTIUMS OF SCHOOLS (COLLABORATIVE OR INDEPENDENT PROCESS?, FREQUENCY OF CONTACT?), ETC.]*
- Q7. Has the bidding process with SFAs, schools, and/or school districts changed due to the lower sodium standards? What are the changes? How have the standards affected the bidding process? *[PROBE FOR: CHANGE IN EVALUATION CRITERIA, PREFERENCE TOWARDS PROCUREMENT TYPES, ABILITY TO PROVIDE LOWER SODIUM FOODS]*
- Q8. How have the sodium regulations affected your business? *[PROBE FOR: ANYTHING ELSE?]*

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*Successes and Lessons Learned*

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- Q9. What tools and strategies do you think were most effective to offer foods lower in sodium?
- Q10. Looking back, are there other strategies that were not used by your business that could have made it easier to provide lower sodium foods to schools in order to meet the sodium standards?
- Q11. Since the time that the sodium standards have been in place (school year 2014–2015), have your strategies for providing foods with lower sodium changed? If yes, how? If not, why not?

**Q12. What key strategies would you suggest to other food suppliers to help them provide foods to help schools meet the sodium standards?**

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*Challenges*

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**Q13. Can you discuss what was most challenging when working towards providing foods to schools striving to meet the sodium standards? Any specific barriers? How did your business overcome the challenges? Do any barriers still exist?**

**[PROBE FOR:**

- *FINDING FOODS FROM MANUFACTURERS THAT ARE LOWER IN SODIUM (IF INTERVIEWEE IS NOT A MANUFACTURER)*
- *BUDGET RESTRAINTS (SCHOOL AND/OR FOOD SUPPLIER)*
- *MODIFICATION OF RECIPES (IF INTERVIEWEE IS FOOD PRODUCER)*
- *REFORMULATION (IF INTERVIEWEE IS FOOD PRODUCER)*
- *TASTE ACCEPTANCE*
- *FUNCTIONALITY OF SODIUM IN SOME FOOD ITEMS*
- *DEVELOPING MARKETING MATERIALS, ETC.]*

**Q14. You mentioned before that your business is located in a [RURAL, URBAN, OR SUBURBAN] area. Do you feel this plays a role in the ability of your business to provide foods that help to meet the sodium standards? Why or why not? [PROBE FOR: DIFFICULTY IN LOCATING DESIRED PRODUCTS/DIFFICULTY OBTAINING DESIRED PRODUCTS, POPULATION SIZE RELATED TO DEMAND, ETC.]**

**Q14A. What impact do you think your geographic location in the U.S. [NORTHEAST, NORTHWEST, MIDWEST, SOUTHWEST, SOUTHEAST, ETC.] has on your business's ability to provide foods to schools that meet the sodium standards?**

**[PROBE FOR:**

- *ACCESS TO DESIRED, LOWER SODIUM PRODUCTS/FOODS*
- *ABILITY OF MANUFACTURERS TO DEVELOP OR REFORMULATE NEW FOOD PRODUCTS/FOODS*
- *COST OF TRANSPORT FOR SPECIFIC PRODUCTS BECAUSE OF PHYSICAL LOCATION OR CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL*
- *REGIONAL CUISINES AND CULTURES]*

**Q14B. Do you feel that the size of the school/school district your business serves plays a role in your business's ability to provide foods that help to meet the sodium standards?**

*[PROBE FOR: AVAILABILITY/ACCESSIBILITY OF DESIRED PRODUCTS, POPULATION SIZE RELATED TO DEMAND, ETC.]*

- Q14C. Are different foods being ordered/created at the different school levels (elementary, middle, high school)? How do you know? *[PROBE FOR: REASONS WHY]*
- Q15. Do you feel that certain types of lower sodium products are more difficult to find/create than others? If so, what types of products?
- Q16. How does your company decide which foods to carry/foods to manufacture?

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*Acceptance of Reduced Sodium Products*

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The next few questions focus on the characteristics of products or types of products relating to the sodium standards.

- Q17. Of the lower sodium products or types of products your business provides, which of these have the *highest and lowest* demand?
- Q17A. For those items with *highest demand*, what reasons (if any) do you hear for why they are popular? *[PROBE FOR: TASTE, TEXTURE, ETC.]*
- Q17B. For those items with *lowest demand*, what reasons (if any) do you hear for why they are not popular? *[PROBE FOR: TASTE, TEXTURE, ETC.]*
- Q17C. Have schools/school districts asked for a lower sodium product or some other type of product that your business does not currently provide? *[PROBE FOR: WHICH ITEMS, ARE THEY AVAILABLE FROM MANUFACTURERS, DO YOU PLAN TO PROVIDE THIS ITEM IN THE FUTURE, ETC.]*
- Q17D. Have you met with any food producers or people from the food industry, such as food distributors, to discuss reformulating products to meet the standards? If so, how responsive have you found them to be?
- Q17E. Have you or has your company gone into schools to meet with students or to hold taste tests or other food-related activities? If so, please describe.

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*Support*

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Your responses to the next few questions will help us understand the type of support and guidance you may have received from the school district you serve, their SFA, USDA, FNS, or other food industry manufacturers and vendors.

**Q18. Did you receive support from the SFA, school district, USDA, or FNS when working toward meeting sodium Target 1?**

**Q18A. If so, could you describe the support and guidance that you received? What did you find most helpful? [PROBE FOR: TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, POLICY MEMOS, WEB MATERIALS, PRINT MATERIALS, OR TRAININGS]**

**Q18B. Would you have liked more guidance or resources to help you provide foods that meet the sodium reduction targets? If yes, please explain.**

**Q18C. What additional resources would have been helpful for you to be better able to provide lower sodium foods?**

**[PROBE FOR:**

- **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR HOW TO WORK WITH SCHOOLS/SCHOOL DISTRICTS, ETC.)**
- **ONLINE RESOURCES**
- **FREQUENCY OF ASSISTANCE**
- **SPECIFIC TOPICS, ETC.]**

**Q19. Now turning to support from the food industry, including manufacturers, and other distributors and producers: Have you received any support from other members of the food industry to help your business meet the sodium standards?**

**Q20. Does your business provide support to schools/school districts working towards meeting the sodium targets? [PROBE FOR: TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, MARKETING MATERIALS, PROVIDE SAMPLES, CONDUCT TASTE TESTS, ETC.]**

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*Future Efforts and Movement Towards Sodium Targets 2 and 3*

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These last four questions ask about achieving the next sodium standards, Targets 2 and 3.

**Q21. What advice would you give to schools in trying to meet the next sodium standards?**

**Q22. What advice would you give other food suppliers trying to offer lower sodium products?**

**Q23. Thinking about achieving the next sodium standard (Target 2), is your business actively working towards providing products that will help in meeting Target 2?**

**Q24. In your opinion, do you think recipe modification, product reformulation, or both will play a significant role in meeting Target 2 and Target 3 sodium standards? Why or why not?**

**Q24A. If both, which strategy do you think will have more of an impact on lowering sodium in school meals? Why?**

We appreciate the time you've taken to answer our questions. Your input is very valuable. Do you have any questions for us before we end **[IF SITE VISIT: THIS PORTION OF]** the interview?

**[IF TELEPHONE INTERVIEW:]** If you have additional questions following this interview, you may contact us at **[CONTACT INFORMATION]**. Thank you again.

**[IF SITE VISIT:]** Next, if available, we would like to take a look at any posters or signs provided by other food suppliers to you, letters that may have been sent to you from other food suppliers or that you have provided to schools, agendas or notes from meetings with the school/school district or community stakeholders, and any other related materials. Do you have any of these materials that you would be willing to share with us?

YES  We will be documenting what we see using a checklist but, with your permission, we would also like to take photographs of these items. We will not photograph any personnel. Do we have your permission to photograph?

YES  Thank you. Do you have any questions before we begin? **[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: PROCEED TO SITE VISIT OBSERVATIONAL INSTRUMENT.]**

NO  Okay. No problem. We will not take photographs, but would like to take notes about the content of the signage related to sodium reduction. **[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: PROCEED TO SITE VISIT OBSERVATIONAL INSTRUMENT]** Reason:

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Thank you again for your time. If you have additional questions following this interview, you may contact us at: **[CONTACT INFORMATION]**.