

**Nutrition Policy**

*Updated and Approved by the Food Bank Board of Directors on 5/20/2025*

**3.4.2 Nutrition**

3.4.2.1 Purpose and Rationale:

The purpose of this nutrition policy is to guide the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank (Food Bank) in making food and beverage procurement and distribution decisions that are consistent with nutrition guidelines aimed at improving the health of guests and alleviating food and nutrition insecurity. This policy will serve as a guide for consistent decision making about the foods we acquire and distribute in order to increase the availability of a variety of health-promoting, culturally inclusive foods that align with the Healthy Eating Research (HER) Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System. See Appendix for full details of the Healthy Eating Research (HER) Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System

The Food Bank is concerned about the increasing rates of type 2 diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, and other serious diet-related diseases and conditions among guests. And the Food Bank recognizes the role nutritious food can play in disrupting the detrimental cycle of poor nutrition, chronic disease, and poverty that too many of our guests experience. The Food Bank’s commitment to providing nutritious food and beverages to guests demonstrates that their health, cultural, and lifestyle preferences for more nutritious foods and beverages are among our highest considerations when acquiring these items.

We recognize the increasing role that food banks play in providing nutritious foods to community members in need, especially since the charitable food system has become a consistent source of nutrition for so many. Further, we acknowledge the increasing diversity of our guest population and seek to provide nutritious staple foods for guests across demographic groups. Our policy to procure and distribute foods of high nutritional quality ensures we hold ourselves to a high standard and demonstrates to the community that we take our role and responsibility seriously.

Internally, this nutrition policy ensures that our food bank’s commitment to promoting health, nutrition, and cultural inclusion is part of our institutional practice and memory, regardless of future staff and organizational changes. It also serves as a central reference point that staff from all departments can utilize for consistent decision making, communication, and tracking of progress toward identified goals. Additionally, the policy can help our food bank build strong relationships with donors and partners who value nutrition and health, thus ensuring that this work is sustainable.

Externally, this nutrition policy communicates to agency pantries, community partners, donors, food suppliers, government entities, guests, and the community-at-large the details of our commitment to maximizing the nutritional quality of the foods we acquire and distribute. It serves as a model that our agency partners can use to assess the nutritional quality of the foods they supply. Most importantly, the primary benefit of this policy is that it has the potential to positively impact the health and well-being of the guests we serve.

3.4.2.2 Guidelines for Ranking and Tracking Foods

In March, 2020 Feeding America adopted the [Healthy Eating Research (HER) Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System](https://healthyeatingresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/her-food-bank_FINAL.pdf), developed by an expert panel, convened by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, that included academic researchers, registered dietitians, and food bank personnel, among others. The report referenced above describes the rationale and methodology for the guidelines included in our Food Bank nutrition policy. The guidelines include 10 food categories. Foods and beverages are ranked using a “stop light hierarchy” (green, yellow, and red). Each category includes specific ranges for saturated fat, sodium, and sugar (total or added) that categorize foods in one of three tiers: “choose often” (green), “choose sometimes” (yellow), and “choose rarely” (red). Categories and specific criteria for saturated fat, sodium, and sugar for each tier are found in Table 1 in the above reference. These guidelines prioritize nutrient dense foods, while reducing non-preferred ingredients such as saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars.

Prior to March 2020, the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank developed and implemented Nourish, a cloud-based software that scores, ranks, and tracks the nutritional quality of inventory using the Nutrient-Rich Food Index guidelines. To be consistent with the guidance provided by the Feeding America network, the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank made investments to update Nourish so the system aligns with the categorization criteria consistent with the HER guidelines.

3.4.2.3 Food Sources Covered by This Policy:

This policy applies to all foods and beverages acquired by the Food Bank including: foods and beverages obtained from government programs; food and beverages purchased by the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank; and foods and beverages donated by food manufacturers, distributors, retailers, organizations, producers and community members.

While this nutrition policy guidance applies to all foods and beverages acquired by the Food Bank, not all foods are tiered with the stop light hierarchy system due to operational limitations.

Foods we commit to tiering for the purposes of this policy include:

* All fresh produce, all USDA food items, all items we purchase, and all case-lotted donated items (at least 20 cases of the same product).

3.4.2.4 Healthy Eating Categories and Recommendations:

The Healthy Eating Research Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System ranks food items in 10 categories and uses a “stop light hierarchy” based on the amount of saturated fat, sodium and sugar (total or added) found in a food item. Foods and beverages are tiered as “choose often” (green), “choose sometimes” (yellow) and “choose rarely” (red). In accordance with these guidelines, we aim to prioritize the procurement and distribution of the following foods and beverages when appropriate and possible:

Fruits and Vegetables, including:

* fresh vegetables including vegetables from all sub-groups- dark green, red and orange, starchy vegetables and other (cauliflower, cabbage, among others); examples include but not limited to spinach and broccoli (dark green), carrots and red bell peppers (red and orange), potatoes and corn (starchy vegetables)
* fresh fruits including apples, bananas, berries, and melons
* frozen fruits and vegetables packed without syrup or sauces
* canned fruits in water, 100% juice, or “lite” syrup
* canned vegetables with no added salt or reduced sodium
* dried fruit with no added sugars
* 100% fruit and vegetable juices with no added sugars.

Grains, including:

* grains that are 100% whole grains including whole grain oats (instant, old-fashioned, rolled, etc.), barley, wild rice, and brown rice
* grain-based foods that contain whole grain as the first ingredient including: pasta, tortillas, and cereals

Protein, animal and plant based, including:

* Lean meats, poultry, and seafood
* eggs
* nuts and seeds with no added salt,
* nut and seed spreads including peanut butter
* beans and lentils, dried
* canned beans and lentils with no added salt or reduced sodium

Dairy: Fat-free or Low-fat (1%) Dairy, including:

* milk and yogurt, plain and unsweetened
* flavored milk, less than 24g total sugar or labeled reduced sugar when available and appropriate
* flavored yogurt, less than 24g total sugar or labeled reduced sugar when available and appropriate
* cheese, reduced fat (2%), low-fat (1%), or fat free.

Non-Dairy Alternatives

* fortified soy milk, unsweetened
* almond or rice milk, unsweetened
* sweetened plant-based beverages with less than 12g of total sugar per serving
* plant-based yogurts with less than 12g of total sugar per serving

Beverages

* plain bottled water
* zero-calorie sodas or sports beverages
* no sugar added or unsweetened coffee, tea, etc.

Mixed Dishes

* soups, stews, macaroni and cheese, canned pasta meals, frozen meals, and other mixed dishes with less than 600 mg of sodium per serving and less than 6.5g of saturated fat per serving.

Processed and Packaged Snacks

* grain based snacks that contain whole grain as an ingredient
* snacks with equal to or less than 6g sugar, 140mg of sodium, and 2g saturated fat

Condiments and Cooking Staples

* To encourage cooking at home and preparation of culturally appropriate foods, condiments such as cooking oils, vinegars, sauces (except tomato sauce), mayonnaise, ketchup, mustards, jelly, spices, and herbs will not be subjected to nutrition guidelines and will not be tiered.

The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank will prioritize the procurement and distribution of foods and beverages that are in alignment with the “choose often” and “choose sometimes” categories, as detailed above. We recognize that for some food categories, alignment with these tiers can be difficult given the food stream available and some donated foods and beverages will be tiered after acquisition. We recognize that some of these staple food items will inevitably be tiered in the “choose rarely” category and will be allowable under acquisition benchmarks set by the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank.

3.4.2.4 Foods and Beverages to Limit:

We recognize that the implementation of the HER nutrition guidelines are more feasible to implement for purchased and USDA food products. We will attempt to minimize donations of food items that typically contain undesirable amounts of saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar. This policy does not preclude BRAFB from accepting donations for transfer to other food banks that will accept them. When appropriate and possible, we will seek to avoid procurement of the following food items and work toward reducing our inventory of these item types:

* Snack Foods and Desserts—including, but not limited to:
  + chips (corn, potato, puffed cheese, tortilla; not including lower/reduced fat or baked)
  + crackers without whole grains
  + French fries
  + onion rings
  + bars including granola, cereal, energy and snack
  + cakes
  + candy
  + cookies
  + donuts
  + frozen desserts and ice cream
  + fruit snacks
  + muffins and pastries
  + pies
  + popsicles
  + pudding
* Sugar Sweetened Beverages—including but not limited to:
* energy drinks such as: Full Throttle Energy Drink®, Monster Energy Drink®, Mountain Dew AMP Energy Drink®, Red Bull Energy Drinks, Rockstar Energy Drink®,
* fruit drinks: coconut water with caloric sweetener, fruit flavored drink or water with caloric sweetener, fruit nectars, fruit punch, fruit smoothies with caloric sweetener
* sodas: regular soft drinks (not including reduced calorie), sugar cane beverages, sugar-sweetened carbonated water
* sports drinks such as: Gatorade Sports Drinks®, Powerade Sports Drink®
* sweetened coffees: blended iced coffee drinks, café mocha, presweetened powdered coffee mix, presweetened ready-to-drink coffee,
* sweetened teas: presweetened, ready-to-drink tea, presweetened tea mix,
* sweetened shakes and smoothies: ready-to-drink milkshakes, eggnog, and
* vitamin-enhanced waters such as: Glaceau Vitamin water™, Propel Fitness Water®.
* caffeine-infused water or other beverages which include caffeine

Working with Food and Beverage Donors – This policy does not preclude the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank from accepting donations of any kind from food and beverage donors. The Food Bank will make our Nutrition Policy available to food and beverage donors including manufacturers, distributors, retailers, and producers. When appropriate, the Food Bank will discuss ways that donors can help to support the aims of this policy; improving the health of guests.

Food Drive Donations – Community food donations remain an opportunity to engage the public with the mission of the Food Bank. When working with the community to acquire foods and beverages from food drives, the Food Bank will emphasize the need for donated foods and beverages that are consistent with our nutrition policy. The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank will make efforts to promote the donation of food and beverage items including:

* Canned vegetables packed in low salt or no salt added
* Canned fruits packed in 100% juice, water or lite syrup
* 100% fruit juice
* Whole grain pasta
* Brown rice
* Whole grain ready-to-eat cereal
* Unsweetened oatmeal
* Dried beans, lentils or low sodium or no salt added canned beans
* Nut butters such as peanut butter
* Canned tuna or chicken packed in water
* Reduced or low sodium soups, stews and canned pasta

3.4.2.5. Internal Tiering Thresholds:

To guide internal decision-making and hold ourselves accountable to our guest health goals, the Food Bank will adhere to the nutrition tiering thresholds below:

* A maximum of 5% of our total pounds received will be red tiered foods
* 95% of our ranked/tiered inventory pounds will be comprised of green and yellow tiered foods

3.4.2.6. Accessible and Culturally Inclusive Foods:

We recognize that food is not nutritious unless it is eaten. And we know that our guests are diverse in terms of physical ability to prepare food, access to cooking equipment, family structure, and cultural needs. To meet the needs of our diverse guests, we seek to include the following in our sourcing strategy. These items may be tiered red, but procurement of these items will not exceed our 5% red threshold.

* Easy-open, pop-top, or pouch itemed for those without a means of cooking/ heating food and those with limited dexterity or mobility
  + At least one item in inventory at all times
* Foods that are appealing for children and families
* Key staple foods for our service area’s top three demographic groups (White, Black, Hispanic).
  + Food Bank staff will review current inventory at least every three years to adapt the inventory, if needed, to support compliance with this guideline.

3.4.2.7. Reference:

Format and significant text of this policy is adapted from, Guide to Drafting a Food Bank Nutrition Policy, Example Food Bank Nutrition Policy for Food Procurement (Using Feeding America’s framework ‘Detailed Foods to Encourage’ to guide procurement of purchased, donated and government foods). Prepared by UC Berkeley Center for Weight and Health, 2015. Authors of the example policy, Karen Webb, Elizabeth Campbell, Michelle Ross & Laura Vollmer are listed as members of the working group as authors for BRAFB policy.

Schwartz M, Levi R, Lott M, Arm K, Seligman H. Healthy Eating Research Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System. Durham, NC: Healthy Eating Research; 2020. Available at <http://healthyeatingresearch.org>

**Appendix**

Healthy Eating Research Guidelines Summary

A chart of food content

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

A screenshot of a food information

AI-generated content may be incorrect.