

**CALIFORNIA CONFERENCE OF  
DIRECTORS OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH**

***BUFFET SERVICE GUIDELINES***

revised July 2008

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**BACKGROUND**

This guideline, originally created in December 1988 and first revised in June 1999. This second revision was completed by the Bay Area Food Technical Advisory Committee in response to the adoption of the California Retail Food Code (CRFC).

Salad bars, buffet lines, smorgasbords, hors d'oeuvre tables, and similar means of retail food service raise a number of questions as to how local health officials should apply the provisions of the California Retail Food Code to these operations. The Food Safety Policy Committee of the California Conference of Directors of Environmental Health has promulgated these Buffet Service Guidelines to provide clarity and uniform requirements in this area.

Health officials and retail food service operators must always keep in mind the fact that all retail food service activities are ultimately governed by CRFC. Of necessity, these Guidelines are general in nature and cannot address every situation that will be encountered. Successful enforcement of CRFC will therefore depend on a reasonable, logical, consistent, and practical application of these Guidelines and CRFC.

**SCOPE**

Unless otherwise indicated, these Guidelines shall apply to any buffet service (as defined - see definitions) conducted in a retail food facility where unpackaged prepared food is displayed, served and/or prepared for the general public (as defined) from counters, tables or similar equipment or installations in dining rooms, lobbies, meeting rooms, bar areas, ballrooms and other areas not traditionally used for food preparation. Outdoor food preparation (other than barbecuing - see CRFC Sections 114143, 114307, 114332.5, and 114341, and CCDEH "Guidelines for the Use of Open-air Barbecue Facilities"), storage, or display of nonprepackaged foods is not allowed pursuant to CRFC.

These Guidelines are intended to supersede all other guidelines or recommendations previously published or distributed by the California Department of Public Health, local environmental health departments, or agencies which deal with the subjects covered by these Guidelines.

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## DEFINITIONS

Exclusiveness of Definitions - Unless the context otherwise indicates, the following terms used in these Guidelines are defined as follows:

1. **Attended Station** - Refers to any part of a service line where the food is served or handed to the consumer by an employee of the permanent retail food facility, in accordance with CRFC Section 114060 (b).
2. **Buffet or Buffet Service** - Refers generally to any permanent, regularly occurring, or temporary operation in a permanent retail food facility where unpackaged prepared food is displayed, served and/or prepared for the general public from counters, tables or similar equipment or installations in dining rooms, lobbies, meeting rooms, bar areas, ballrooms, and other areas not traditionally used for food preparation. Such activities include, but are not limited to, buffets, smorgasbords, salad bars, sandwich bars, hors d'oeuvre tables, buffet line cooking and similar modes of food display and preparation in restaurants, bars, hotels, grocery stores and supermarkets. For the purposes of these Guidelines, the terms “buffet” and “buffet service” also include dessert carts and salad carts where used to serve more than one table.

**Exclusions** - For purposes of these Guidelines, the term “buffet service” **does not** include operations such as cafeteria-type food service already covered by CRFC. Such operations must conform directly to the applicable sections of CRFC Chapters 4-9, inclusive. The term “buffet service” also **does not** apply to “tableside” food preparation as defined in this section.

3. **Buffet, Permanent** - Refers generally to the operation of a service line or service line equipment which is placed or installed in a fixed location and used for buffet service on at least a daily basis.
4. **Buffet, Regularly Occurring** - Refers generally to the operation of a service line or service line equipment whether installed, movable or portable, which is used for buffet service at scheduled or fixed times or periodic intervals. For instance, buffet service which occurs daily, weekly, Sunday mornings, Tuesdays and Thursdays, etc., is regularly occurring.

5. **Buffet, Temporary** - Refers generally to the operation of a service line or service line equipment which is primarily movable or portable and used for buffet service for limited periods on an intermittent, irregular or non-scheduled basis.
6. **Cooking Equipment** - Refers to all electrically energized, gas, charcoal or chemically fueled sources of heat used in the preparation, heating, or temperature maintenance of food. This definition includes candles, canned heat, “sterno” and similar open flame heat sources. NOTE: See Guideline No. 6 in this document for ventilation restrictions.
7. **Cooking Station** - Refers to any attended station of a service line where food is cooked to order. Such preparation includes but is not limited to omelet, crepe, pancake or waffle preparation; meat or steak grilling; carving from roasts of meat; and assembly of sandwiches or tacos. NOTE: See Guideline No. 6 in this document for ventilation restrictions.
8. **General Public** - As used in these Guidelines, buffet service for the “general public” refers to functions to which the general public is invited and where no sponsoring person or entity has contracted with the retail food facility operator for the function. The term also refers to food service by so-called “clubs” which as a practice sell “memberships” to the general public on a temporary or ad hoc basis.
9. **Portable** – Refers to equipment that is capable of being lifted and moved or has utility connections that are designed to be disconnected or of sufficient length to permit the unit to be moved for cleaning, and weighs no more than 80 lbs and is no greater than 3 feet in any plane.
10. **Self-Service Area** - Refers to any part of a service line where unpackaged food is displayed for consumer self-service in accordance with CRFC Sections 114060 (a) and 114063 (a) – (e).
11. **Service Line** - Refers generally to any table, counter or similar installation or equipment used in buffet service where the consumer obtains or receives displayed food.
12. **Tableside Food Preparation** - Refers generally to any preparation of a food item by a food employee of the food facility for an individual consumer at the dining table. This term includes, for example, the customary dining room preparation of Steak Diane, Cherries Jubilee, Caesar Salads, Steak Tartare, and similar dishes.

#### **A. *Applicability of NSF and Similar Standards***

CRFC Section 114130 (b) requires all new or replacement equipment to be certified or classified for sanitation by an ANSI accredited certification program, or be evaluated for approval by the enforcement agency in the absence of an applicable ANSI certified sanitation standard.

Wherever appropriate, the applicable ANSI certification is incorporated and noted in these Guidelines. The pertinent NSF International standards and the standards of similar organizations must be applied in these Guidelines where appropriate.

# FOOD DISPLAY AND SERVICE - GENERAL SANITATION AND SAFETY REQUIREMENTS

## GUIDELINE NUMBER 1 - GENERAL OPERATION AND ARRANGEMENT OF SERVICE LINES

The requirements of this guideline apply to all buffet service.

### A. *Service Lines*

- 1) **Equipment** - All equipment and utensils used in a service line must be made of approved materials and be maintained in good repair and in a clean manner, free from contamination.
- 2) **Surfaces** - All surfaces of service lines must be kept clean and free of debris.

### B. *Safety*

All equipment used in service lines must be installed, operated and maintained in a safe and secure manner. All such equipment and its installation must meet all applicable codes.

### C. *Food Displayed in Self-Service Area*

All food displayed for consumer self-service must be displayed within easy reach of the average consumer. The maximum distance between the edge of a service line, excluding any tray rail, and the front of the rearmost displayed item cannot exceed 22 inches. However, chafing dishes (“chafers”), oval trays, pans, and similar food containers may extend beyond this 22 inch limit so long as the displayed food begins within the 22 inch limit.

Service lines which are accessed from two sides should be arranged so that consumers do not reach across the mid-point of a two-sided serving line. If necessary, a central barrier should be provided which prevents consumers from serving themselves from the other side or across food containers.

All sneeze-guards or droplet protection devices used in service lines must conform to Guideline No. 2 of this document (Sneeze-guards). Also, the protective surface of the sneeze-guard must be positioned high enough above the displayed food so that it does not interfere with the customer’s access to the rearmost displayed food item or the use of serving utensils. Sneeze guards that comply with Guideline No. 2 generally meet this criterion.

### D. *Temperature Control*

CRFC Section 113996 (a) provides that “...potentially hazardous food shall be maintained at or above 135°F or at or below 41°F.” CRFC Section 113996 (c) (4) provides that “The following may be held at or below 45°F...Potentially hazardous foods held for dispensing in serving lines and salad bars during periods not to exceed 12 hours in any 24-hour period....” Simply stated, this means that such foods displayed in

service lines must be held at the required temperatures. Potentially hazardous foods held hot for serving must be rapidly brought to the required temperature before being placed in the service line, unless the service line equipment is designed to rapidly bring food up to the required temperature. An accurate, easily readable, metal probe thermometer shall be readily available (Section 114159 (a)).

In accordance with CRFC Section 114130 (b), all food containers, icebeds, and other equipment used to display potentially hazardous foods must conform to the applicable NSF standards.

**E. Cooking and Reheating Temperatures / Oven Parameters**

CRFC Sections 114004, 114008, 114093, and 114016 require that all ready-to-eat foods prepared at a food facility from raw or incompletely cooked animal tissues shall be thoroughly cooked prior to serving, as follows, unless otherwise ordered by the consumer:

- 
- **Poultry** (including ground poultry): 165°F for 15 sec
  - **Stuffed fish, stuffed meat, stuffed poultry, stuffed ratites; pasta stuffed with raw or undercooked animal foods:** 165°F for 15 sec
  - **Stuffing containing fish, meat, poultry or ratites:** 165°F for 15 sec
  - **Reheated cooked foods** (foods cooked, cooled, and reheated for hot holding): 165°F for 15 sec
  - **Ground meat** (including beef, veal, lamb, pork and other edible animals): 155°F for 15 sec (158°F for < 1 second)
  - **Single pieces of meat** (including beef, veal, lamb, pork, or game animals from approved sources): 145°F for 15 sec
  - **Fish:** 145°F for 15 sec
  - **Raw shell eggs:** 145°F for 15 sec (for immediate service)
  - **Raw eggs** (and foods containing raw eggs): 155°F for 15 sec (other than immediate service)
  - **Foods cooked in a microwave oven** (Stirred or rotated and covered. After microwaving, the food must stand for at least two minutes before serving to obtain temperature equilibrium): 165°F (in all parts of the food)
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CRFC Section 114004 (b) requires that certain whole roasts (beef, corned beef, pork, and cured pork) be cooked in an oven that is preheated to the temperature specified in the chart below and then held at that temperature during cooking:

Oven Type	Oven Temperature Based on Weight	
	Less than 10 lbs	10 lbs. or more
Still Dry	350°F or more	250°F or more
Convection	325°F or more	250°F or more
High Humidity*	250°F or less	250°F or less
* Relative humidity greater than 90% for at least 1 hour measured in the cooking chamber or exit of the oven; or in a moisture-impermeable bag that provides 100% humidity.		

CRFC Section 114004 (b) also requires that all parts of these roasts be heated to a temperature and for a holding time as specified in the chart below:

Temperature (°F)	Time* in Minutes	Temperature (°F)	Time* in Seconds
130	112	147	134
131	89	149	85
133	56	151	54
135	36	153	34
136	28	155	22
138	18	157	14
140	12	158	0
142	8		
144	5		
145	4		
* Holding time may include post oven heat rise.			

CRFC Section 114004 (c) allows the California Department of Public Health to approve alternative time and temperature minimum heating requirements when the food facility demonstrates that the alternative requirements provide an equivalent level of food safety.

**F. Availability of Employee Handwashing Facilities.**

CRFC Sections 113953-113953.5 require all food facilities to provide employee handwashing facilities. No additional or special employee handwashing facilities need be provided specifically for service line employees in regularly occurring or temporary buffets so long as the facilities required by CRFC are adequate and reasonably accessible to service line employees. However, handwashing facilities must be provided in permanent buffets in which food is prepared and served by employees.

**G. General Droplet Protection Requirement.**

All food displayed in service lines must be protected from droplet contamination in accordance with CRFC Sections 113980 and 114060 (a) – (b). Under these Guidelines,

displayed food must either be placed behind a sneeze-guard or similar droplet protection device as provided by Guideline No. 2 (Sneeze-guards), or placed in a covered or otherwise protected container that meets the standards of Guideline No. 3 (Self-service Stations) or Guideline No. 4 (Attended Stations). Other forms of protection may include packaging; display cases; mechanical dispensers; or other effective means.

## DROPLET PROTECTION

### GUIDELINE NUMBER 2 - SNEEZE-GUARDS

A sneeze-guard consists of a barrier, usually glass or plastic, which is placed in front of and well above displayed food to block contaminants expelled from a customer's mouth or nose. Sneeze-guards are sometimes referred to as food shields or food protective devices. In some circumstances, the properly positioned cover of a serving dish may be an acceptable alternative to a sneeze-guard. (See Guidelines Number 3 and 4).

#### **A. General Requirement**

Where required under CRFC Sections 114060 (a) – (b), sneeze-guards must be placed in front of displayed food in order to intercept a direct line between the average consumer's mouth<sup>1</sup> and the food displayed within the zone of potential droplet contamination.

#### **B. Defining the Zone of Potential Droplet Contamination.**

**The zone of potential droplet contamination may vary depending on the circumstances.** For example, assuming an average consumer height of between 5' and 5'8", an average mouth height between 4'6" and 5', and a 30 inch service line height, the zone of potential droplet contamination is an area which extends 30 inches by 30 inches from a point 30 inches directly above the consumer edge of the service line to a point 30 inches directly in from the consumer edge of the service line.<sup>2</sup> NOTE: See illustrations in Appendix.

Unless otherwise protected as provided by Guidelines Number 3 and 4, all displayed food within the zone of potential droplet contamination must be protected by a sneeze-guard. This requirement includes the ends of service lines where displayed food is within the zone of potential droplet contamination. Food displayed outside or behind the

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<sup>1</sup> **The height of the average consumer's mouth** for purposes of this guideline is between 4'6" and 5' as specified in the applicable sections of NSF Standard Number 2. Accordingly, the average consumer is between 5' and 5'8" tall for this NSF standard. However, the NSF Standard provides that this average may be adjusted for special circumstances where the average height of a particular food facility's consumer is above 6'3" or below 4'4", such as in athletic facilities or educational institutions.

<sup>2</sup> **The zone of potential droplet contamination** extends outward from the consumer's mouth and horizontally from the consumer's edge of the service line. The zone is calculated using the applicable sections of NSF Standard Number 2. This standard assumes a 30-inch distance straight out from a 5' mouth height, which is, in turn, above a 30" high buffet table. Consequently, the 5' mouth height is also 30" above the table.

zone of potential droplet contamination does not require a sneeze-guard. Food intended only for display purposes need not be protected.

### **C. *Installation and Coverage Requirements for Sneeze-guards***

In order to conform with this guideline, sneeze-guard systems must meet or exceed NSF International standards for coverage and installation. NSF Standard Number 2 provides that “shields [sneeze-guards] shall be mounted so as to intercept a direct line between the customer’s mouth and the food display area at the customer “use” position...Special consideration must be given to use location conditions such as tray rails”.

Regardless of design, all sneeze-guards must be installed and adjusted as necessary during operation to maintain constant protection of displayed food items as required by this guideline. The protective area of the sneeze-guard must be positioned high enough above the displayed food so that it does not interfere with the consumer’s access to the rearmost displayed food item or use of serving utensils.

### **D. *Movement of Sneeze-Guards; Suspended Sneeze-Guards.***

Regardless of design, sneeze-guards must be installed so as to minimize potential movement of the shields by consumers. Sneeze-guards suspended by devices such as chains, ropes, wires, or similar movable suspension equipment must be placed near walls, pillars, posts, or other architectural barriers, or else restrained by chains, straps or similar restraining devices to prevent movement of the sneeze-guards by consumers.

### **E. *Miscellaneous Requirements for Sneeze-Guards.***

- 1) Sneeze-guards must be made of easy-to-clean, sanitary materials which conform to NSF Standard Number 2. For example, safety glass, plastic, acrylic, and similar materials are acceptable.
- 2) Exposed edges of sneeze-guards must have a safety edge or be trimmed with protective edges or channels.
- 3) Sneeze-guards must be kept in a clean and sanitary condition during operation.

### **F. *Examples of Acceptable Sneeze-Guard Devices.***

The illustrations in the Appendix are included only as suggestions or examples of acceptable sneeze-guards. The illustrations are not intended to prohibit or prescribe any designs. So long as the sneeze-guard protects the displayed food in accordance with this guideline, it is acceptable.

## **GUIDELINE NUMBER 3 - DROPLET PROTECTION IN SELF-SERVICE AREAS OF SERVICE LINES**

CRFC Section 114060 (a) requires that...

"...food on display shall be protected from contamination by the use of packaging, counter, service line, or sneeze guards that intercept a direct line between the

customer's mouth and the food being displayed, containers with tight-fitting securely attached lids, display cases, mechanical dispensers, or other effective means.”

This means that displayed food must be protected by a sneeze-guard which meets the requirements of Guideline Number 2 or, as acceptable alternatives, placed in a service container which has a tight-fitting securely attached lid, in a display case, or by other effective means.

Acceptable containers include self-closing containers such as roll-top chafing dishes (“chafers”) whose lids are set not to open to more than 90 degrees from their closed position and other containers which the regional CCDEH Food Technical Advisory Committee (FTAC) has accepted and/or the local health department has approved as equal to NSF or comparable standards.

#### **GUIDELINE NUMBER 4 - DROPLET PROTECTION AT ATTENDED STATIONS OF SERVICE LINES**

CRFC Section 114060 (b) provides that unpackaged food may be displayed in other than self-service containers if **both** of the following conditions are satisfied:

- 1) The food is served by a food employee of the establishment directly to a consumer.
- 2) The food is displayed in clean, sanitary, and covered or otherwise protected containers.

This standard may be met by either:

- 1) Placement of a sneeze-guard which meets the standards of Guideline Number 2 between the food and the consumer; or
- 2) The attending food employee serving the food from a covered container, so long as the cover is replaced after each serving; or
- 3) Other protection that provides an equivalent barrier which intercepts a direct line between the mouth of the average consumer and the food. Containers such as roll-top or half-dome chafing dishes meet this requirement provided that when the container is open, only the attending employee directly faces the food.

**Service Line Food Preparation** - At cooking stations a sneeze-guard which conforms to Guideline Number 2 must be placed between the consumer and food ingredients used to prepare items for other consumers. However, sneeze-guards are not required between the consumer and the food item being prepared specifically for that consumer. This guideline does not apply to tableside food preparation, as defined in “Definitions”.

## UTENSILS, FLATWARE, AND DINNERWARE

### GUIDELINE NUMBER 5 - UTENSILS AND SELF-SERVICE DISPENSING OF FOOD ITEMS IN SERVICE LINES

#### A. *Dispensing Utensils.*

CRFC Section 114063 (d) requires that food displayed in self-service containers be provided with a suitable food dispensing utensil for each container displayed, or other effective food dispensing methods that protect the food from contamination. Each service container must be provided with at least one appropriately sized serving utensil for use exclusively with that container. The utensil must be of sufficient size and design to prevent it falling into or out of the container when not in use. The self-service utensils must be changed, cleaned and sanitized as regularly as required by Section 114117 (a).

#### B. *Dinnerware and Flatware.*

**All reasonable steps** should be taken to keep patrons from reusing their dinnerware (plates, saucers, etc.) when returning to the service line. Sufficient clean dinnerware should be provided so that consumers are not encouraged to reuse their dinnerware when returning to the service line. Signs should be posted directing patrons to obtain a clean plate when returning to the service line. Suitable facilities should also be available near the service line in which to deposit used dinnerware.

The management of the retail food facility or the PIC must provide sufficient utensils, dinnerware and service line supervision to prevent consumers from (1) reusing tableware, (2) using their hands or their tableware to dispense food, or (3) otherwise unnecessarily handling or touching displayed food items.

## SERVICE LINE COOKING

### GUIDELINE NUMBER 6 - VENTILATION

CRFC Section 114149.1 (a) provides that "Mechanical exhaust ventilation equipment shall be provided over all cooking equipment as required to effectively remove cooking odors smoke, steam grease, heat, and vapors." CCDEH has promulgated ventilation guidelines for the enforcement of CRFC Sections 114149 – 114149.3 entitled *CCDEH - Recommendations for Mechanical Exhaust Ventilation and Hood Systems of Commercial Food and Utensil Heat Processing Equipment*. The CCDEH ventilation guidelines also conform to *Uniform Mechanical Code*, Chapter 5 and applicable NSF standards.

#### A. *General Ventilation Standard.*

In accordance with CRFC Sections 114149 – 114149.3 and the CCDEH ventilation guidelines, there must be sufficient ventilation in service lines, and in dining rooms and similar areas where cooking equipment is used, to remove gases, odors, steam, heat,

grease, vapors, or smoke, and to prevent the accumulation of these substances on the floors, walls, ceilings, and other surfaces of these areas of retail food establishments.

**B. *Separate Ventilation - Canopies, Hoods Required for Service Line Cooking Equipment***

Unless exempted in Section C, below, the CCDEH ventilation guidelines, or specifically approved by the appropriate local enforcement agency, all cooking equipment used in service lines must be separately ventilated in accordance with the CCDEH ventilation guidelines.

**C. *Exemptions from Separate Ventilation Requirement***

Certain small, individual, portable cooking equipment units which are exempted from canopy and hood ventilation requirements under the CCDEH ventilation guidelines and the applicable Uniform Mechanical Code standard may be used without separate or special ventilation. Sufficient area ventilation must be provided to conform with the general ventilation standard of Section A of this guideline.

Exempted units include but are not limited to the following:

- portable crepe makers
- portable waffle irons and portable toasters
- portable ovens (microwave, cook and hold)
- hot dog warmer
- low temperature rotisseries
- small hot plates (1.5 kw/5,000 BTU or less)

This exemption only applies in situations where food is prepared on an individual consumer basis.

**D. *Use of Multiple Units.***

More than one of the individual portable cooking equipment units specified in Section C of this guideline may be used in a service line provided that there is sufficient general area ventilation to conform with the general ventilation standard of Section A of this guideline. The enforcing agency shall have the discretion to determine whether the use of multiple units conforms to the general ventilation standard of Section A.

**E. *Fire Safety.***

Open flame devices present a special hazard especially when utilized in consumer areas such as buffet lines. Operators who propose use of any open flame devices should contact their local fire authority to ensure that use of these devices is in compliance with all applicable requirements including the regulations of the State Fire Marshal found in Title 19, California Code of Regulations, Section 3.25, Open Flame Devices.

## FLOORS, WALLS AND CEILINGS OF AREAS WITH SERVICE LINES

### GUIDELINE NUMBER 7 - FLOOR SURFACES IN AREAS WITH SERVICE LINES; TEMPORARY COVERING

CRFC Section 114268 (a) requires that “except in sales areas of retail food establishments...the floor surfaces in all areas in which food is prepared, prepackaged, or stored...shall be smooth and of durable construction and nonabsorbent material that is easily cleanable.” Under these Guidelines, the term “sales areas” includes dining areas and all areas where buffet service takes place. (See definition of “buffet service”).

Floor surfaces in sales areas with service lines must be easily cleanable, maintained in a clean condition, kept free from debris and otherwise meet the requirements of this guideline.

#### **A. *Employee Side of Service Line.***

The floor area beneath and adjacent to attended stations shall be smooth, durable, easily cleanable and maintained so as not to present a slip or trip hazard. This requirement may be met in temporary and regularly occurring buffets by using supplemental flooring which may consist of a mat, carpet-runner or similar temporary floor covering. This area must be kept clean, in good condition, free from debris, and cleaned after each service period. Floors in permanent buffets must meet the same requirements as those in kitchen areas.

#### **B. *Consumer Side of Service Line.***

Where there is a carpet or other similarly absorbent and permanent floor covering, the local enforcement agency may require that a suitable temporary floor covering be placed on the consumer side of the service line where there is a significant risk of spillage. This temporary covering may consist of a mat, carpet-runner or similar temporary suitable floor covering. This covering must be kept clean and free from debris, and cleaned after each service period.

### GUIDELINE NUMBER 8 - WALLS AND CEILINGS

CRFC Section 114271 does not require the walls and ceilings of bars and dining areas to be of a smooth, durable and nonabsorbent washable surface. However, under this guideline, the walls and ceilings of bars, dining areas and areas with service lines must be maintained in clean condition and free from debris, dirt and dust.

## OVERHEAD PROTECTION

### GUIDELINE NUMBER 9 - OVERHEAD PROTECTION

Special precautions must be taken to protect displayed food from overhead leakage and dirt in buffet service areas which contain exposed overhead water or sewer lines, exposed architecture, hanging displays of various objects, such as plants, or other

decorative or structural features which are not easily cleanable during the normal course of maintenance. These precautions may include the installation of a canopy type cover or awning that adequately protects food on the service line.

## **APPENDIX**

### **SNEEZE GUARD ILLUSTRATIONS**