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EU wants free fruit and veg in schools

By Barbara Balfour

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European Commission proposal particularly targets six- to ten-year-olds

BRUSSELS - The crunching of apples and carrot sticks will become a dominant soundtrack in school lunchrooms if a new programme aimed at boosting fruit and vegetable consumption in the EU is successful.

Under an initiative launched today in Strasbourg by Mariann Fischer Boel, the European commissioner for agriculture and rural development, the EU plans to allocate €90 million annually towards setting up programmes to provide fruit and vegetable to schoolchildren. The funds would also be used to extend similar programmes already created by a number of member states.

The Commission hopes the programme, which now needs the backing of the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, could start at the beginning of the 2009/2010 school year.

"This proposal shows we're serious about taking concrete steps to fight obesity," Fischer Boel said. "Giving kids good habits at an early age is crucial as they will carry these into later life. Too many of our children eat far too little fruit and vegetables and often don't appreciate how delicious they are. You only have to walk down any high street in Europe to see the extent of the problems we face with overweight kids."

The programme is the latest effort by the European Commission to improve health and nutrition, as set out in the "Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity and related health issues."

The European Commission particularly hopes to reach children aged six to ten, a stage when lifelong eating habits are typically formed, though it would be up to member states to decide which age groups and schools would receive money.

Of the 27 EU member states, citizens in only two (Greece and Italy) currently eat the 400 grams of fruits and vegetables a day recommended by the World Health Organization. Poor diet in turn leads to obesity, for which the rates are currently increasing in the EU, especially among children.

Of the estimated 22 million children in the EU who are overweight, 5.1 million are obese,

a figure expected to rise by 400,000 per year. The effects of obesity include health, psychological and social problems, the costs of which are in many cases ultimately paid for by society.

Obesity is now responsible for up to 6% of the total health bills in the EU. Healthcare costs that could have been prevented by an adequate intake of fruit and vegetables total an estimated €53 million a year in Denmark and €460 million in the Netherlands. They are also assumed to be significant in other EU member states.

Other studies demonstrate a strong link between low income and low consumption of fruit and vegetables. For this reason, to ensure the programme's success, fruits and vegetables will be provided free of charge.

Member states will match 50% of the cost of the produce (poorer member states and regions will finance 25%) as well as the costs of national strategies, including educational and awareness-raising initiatives that they will be required to implement. It will be up to the member states to decide whether to make use of the programme, as well as how much fruit to provide and how often.

"We are aware that €90 million is not going to save the world," said Fischer Boel. "But we hope it is enough money to push member states to put into place these schemes."