

 DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

Food Procurement and Infrastructure

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I. Intro

In the Spring of 2021, President Biden unveiled the American Jobs Plan (AJP) and the American Families Plan (AFP) his infrastructure proposals aimed at Building Back Better. The AJP, which is foundational to the administration’s climate change strategy, focuses on putting millions of Americans to work in good-paying jobs and rebuilding the nation’s infrastructure. The AFP focuses on our children, our families, and our caretakers.^{1,2}

The AJP and AFP recognize the power of procurement of vehicles, energy, and materials in creating good-paying jobs and meeting our ambitious climate goals. However, Biden’s plans neglect to consider the massive impact that leveraging the government’s food procurement could have in “building back better” when it comes to our food system. Building infrastructure that supports sustainable food and agricultural systems represents an important opportunity to improve public health, strengthen food security and resilience, support family farms, revitalize rural communities, redress systemic injustice and mitigate climate change.³ **The aim of this memo is to highlight opportunities already included in the AFP and AJP and suggest policies for Congress to add to these proposals in order to leverage federal food procurement to Build Back Better.**

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II. Background: Why transforming our destructive food system is crucial to Build Back Better

United States food and agriculture policy has encouraged the growth of a highly concentrated industrial food system that works against the interests of family farmers, local communities, frontline workers, the environment, public health, and animal welfare, predominantly affecting people of color, especially Black and Indigenous people, and other frontline communities.

Today, U.S. food production is dominated by chemical-intensive monocultures grown for animal feed, biofuels, and processed foods as well as industrial-scale livestock production. These agricultural practices deplete and degrade our nation’s valuable soil, water, and biodiversity while generating unsustainable amounts of greenhouse gases.⁴ While the food and agriculture sector employs 11% of U.S. workers, these jobs are typically low-wage and often dangerous.^{5,6} The labor of farmworkers and other food workers is exploited to the point that many can’t afford to eat the very food they harvest, pack, transport, process, prepare, and serve. Family farmers are having to abandon their farms because they can’t compete in a highly consolidated, unfair market. Black and Indigenous farmers are struggling to stay on their land as a legacy of the roots of the food system in slavery and the policies that uphold white supremacy long after emancipation. Moreover, despite the wealth of our nation, millions are still

going hungry at home and at school, and a majority are suffering from diet-related conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure.

The federal government procures tens of billions of dollars of food each year for children in schools, military service members, veterans in VA hospitals, people incarcerated in federal prison, and seniors relying on federal feeding programs. Right now, the vast majority of these food purchases are supporting the status quo food system that is actively working against this administration's goals. Instead, we can tap into this immense potential to transform our food system by aligning federal food purchases with the administration's policy objectives to achieve racial justice, mitigate climate change, support family farms, strengthen local economies, ensure nutrition security, support food and farmworkers, and protect animal welfare. We refer to this concept as **values-driven food procurement**.

The Good Food Purchasing Program: A model for values-driven food procurement at the local level

Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP) is one of the most comprehensive sustainable food procurement policy models available. Its metric-based, flexible procurement framework emphasizes five values:



NUTRITION



**ENVIRONMENTAL
SUSTAINABILITY**



**VALUED
WORKFORCE**



**LOCAL
ECONOMIES**



**ANIMAL
WELFARE**

First adopted in Los Angeles, CA in 2012, GFPP has now influenced over \$1 billion in annual food purchases by 48 institutions across 20 cities.⁷ With use-cases across the country, GFPP provides a successful model of holistic food procurement standards that can guide values-driven federal food procurement policies.

II. Opportunities for Congress to advance values-driven school food procurement in AFP and AJP

President Biden's American Families Plan includes an opportunity for values-driven school food purchasing by committing to invest \$45 billion to expand the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (Summer EBT) to all eligible children nationwide, expand the Community Eligibility Program to increase access to school meals, and launch a \$1 billion healthy school food incentive demonstration.⁸

The AFP recognizes that "school meals are one of the federal government's most powerful tools for delivering nutrition security to children."⁹ In particular, improving school meal quality is a critical point of intervention to mitigate racial health disparities that emerge early in children.¹⁰ The CDC points to research proving that eating habits and healthy behaviors are connected to academic achievement, so improving school meals can also boost academic performance.¹¹

Despite improvements to school meals over the last decade and incredible leadership from school food service operators, school meals still typically rely predominantly on food from large, multinational corporations. Because schools have such limited access to organic and local food options, the most commonly offered lunches usually feature highly processed meat- and dairy-heavy dishes¹². They also often lack access to food sourced from socially disadvantaged producers. Numerous factors contribute to this including but not limited to: Low reimbursement rates for school meals; corporate consolidation in our food system reflected in the USDA Foods program; and an array of production-side policies and subsidies that favor industrial-scale agriculture. Further, many schools lack the proper kitchen facilities, staffing capacity, and staff training to offer healthy meals cooked from scratch. School kitchen infrastructure and culinary training for school foodservice professionals are crucial facilitators to serving healthy school meals with fresh and locally procured ingredients.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ The \$1 billion healthy school food incentive demonstration included in the American Families Plan is a great window of opportunity to **support schools in improving the nutritional quality of school meals**. Congress should retain this funding proposal from the AFP, directing USDA to support schools in exceeding current nutrition standards by limiting added sugars, moving to 100% whole grain, striving to meet Target 4 sodium, increasing fiber intake, phasing out processed meats in favor of plant-based sources of protein that are under-consumed relative to the dietary guidelines recommendations, and accommodating students with dietary restrictions or preferences.
- ▶ The American Jobs Plan proposes \$100 billion toward **green school infrastructure upgrades, including school kitchens**.¹³ Congress should prioritize funding for school districts serving a high population of students eligible for Free and Reduced Price Meals and that seek to update their school kitchen infrastructure such that they can scratch-cook student meals for the first time. This will help schools move away from pre-packaged, often highly processed food options, and enable schools to work with fresh, locally procured ingredients.
- ▶ Invest at least \$2 billion in **workforce training and development for school food service staff**. School districts across the country report a shortage of food service professionals with the culinary training necessary to execute cooking from scratch in a school food service context.
- ▶ Congress should go a step further than President Biden's proposal to expand the Community Eligibility Provision and establish **universal free school meals** so that every student can afford school breakfast and lunch. In order to ensure school districts can provide high-quality meals and pay their employees a fair wage, Congress should **increase the per-meal reimbursement rate**, which is currently far too low given increases in food and labor costs over the last decade. **Through polling at Data For Progress, we found that nearly two-thirds of Americans, including a majority on both sides of the aisle, want the federal government to ensure that school lunches are fresh, healthy, prepared onsite, and locally grown.**¹⁴

III. Opportunities for Congress to advance values-driven food procurement across other federal agencies

Beyond the school meal program, the federal government also purchases billions of dollars of food each year that could be leveraged to support climate, public health, racial justice, worker protections, and other administration goals. While most federal food service and feeding programs do follow at least some nutrition guidelines, and some agencies try to purchase some locally produced food, no agency has a robust values-aligned food procurement policy or practices in place. This is a missed opportunity.

For example, the Biden administration has emphasized the importance of supporting BIPOC producers who have faced intolerable discrimination since the founding of this country.¹⁵ BIPOC producers have been intentionally cut out from institutional markets, including the largest market: the federal government's. That is part of the reason Black farmers, for example, account for less than .4% of U.S. farm sales.¹⁶ As part of a broader strategy to address this injustice, federal food service venues and feeding programs should create explicit objectives to purchase food from socially disadvantaged producers.

Similarly, USDA is working to incentivize climate-smart agricultural practices through production-side policies, but there are no demand-side policies to support this strategy.¹⁷ In the same way that the federal government helped to build the market for clean energy through its energy procurement, it can spur a climate-friendly food system by purchasing lower-carbon foods and food grown with regenerative, organic practices.

Serving healthy food to people who are dependent on public food service is one of the most straightforward strategies to achieve nutrition security. For instance — given the alarming rates of diet-related disease among our nation's veterans, it is crucial that healthy food is served at our Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals. Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the prevalence of multiple chronic conditions was significantly higher among veterans than nonveterans.¹⁸ Another study found that among veterans aged 65 and over receiving care in the Veterans Affairs health care system, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, and coronary heart disease were the three most common conditions.¹⁹ All of these conditions are diet-related.²⁰ Serving healthier food in VA hospitals would afford the high standard of care that our veterans deserve and reduce healthcare costs.

This administration has pledged to ensure safe and dignified working conditions for the food and farm workers who are the backbone of our economy.²¹ But at the same time the government is issuing citations to companies like Tyson for its egregious treatment of workers, it is also awarding them lucrative food contracts.^{22 23}

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS*

- ▶ As long as the federal government defaults to a “lowest responsible bidder” procurement model, it will continue to purchase foods with a low sticker price but a high cost to society. The costs of the government’s food purchases to our health, the environment, local communities, workers, farmers, and animals are externalized. A lack of oversight and regulation within our food system allows companies to pollute the air and water that local communities depend upon, exploit contract farmers, underpay food workers and subject them to dangerous working conditions, and raise animals in inhumane and unsanitary conditions. These “hidden” costs —plus the health care costs associated with unhealthy diets—should be accounted for in the price of foods as well.²⁴ Congress should direct the Office of Management and Budget to **establish a new framework for true cost accounting in food procurement**, in consultation with relevant agencies including USDA, EPA, and HHS, to be implemented over time by food procuring agencies.
- ▶ In the face of a major public health crisis that has exacerbated our national vulnerability to a pandemic, the government should not support any food procurement that does not conform to its own rigorous medical and scientific assessment: the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Congress should designate \$200 million in funding to **support federal foodservice facilities in implementing the Foodservice Guidelines for Federal Facilities** (FSGs), which operationalize the *Dietary Guidelines* in a foodservice context. Funding should be available to support implementation costs, including staffing and food procurement costs necessary for agencies to achieve the innovative practices identified by the FSGs. These include procuring local and organic foods, and sustainably sourced seafood.
- ▶ **Disqualify all food vendors with violations of federal labor, environmental and animal welfare laws.** It is inconsistent and counterproductive for the federal government to reward companies that have violated its own laws with food contracts.
- ▶ **Phase in a requirement that all federally certified food vendors disclose their greenhouse gas emissions, including scopes 1, 2, and 3.** This disclosure process should be developed to be consistent with parallel federal efforts, such as reporting mandates around climate-related financial risk by the Securities and Exchange Commission. Compliance should be fair and coupled with assistance programs for small and mid-sized businesses and producers.
- ▶ Create a **transparent supply chain** in all federal food procurement by allocating funding to establish a federal database of all food contracts that includes and requires all suppliers to disclose supply chain data down to the farm of origin. The lack of transparency in our public supply chains limits our collective progress and obscures public access and accountability.

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- ▶ Establish a **preference to contract with**:
 - **foodservice management companies that**:
 - **have a demonstrated plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions** associated with their food service operation (such as by reducing supply chain emissions and food waste);
 - demonstrate they can **meet the “innovative” standards in the Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities**;
 - **vendors that**:
 - **respect the right to organize, ensure healthy and safe working conditions, and pay living wages** to frontline food workers across the supply chain by having a union contract, being a worker-owned cooperative, and/or having a Labor Peace Agreement;
 - **track procurement data and prioritize food contracts for socially disadvantaged producers as well as minority-owned food businesses**, including processors and distributors;
 - have committed to and are disclosing progress toward a **science-based greenhouse gas reduction target**; and
 - provide **Certified Organic products** and foods with third-party certifications for **sustainability and strong animal welfare practices**.

- ▶ More than 80 percent of Americans are concerned about air and water pollution, worker safety and health problems caused by Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs).²⁵ To support a gradual and just transition away from CAFOs, the federal government should **gradually phase out its purchases of animal products from CAFOs** while increasing purchases of pasture-raised animal products, fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes, grains, and seeds. See our [Data For Progress report on antitrust and restoring independence and fairness to agriculture](#).

**Many of these recommendations are also applicable to a school food context*

A NOTE ON LOCAL AND REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEM INFRASTRUCTURE AND AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION

Although outside of the scope of this memo, it is important to acknowledge regional food infrastructure, land access and agricultural land conservation. To support the procurement of local, fair and sustainable foods, the federal government must support the infrastructure required to build robust climate-smart regional food systems that support good-paying jobs. To ensure our food system is rebuilt with justice at its core, additional investments need to be allocated for BIPOC producers and foodways. Congress should prioritize land access for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers, as well as

support for agricultural conservation and regenerative farming methods. See our Data For Progress reports here on [land access](#) and [regenerative farming](#). After the farm gate, the main barrier to the entry and expansion of local food production is the lack of upgraded distribution, processing and storage capacity, as provided through local food hubs and established food distribution centers.²⁶ Increasing this critical supply chain capacity represents an important opportunity for investment within the infrastructure package.^{27 28}

Conclusion

The American Jobs Plan and American Families Plan offer an opportunity to meaningfully confront the greatest challenges of our lifetime, kickstarting a decade of social and economic transformation. To be successful, the infrastructure package must be comprehensive and include our food system.

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Shifting our food and agricultural systems is not only necessary to achieve the Biden Administration’s stated goals — it also holds enormous promise for solving entrenched environmental and socioeconomic problems. With tens of billions of dollars of food procured each year for schools, federal personnel and federally operated food service, the federal government has significant purchasing power. Leveraging values-driven federal food procurement can begin to move us away from extractivism and toward a regenerative food system that truly nourishes our communities and our land. There are opportunities already included in the American Families Plan and American Jobs Plan, but these must be expanded to ensure greater access to healthy school food, more transparency around the “true cost” of food production, and food procurement policies that support a sustainable food

future for all Americans. Aligning federal food purchasing can at once bolster climate smart agriculture, begin to reduce racial and socio-economic health disparities and improve millions of jobs that are central to economic and community vitality. As with the energy system, we need a just transition to mend our broken food system. Congress must seize on this opportunity to Build our food system Back Better.

An excerpt from the HEAL Food Alliance Platform: Why we must center racial justice in transforming food system infrastructure

Our food and farming systems bear strong the imprint of chattel slavery and colonization. At the end of the Civil War and the beginning of emancipation, the plan to provide each freed family with 40 acres and a mule collapsed under a deficit of political courage, and the only government sponsored land redistribution was from Indigenous people to white settlers under the Homestead Act.

Today, these decisions are reflected in who owns farms, and who works them. The descendants of those historically denied land now face enormous wealth gaps and the highest per capita food insecurity in the nation. This model of agriculture was spread across the United States, extracting land and labor and creating crises like the Dust Bowl of the 1920s, and rampant soil depletion across the country.²⁹

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING:

Resources related to values-aligned food procurement:

- ▶ [The Center for Good Food Purchasing Standards](#): for a model of values-aligned procurement standard.
- ▶ [John Hopkins Report on True Cost Accounting for Food System Reform](#): an overview of true cost accounting applied in the context of food systems.
- ▶ [HEAL Food Alliance Platform](#): a roadmap to a future that truly nourishes our health, our economies, and our environment.
- ▶ National Farm to School Network: [Values Aligned Universal Meals Program](#).
- ▶ The Good Food Purchasing Program: [A roadmap for the post-pandemic food system we need](#)

Resources related to local food system infrastructure:

- ▶ [Reimagining Native American Food Economies: A Vision for Native Food and Agriculture Infrastructure Rebuilding and Recovery](#)
- ▶ [Harvesting Opportunity: The Power of Regional Food System Investments to Transform Communities](#)
- ▶ [Local and Regional Food Systems: A Summary of Local Food Systems in the U.S. by Foodprint](#)
- ▶ [On the Plate at SUNY: Growing Health, Farms and Jobs with Local Food](#)
- ▶ [Trends in U.S. Local and Regional Food Systems: A Report to Congress](#)

ENDNOTES

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