Your guide to getting started with delicious and nutritious choices in state and local parks.
Missouri is blessed with one of the best state park systems in the country, as well as a wealth of municipal parks. Thousands of visitors come to the parks each year to enjoy a wide range of recreational activities. Though the Show-Me State is known for its parks and natural resources, Missouri also has the unfortunate distinction of being named one of the top 10 most obese states in the country [1]. And while our parks are a valuable resource for children and adults to maintain and improve their health through exercise and recreation, the high-calorie, salty foods served at some parks can quickly negate the benefits of being outside and moving more.

Because of the vast number of visitors to Missouri parks every year, simply having healthier food choices available in the parks can go a long way in improving health in Missouri. For this reason, the Department of Natural Resources, the Missouri Council for Activity and Nutrition, and the Missouri Parks and Recreation Association have combined forces to offer this Eat Smart in Parks guide. This guide is one part of a project that encourages choice and a way to incorporate healthy foods. Included in this guide is a model policy that reflects some of the best information from leading health organizations, including the Institute for Medicine and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation. See page 13 for a complete description of this policy.

Working with many of you over the years, we know that maximizing profit while controlling costs is a crucial part of the equation. Strategies for keeping costs low, profit margins high and increasing the popularity of healthy food are offered in this guide.

We hope you use some of the strategies in this guide to expand the food choices in your parks and we welcome any comments or questions on how to make it happen. You may contact us or learn more about the project at http://www.mocan.org.

See you in the park,

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WHAT IS EAT SMART IN PARKS?

Eat Smart in Parks is a statewide effort aimed at promoting healthier eating options in Missouri’s state and local parks. This effort includes the development of a model Eat Smart in Parks policy that guides parks in serving healthier options, training for state and local parks to assist them with using the guidelines, and materials to promote healthier items. While the project is in its pilot phase, there is growing interest in ways parks and other places of recreation can offer fresh, flavorful foods to visitors that are good for them, too. The Eat Smart in Parks project team is led by individuals from University of Missouri Extension, Missouri State Parks, Missouri Parks and Recreation Association (MPRA) and the Missouri Council for Activity and Nutrition (MOCAN).

MISSOURI’S MODEL POLICY FOR EATING SMART IN PARKS

To give you a jump start in making your park health friendly, MO State Parks, MOCAN and MPRA, along with representatives from state and local parks, concessionaires and health advocates, have developed a healthy model policy for concessions in Missouri parks. This model policy is a tool to help you set a standard for the foods and drinks offered. The policy guidelines contain measures that can help you boost the availability of healthy choices at parks. By adopting these nutritional and marketing standards, Missouri can become a frontrunner in championing great parks, great food and great park experiences.

Written in plain language, these nutritional guidelines are designed for park staff and others who are interested in offering tastier, healthy foods. Food groups are broken into categories: Fruits, Vegetables, Grains, Dairy and Proteins, as well as Beverages. Recommendations are made for serving sizes, as well as the highest thresholds for fat, sugar and sodium. Moreover, the policy guidelines consider revenues by offering recommendations for signage, display and pricing of items. (The full model policy is available on page 13.)

While the model policy is intended for any park in Missouri, we know that each park is unique. Your park may be able to initially offer a few healthy items, or it may be possible to fully implement the Model Policy guidelines. For example, your policy might include:

- Placing at least one healthy item or meal on the children’s menu;
- Adding a new healthy item to the menu each season; or
- Posting the calorie content of each menu item.

Educating or training staff on the policy is a great first step, and making the policy clear and visible by posting it in kitchens or concession stands will help staff stay on the same page, especially in high turnover locations. You may also want to include the staff in the planning healthy menu changes to let them know that their ideas are valuable and to increase cooperation.

We know that for many parks, this is a brand new undertaking, but you are not alone. We are available to provide support and guidance for park concessionaires who embark on this journey toward better health. We are here to help and connect you with other people or resources as you get started.
GETTING STARTED

Before you implement any guideline, there are some steps that you need to consider.

**Step 1: Get approval.**
You may need permission or approval from a supervisor, a city council or another decision maker before you implement any changes. Having the conversation early will help with your planning process. You may also want to create support for your program by involving others who are interested in providing healthy food choices.

**Step 2: Assess your current menu.**
Take a look at what you currently offer on your menus and in your vending machines. Using the model policy and tools in choosing healthy foods, you can determine how your current food and beverage choices stack up. Need help in determining if an item meets the guidelines? Check out our Missouri Label Checker available online at [http://mocan.org](http://mocan.org).

**Step 3: Select healthy items.**
You may want to start with small changes. This might include substituting products that meet the guidelines for popular menu items, such as low-fat nacho cheese sauce in place of regular sauce. Small decisions and changes can ease your operation into healthier menu items. You may also want to enlist the help of a food distributor who can help you identify the products they carry that will meet the guidelines. Try contacting your local Extension Nutrition Specialist for assistance in analyzing the products. You can also expand the menu to include items that meet the guidelines. Fresh fruits and vegetables are a safe bet.

Common questions to guide your selection process include:

- What types of visitors visit?
- What are they currently buying?
- What seasonal activities happen in your park?
- What skills do your staff have?
- What does your concessions area look like?
- Do you have the space and equipment needed to store and prepare these foods?

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Having a big picture and a specific goal in mind can help you stay focused when it seems like there is too much to try or change. Determining the ways that your park can meet that goal and breaking those ways down into smaller activities can help your group stay motivated.

**Step 4: Test items with consumers.**
Try out new menu items or modifications of existing ones with your visitors. Some vendors offer taste tests during high-traffic events. Others offer a free sample on a specific day of the week, such as “Taste it Tuesdays!” The key is to determine what your visitors seem to like and what they are willing to buy. Ask your staff members to record what people say or what they enjoy the most. Having that information will let you make the best decisions for your operation.

**Step 5: Educate staff and foster staff buy-in.**
Employee buy-in is an important and sometimes overlooked step in the implementation of any program [2]. Staff that do not feel committed to the program may, for example, over-serve portions of less healthy food or discourage healthy selections. If staff don't see the importance of healthier food, they may be less likely to comply with recommending the fresh fruit or baked chicken over the French fries or candy bar. This is one reason why it is important to include staff in the planning phase. They need to know that their opinions and insight are valuable.

To increase employee buy-in to wellness programs, some companies have found it useful to sponsor activities or contests to encourage commitment to better health. For example, a walk or bike to work week might be feasible for some parks. Some food service operations have offered contests, where a server who sells the most of a particular healthy food item receives a prize at the end of the week.

In addition to enthusiasm-raising activities, the nutritional policies and logic behind them should be part of the standard training for staff. Staff training is important so your employees have the knowledge, skills and tools to prepare and serve food choices that are nutritious and delicious. The training can also cover ways that staff can help visitors select these healthy products. If you do not currently offer training, you can contact your local Extension Nutrition Specialist to help you get started.
Step 6: Consider marketing healthy options.
Offering healthier menu items is only one step in the process of improving the health of park patrons. Changing the culture of the parks and the mindsets of visitors requires the use of multiple strategies. Here are some proven ideas for creating a market in your park.

Marketing ideas:
• Kick-off events. A grand opening is a great way to highlight the new policy and your new food choices; however, it’s best to have piloted new products prior to the kick-off event.

• Keep it fresh by introducing new items. When the novelty begins to wear off, this is a way to revitalize the effort. For this reason, Xanterra food service, serving Mount Rushmore National Park, aims to introduce three new healthy menu items to each location annually [4].

• Cooking or gardening demonstrations are valuable tools for selling the public and staff on healthier food. Check with your local Extension Nutrition Specialist for advice on setting up food demos. Spice up the name of healthy menu items. As proven quite effective in Missouri schools, changing the name of a menu

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The Eat Smart in Parks Pick
The Eat Smart in Parks Pick is a clear way for local and state parks to identify healthy foods for their visitors on menus, banners, signs and shelf talkers. Simply put the Eat Smart in Parks fork or logo next to the item that meets the nutritional guidelines to let your visitors know that this particular item is delicious and nutritious. You can download the Eat Smart in Parks Pick design files at http://www.mocan.org to use in your own parks.

How do you determine if an item meets the guidelines?
Eat Smart in Parks developed a Missouri Label Checker that is a tool you can use to determine if an item meets the guidelines. The tool is available online at http://mocan.org.
item, like from frozen grapes to Fabulous Frozen Grapes, can go a long way in attracting interest and sales to your healthy choice.

• **Regionalize the menu.** For example, if you are located in the southwest part of the state, you can rename the veggie plate the “Ozark Sampler.”

• **If you buy local food, let the visitors know that they’re supporting local family farms with their purchase.** Even better, put a picture of the farmer on your menu or place it visibly around your concession area.

• **Weekly specials on concession stand items can help promote new items.** Some parks have reduced prices on a healthy snack to encourage trying it out and drive sales.

• **Samples or taste tests can be conducted at parks to increase desire for a product.** Additionally, this can be a useful tool for market research prior to deciding which items to introduce on a bigger scale.

• **Fliers and banners** can be posted or distributed in the park and the community.

• **Point-of-sale marketing** can be utilized by training staff to promote newer, healthier menu items at both restaurants and concession stands.

• **Offer prize drawings.** For example, every time someone orders an item from the healthy menu, his or her name could be entered in a drawing at end of week. Prizes could be passes to the swimming pool or coupons for another healthy food or beverage.

• **Encourage repeat buyers through a punch-card system.** Vendors can foster repeat buyers by implementing a buy 10 and get the 11th free incentive.

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• **Work with local farmers** to host a farmers’ market at the park. Buying local is an exciting trend. Parks can often develop a local farmers’ market by opening up a vacant or less-used parking lot during early morning or off-peak hours. This can be an important service to local farmers who may not know if there is a market for their products, and it can help drive visitors to your park.

• **Organize a meal at the park** where local farmers and chefs prepare healthy, affordable meals to highlight new ways to prepare fruits and vegetables. Lexington, Kentucky parks hosted a very successful event, charging $10 for adults and $5 for children. University of Missouri Extension Nutrition Specialist may also be able put you in touch with chefs or other Nutrition Specialists to get these started.

**Signage can help**
The way menu items are displayed affects their sales. Retailers use this technique often, putting popular or high-priced items at eye-level or in other easy to see places. There are many ways to use this concept to promote sales of healthy food and/or make unhealthy food less attractive.

• Place a concession stand sign for healthy food items at eye level.

• Do the opposite for menus with less healthy food; place it above eye level, especially above eye-level for children.

• Use large, brightly colored signs for healthy food.

• Make ample use of pictures of healthy food, as it is often more visually appealing. Which is prettier, a bowl of strawberries or a bowl of fried onion rings?

• Use the Eat Smart in Parks logo on menus, signs, flyers, posters. This will help promote healthy eating choices in your park that other parks are already using.

• Highlight healthier items on menus with decals, larger font or on the right-hand page.

• Place healthier items toward the top of the menu.

You can also download posters from the Eat Smart in Parks campaign at [http://www.mocan.org](http://www.mocan.org).
# Support your local farmer

Many Missourians feel a close tie to the land. Those who hunt, fish and hike understand the importance of preserving the land in Missouri so that it can be passed on to future generations. Likewise, protecting family farmers, the backbone of this state, is an issue close to the hearts of many. In recent years, the push to buy local and support local farmers has given new hope to suffering family farms. Because fresh, local produce has a host of benefits, providing healthier food in Missouri parks and supporting local farmers can both be accomplished at the same time. Since so many park visitors feel a kinship to the land, it follows that marketing healthy local food to Missourians is a great way to enrich their park experience and their bodies.

Parks with successful local food programs have used opportunities to educate visitors about the benefits of eating local. This education can take the form of signage at restaurants or concession stands promoting local food, local farmers who source their food and many more ideas [3, 4]. You can learn about other local food programs at http://mofarmtoinstitution.missouri.edu.

# Maintaining the profit margin

With planning underway, you may have some concerns about how these food changes might impact your operations. Cost control and maintaining profit margin are understandably important concerns when changing a menu, but it’s an achievable goal. In National Parks Service case studies, most restaurants and concessioners found that profits stayed the same or improved when the menu changed to include healthy food [4]. This was made possible with cost saving measures. Here are some of the proven ones below:

**Raising the price of unhealthy**

Let’s face it, a dollar only goes so far in tough economic times. And whether park visitors bring their food or buy it, the price has to be right. When healthy food is sold at higher prices, this creates a disincentive, and visitors may resort to buying unhealthy food. Price adjustments can be made to make cost work in your favor. This may mean raising the price of unhealthy food. For example, raising the price of a soda to $1.50, while maintaining a $1.00 price tag for a bottle of water is a proven strategy for increasing water sales [5]. Raising the prices on some food items is a useful strategy to offset the sometimes lower profit margin of healthier food.

Contracts with soft drink companies can be a barrier to adjusting prices. Some state park systems have found it useful to include the companies as part of the conversation about improving the health of park visitors [6]. They may have healthier items to offer, or can work with you under a new park policy.

**Portion control**

Reducing the portion size of unhealthy food can accomplish two goals: reducing the amount of calories eaten and increasing the profit margin. For these reasons, it is a great strategy for Missouri parks. Smaller cups and plates can reduce portion size, saving calories and money while reducing waste. Smaller cups and plates make portions appear generous.

Likewise, concessionaires can make portions consistent. It is important to designate the appropriate portion size and provide staff the equipment and training needed to serve the same size portion every time. Specifying portion sizes, then posting the visual for staff, can help keep portion sizes consistent [7]. Using calibrated serving utensils such as spoodles and portion control cups make serving consistent portion sizes easy. Serving pre-portioned or individual serving size items can save time but it is very important to read the nutrition label to verify that the item contains only one serving and that it meets the guidelines. Potato chips for example are often sold in a variety of “individual” sizes but the larger packages typically have more than one serving.

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Keeping it local
Buying from local farmers can reduce the price of fresh food. The food does not have to be shipped as far, or stored as long before shipment. Initially, local farmers may have less capacity to provide fresh food on a large scale. However, any change in the purchase of local food will help enlarge the market for farmers. It takes time to help build a market for local food so that suppliers can increase their capacity. One purchase, though, is all it takes to try out a new healthy choice and determine whether buying locally grown is something your park can offer in the future. Apples and watermelon are some foods commonly sourced from local growers. You can learn more about your options through the Missouri Farm to Institution project (see [http://mofarmtoinstitution.missouri.edu](http://mofarmtoinstitution.missouri.edu)) or through the Missouri Department of Agriculture ([http://mda.mo.gov](http://mda.mo.gov)).

Planting health
Not all parks need to look outside their land for fresh, local produce. Planting gardens for produce in the park can be a cost-efficient solution and draw attention to the park’s commitment to good health. On-site gardens could be particularly helpful in rural areas where finding local food sources can be a challenge.

Healthy food – It's always in season
The cost of local, fresh food is the lowest when it is abundant and in-season. It is also typically a time when parks are the busiest. Using a seasonal menu is a great way to take advantage of increased visitor traffic and good prices.

Hidden healthy
Other parks have found that when they have introduced healthier food items, the least healthy items continue to be top sellers. While strategies for promoting healthy items play a vital role, making changes to the least healthy items can be beneficial. For example, switching oils, using less oil, baking instead of frying or switching to lower fat/lower sugar salad dressings can all help [8].

Making healthy the only choice
A group of parks and recreation employees in Kentucky found that when they completely replaced all of the least healthy menu items with healthier items, they were still able to turn a sizable profit. Because the concession stand was located in an area where there were few nearby food options, they found that people purchased what was available. People would come for chocolate or soda and buy granola bars and water instead [9]. This strategy may be most effective when used with a “captive crowd,” for example, swimming pool concession stands where outside food and drinks are prohibited.

#3 Renegotiating contracts
A window of opportunity may be created when concession or vending contacts are up for re-negotiation. The parks department will have an opportunity to create a new prospectus giving preference to concessionaires or vendors who can provide healthier, more sustainable locally grown food. Writing a prospectus that calls for healthier food practices will attract vendors who are more committed to the ideas, or know that they have to adapt to this philosophy in order to win the bid. However, other incentives can be offered to attract or provide support for healthier vendors. In California state parks, vendors who meet certain criteria are invited to participate in large public events held by the parks, giving them opportunities, not only to sell to the crowd, but also to market themselves to other visitors [4].

Finding new suppliers takes a lot of diligence. A concessionaire may need to seek out new local partners as sources. In the case of a café in Golden Gate National Park, the company who won the bid partnered with a local bakery who shared a commitment to organic, local food, and another local business that provided organic meat, cheese and produce [4]. It took time and effort to find local partners, as some businesses did not have the capacity or interest in accommodating the needs of the food service; however, both businesses grew as a result of the partnership. This may be a selling point for Missouri parks, as local sourcing will help keep money in Missouri.
TIPS & TRICKS

From the Missouri parks that have already begun to offer healthy food choices, we have collected a few popular ideas that you might want to try:

- 100% frozen fruit juice
- Air popped or low-fat popcorn
- Apples, oranges, bananas
- Baked chicken or fish
- Broccoli and low fat ranch dressing dip
- Carrot chips
- Corn on the cob
- Dry roasted nuts
- Frozen grapes and bananas
- Hummus
- Low-fat yogurt
- Salsa
- Smoothies made with low-fat yogurt and 100% fruit juice
- Steamed or grilled vegetables
- Watermelon

For education and outreach to park visitors, you can try a number of low-cost marketing strategies including placing information about healthy choices under the glass tops of tables or along counter tops.

Some parks have also tied sustainable food education to waste management education, discussing improvements the park has made in going “greener” and asking visitors to be good environmental stewards, too.

No matter which tip or idea you try, the key to remember is that a small step toward healthy options is most important. The key is to start small and see what fits best for your park.

Conclusion

Parks are critical partners in promoting healthy lifestyles. We hope that some of these ideas and suggestions are useful to you now and in the future. Your commitment to increasing access to healthy food has never mattered more. For additional information about the project, please visit http://www.mocan.org or contact Cindy DeBlauw at 573-882-5114.
MISSOURI’S MODEL POLICY

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans are recommendations for consumers to help them select a healthy diet. The following recommendations are based on these guidelines. In general, park food service operations should strive to comply with the food group and preparation suggestions below. The chart beneath these suggestions provides specific nutrient standards for individual food and beverage items.

FRUITS:
• Offer at least one fresh, canned, dried or frozen fruit daily.
• All canned or frozen fruit should be packaged in 100% water or unsweetened juice, with no added sweeteners.

VEGETABLES:
• Offer at least one fresh, canned or frozen vegetable daily.
• Vegetables should be served raw, steamed, baked or grilled seasoned without added fat or oil.

GRAINS:
• Offer 100% whole grain products such as cereal, bread, rice and pasta.

DAIRY:
• Offer low and nonfat milk and dairy products such as yogurt, cheese and pudding.

PROTEINS:
• Offer low fat and unprocessed options such as lean meats, poultry, fish or vegetarian options.
• Protein options should be baked, broiled, grilled or boiled without added fat or oil.

At least 60% of the FOODS offered meet all of the following nutrition standards:

CALORIES:
• No more than 250 calories per item (excluding nut and seeds without added fat or sweeteners).

FAT:
• No more than 35% of calories from total fat (excluding nuts, seeds and nut butters without added fat or caloric sweeteners) per serving. Snack mixes with nuts and other foods aren’t exempt from the 35% fat limit.
  • No more than 10% calories from saturated fat.
  • 0 gm trans fat (< .5/serving).

SUGAR:
• No more than 35% of calories from sugar per serving, except for fruit without added caloric sweeteners.
• No more than 30 grams sugar per 8 oz of yogurt, pudding, frozen yogurt or milk desserts.

SODIUM:
• 250 mg or less per serving.

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BEVERAGES

At least 60% of the BEVERAGES offered meet the following nutrition standards:

Water
• Unflavored, non-carbonated and no additives.

Milk
• Nonfat and/or low-fat (1% or ½%) flavored, unflavored. Milk contains no more than 24 grams of sugar and no more than 150 calories per 8 ounces.

Juice
• 100% (liquid or frozen) juice with no added sweeteners in containers of 8 ounces or less.

Calories/Portion size
• Low calorie beverages contain less than 10 calories per 8 ounces.
• Beverages with greater than 66 calories per 8 ounces are sold in portions of 12 ounces or less.

Other
• Vegetable juices contain < 230 mg sodium per serving.
• Electrolyte replacements don’t contain more than 42 grams of sweetener per 20 ounce serving.
• Energy drinks are not sold.

FOODS & BEVERAGES

For all FOODS and BEVERAGES
• Signage that lists the amount of calories per item is posted and visible for all customers.
• Items that meet the standards will be as visible or more visible to customers as items that do not meet the standards.
• Items that meet the standards must be sold at a price equivalent to or lower than similar items that do not meet the standards.
REFERENCES


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