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EU expands milk programme

By Barbara Balfour

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The European Commission wants cheese, yogurt and kefir added to schoolchildren's daily diet

BRUSSELS - For generations of European schoolchildren, getting a healthy start to the day has meant lining up for a glass of milk. Now, under a change to the subsidies it has been providing for 30 years, the European Commission wants them to be able to demand a wider range of dairy products, including fruit-flavoured yogurt, a wedge of low-fat cheese or an invigorating cup of kefir.

In another innovation aimed at enabling children to make healthier choices, the Commission wants its School Milk scheme to be extended to children over the age of 11.

The Commission's decision to expand the programme and to accommodate cultural and dietary preferences on school menus is its latest response to figures showing that the number of overweight and obese children continues to climb across the EU.

Official figures suggest as many as 22 million children in the EU are overweight, 5.1 million of whom are obese.

In the 2006/2007 school year, the EU spent more than €50 million distributing the equivalent of about 305,000 tonnes of milk to the 22 member states participating in the scheme. The expansion of the programme, from the start of the 2008/2009 school year, will increase the cost to €62 million annually, the Commission said.

All schoolchildren in the programme are entitled to 0.25 litre of milk – or the equivalent for other milk products – each day.

What products children can choose from will ultimately be up to member states. It will also be up to national governments to decide how much money to provide to top up the EU subsidy, and therefore, how many children will benefit as a result.

Five categories of dairy products are now covered by the EU subsidy, including heat-treated milk and fermented milk products that are either flavoured or plain; flavoured and non-flavoured fermented milk products with fruit; flavoured and non-flavoured fresh and processed cheeses; Grana Padano cheese and Parmigiano Reggiano cheese; and flavoured and non-flavoured cheeses that do not fall under the other categories. Lactose-

free milk products are also eligible for subsidy under the programme.