



ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

VALUE SPOTLIGHT

V2.2: revised 8/8/18

Source from producers that employ sustainable production systems to reduce or eliminate synthetic pesticides and fertilizers; avoid the use of hormones, routine antibiotics, and genetic engineering; conserve and regenerate soil and water; protect and enhance wildlife habitats and biodiversity; and reduce on-farm energy and water consumption, food waste, and greenhouse gas emissions.

Reduce menu items that have high carbon and water footprints using strategies such as plant-forward menus that feature smaller portions of animal proteins in a supporting role.

All life depends on healthy ecosystems composed of clean air, water, soil, and biodiversity. The earth's ecosystems, however, are threatened by a number of human activities, especially agriculture and livestock production. But not all agriculture is created equal. Industrial agriculture—characterized by large-scale monocultures, heavy use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and intensive livestock operations—comes with steep costs to our environment, farmers, workers, and rural communities. These impacts are felt today and will be passed on to future generations unless we take urgent actions to make our food systems more sustainable.

Based on a small range of crops and farm animal products, industrial agriculture erodes diversity of farms and surrounding environments and wildlife. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that, over the twentieth century, the world's agricultural diversity declined by 75 to 90 percent.¹ Meanwhile, genetically modified crops like corn and soy—which are largely channeled into feedstock for the world's rising meat consumption, fuel additives, and junk food ingredients—have exploded.² Monocultures deplete natural soil fertility, replacing it with costly and often toxic chemical fertilizers, while causing soil erosion that leaves the land vulnerable to the effects of climate change and undermines future food production.³

At the same time, the increasing amounts of fertilizers and pesticides needed to maintain the productivity of industrial systems are linked to numerous problems such as the decline in pollinators⁴ and the spread of “dead zones” in marine ecosystems.⁵ Farmworkers, rural communities, and low-income communities of color disproportionately suffer from the environmental impacts of industrial agriculture.⁶ For example, intensive livestock operations known as confined animal feeding operations or CAFOs are responsible for widespread groundwater and air pollution. Nearby communities and workers are at high risk of respiratory diseases like asthma and chronic bronchitis—with rates as high as 30 percent for factory farm workers—from exposure to CAFO emissions.⁷ Fertilizer and manure runoff cause nitrate contamination in drinking water, leading to skin rashes, hair loss, birth defects, and “blue baby syndrome.”⁸

Over a two-year period, Oakland Unified School District reduced its environmental impact while remaining cost effective, including:

- Reducing its purchases of animal products by nearly 30 percent while increasing purchases of organic and humanely-raised meat
- Reducing the carbon footprint of its entire food service by 14 percent at no additional cost
- Reducing its water use footprint by 7 gallons per meal or a total of 42 million gallons of water per year
- Increasing purchases of fruits, vegetables, and legumes by approximately 10 percent and serving reduced meat or plant-based meals that meet or exceed USDA requirements⁹

OVERVIEW, CONT.

Food production is also a key contributor to global climate change. Food system activities, including producing, transporting, and disposing of food, generate up to 30 percent of total global greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁰ Of these sources, livestock production is the largest, accounting for an estimated 14.5 percent of global emissions from human activities, even more than the transportation sector.¹¹ The scientific evidence indicates that significant reductions in meat and dairy consumption and the amount of food that is wasted, alongside reductions in emissions from other sectors, are crucial for avoiding the most catastrophic climate change scenarios.¹²

Farmers across the country are using organic and agroecological methods like cover cropping, crop rotation, integrated pest management, and crop-livestock integration—practices that work with nature instead of against it.¹³ Motivated by environmental, social justice, and health concerns, US consumers are also increasingly demanding food that is sustainably produced. The purchasing power of institutions represents an important tool for providing markets for sustainable food producers and thus accelerating the adoption of environmentally-sustainable farming, ranching, and business practices.



The Center for Good Food Purchasing's Good Food Purchasing Program provides a metric-based, flexible framework that encourages large institutions to direct their buying power toward five core values: (1) local economies, (2) environmental sustainability, (3) valued workforce, (4) animal welfare, and (5) nutrition. Through the Program, the Center works with institutions to establish supply chain transparency from farm to fork, evaluate how current purchasing practices align with the Good Food Purchasing Standards, set goals, measure progress, and celebrate successes in using institutional purchasing power to improve the food system.

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