Re: White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

The Berkeley Food Institute (BFI) seeks to transform food systems to expand access to healthy, affordable food and to promote sustainable and equitable food production. We empower new leaders with capacities to cultivate diverse, just, resilient, and healthy food systems. BFI addresses many of the impediments to systemic change in food systems by creating productive connections between researchers and practitioners, farmers and producers, NGOs, governments, and civil society. Founded in 2014, BFI is located on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley and is led by Executive Director, Nina. F. Ichikawa, and a staff of full-time, part-time, contract, and student employees. BFI has four key areas that guide our research and programmatic endeavors: Agroecology, Fair and Healthy Jobs, Good Food Access, and Racial Equity.

**Good food access** reflects a condition and reality where all people have access to food that they can afford and reflect their nutritional needs. We see good access as an outcome of food sovereignty and as a reflection of the political will to invest in public programs that ensure individuals and families can access food when resources are limited.
Our commitment to **fair and healthy jobs** is rooted in the belief and possibility that those who labor to produce the food we eat should be treated with respect, paid fairly, and work in conditions that are safe and dignified. This not only upholds the well-being of workers, but also makes our food system healthier and safer and increases the quality of the food produced and made available to the public.

**Agroecology** is the integration of ecology in agriculture and agri-food systems with attention to environmental, social, and economic dimensions that impact agriculture. We focus both on urban and rural agro-ecological food systems.

Lastly, BFI’s commitment to **Racial Equity** is captured through our commitment to make the food system one where people of color are also owners, producers, planners, and decision-makers in all the aforementioned areas. Agri-food systems are stronger when racial inequities are both acknowledged and resolved through intentional efforts to create space, opportunities, and autonomy across the food system.

BFI is thrilled that the Biden-Harris Administration and the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) are committed to addressing hunger, nutrition, and health through this White House conference. The invitation to stakeholders to provide comments on these matters is a golden opportunity to think holistically about these challenges, and a food-systems framework does just that. In doing so, we can address the root causes of hunger and diet-related diseases by prioritizing the people most impacted by hunger and food insecurity, the stewards of land who produce the food we eat, the researchers who advance understanding and knowledge in this space, and those who labor in our food system. BFI’s four key pillars and our corresponding comments are below.

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Summary of Comments

1. Good Food Access
   a. Keep as many pandemic-era feeding programs as possible.
   b. The National School Breakfast and School Lunch Programs must be universally accessible.
   c. Food sovereignty is a pathway to ending hunger in Native American communities and must be prioritized.

2. Fair and Healthy Jobs
   a. The federal minimum wage must be raised to ensure that people who work can afford to buy food.
   b. Additional financial resources must be invested to support local restaurants and food retailers that helped to keep vulnerable communities fed during the pandemic.

3. Urban and Rural Agroecology
   a. Urban agriculture must be invested in as a conduit for increasing food access and as a medium for increased physical activity in public spaces.
   b. Investments must be made into research that can provide practical insights on the interconnectedness of food production, soil health, land use, and water.

4. Racial Equity in the Food System
   a. Hunger and food insecurity, especially in rural areas, must also be understood in the context of injustices experienced by Black farmers and producers in the United States.
Full Comments

1)  **Good Food Access**

a.  **Keep as many pandemic-era feeding program changes as possible.**

The USDA Food and Nutrition service made unprecedented efforts to make SNAP more accessible during the Covid-19 pandemic. This included the creation of Pandemic-EBT, a minimum 15% increase in benefits levels, investments in online purchasing, and efforts to decrease administrative burdens on SNAP participants and eligibility workers.¹ These are changes that anti-hunger advocates and organizations have pushed for more than a decade. The Biden-Harris Administration should work with Congress to make many of these changes permanent, beyond the September 30th expiration date set for many of these changes and waivers.

California, and other states, also served as policy labs for innovative pandemic-era feeding programs, like the Great Plates Delivered Program.² The program sought to provide three restaurant-prepared meals a day to isolated seniors who were not enrolled in other food assistance programs. The program also sought to provide a lifeline to local restaurants and food workers that prepared the meals, and to combat isolation among participants. Our impact assessment of the program found that it provided nourishing, culturally appropriate meals to over 55,000 seniors and supported women-, minority- and immigrant-owned restaurants at the height of the pandemic. Furthermore, over 8,000 workers remained employed in food service jobs as a result of this program.³ We believe the Biden-Harris Administration should consider supporting similar programs at a national scale to support seniors struggling with hunger, isolation, and lack of quality, prepared meals.

b.  **The National School Breakfast and School Lunch Programs must be universally accessible.**

Universal school meals are key to ensuring that all children enrolled in school have access to at least two nutritious and plentiful meals. The participation benefits of the National School Breakfast and School Lunch Programs are well documented, especially related to academic performance for school-aged children.⁴ Our research with the Oakland Unified School District revealed that offering freshly prepared meals can improve participation in these programs, and positively influence parental perception of meal quality.⁵ Our reporting also dived into the importance of wellness curricula, vendor procurement opportunities, effective waste management, and more.⁶ In the upcoming 2022-23 academic year, California will be the first

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³[https://food.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GREAT-PLATES_WEB_FINAL.pdf](https://food.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GREAT-PLATES_WEB_FINAL.pdf)
⁵[https://food.berkeley.edu/programs/research/seed-grants/rethinking-school-lunch-oakland/](https://food.berkeley.edu/programs/research/seed-grants/rethinking-school-lunch-oakland/)
state to offer universal school meals for all school children. This has greatly reduced the administrative burden on districts, vendors and families and most importantly, has fed millions of children through uncertain times. We believe that the Biden-Harris Administration, in partnership with the USDA and Congress, could make this a reality in all states.

c. **Food sovereignty is a pathway to ending hunger in Native American communities and must be prioritized.**

The US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Indian Affairs (BIA) describes food sovereignty as the “ability of communities to determine the quantity and quality of food that they consume by controlling how their food is produced and distributed”. This is also a pathway to decreasing hunger and food insecurity on tribal lands and is an opportunity to enhance foodways that are culturally specific and developed within indigenous communities and their agricultural and food procurement practices. Support in this area must include continued investments in research and building institutional and technical capacity - with groups like the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative (IFAI) and the Native American Agriculture Fund (NAAF). There must also be continued acknowledgement of redress that is due to native people.

There must also be a commitment to integrating food sovereignty principles into existing federally funded programs, like the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). A 2018 study from UC Berkeley looked at ways to integrate traditional and local foods into this commodity program, which was driven largely by a desire for culturally relevant and healthier foods from people receiving this benefit. This is a great opportunity to think outside the box and scale up learnings from the growing movement for indigenous food sovereignty to improve food access for all Americans.

2) **Fair and Healthy Jobs**

a. **The federal minimum wage must be raised to ensure that people who work can afford to buy food.**

The stagnant federal minimum wage is a hunger issue when people earning minimum wage struggle to afford food. Stop-gap measures like SNAP and WIC are crucial to ensuring that families, especially with young children, get adequate food support but many would not need to participate in these programs if they had higher wages. The Biden-Harris Administration should use the power of the office to remind Congress of this reality and work together to raise the minimum wage across the United States. Otherwise, our federal feeding programs serve as a convoluted wage subsidy for those who live in a state or work for an employer where wages are not sufficient to meet basic needs.

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7. [https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/univmealsqandapart2.asp#:~:text=Beginning%20in%20School%20Year%20]


9. [https://indigenousfoodandag.com/]

10. [https://nativeamericanagriculturefund.org/]

Raising the minimum wage would be especially impactful for restaurant workers, grocery store workers, and farm laborers, whose risk of exposure to Covid-19 was high, relative to people who could afford to work from home. Months into the pandemic, a UC San Francisco research study revealed that restaurant line cooks had a 22% increased risk of mortality from contracting this coronavirus, along with a 56% increased risk for Latino food and agricultural workers. This trend was, and still is, alarming and we attempted to highlight these issues through a virtual event featuring the PBS Frontline Documentary “COVID’s Hidden Toll” and the publication of a policy brief on the impact of the pandemic on gig food delivery workers. Living wages make food access possible, as well as the time to procure and prepare food, not to mention enjoy it with family and friends. On the other hand, without a living wage, our government feeding programs will continue to unfairly subsidize employers whose business models do not allow people to earn a wage that lifts them and their family out of poverty. A level playing field for all businesses and workers would be an increase in the federal minimum wage.

b. Additional financial resources must be invested to support local restaurants and food retailers that helped to keep vulnerable communities fed during the pandemic.

Restaurants, especially those that served free or reduced-price meals to vulnerable residents across the country, were a lifeline for many during the Covid-19 pandemic. In California, this was best captured through the state- and locally-funded Great Plates Delivered Program. Individual, nonprofit and philanthropic groups also emerged to ensure that people could eat during and after the initial lock-down period of the pandemic. Some restaurants have also opted to make free-meals a part of their business model, while also prioritizing worker safety and liveable wages. The Food Research and Labor Center (FRLC) at UC Berkeley and One Fair Wage (OFW) identified that nearly $73 billion in restaurant relief was provided to owners through both Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) Loans and the Restaurant Revitalization Program, which is managed by the Small Business Administration (SBA), reaching nearly 62,000 restaurants. This allowed owners to keep their employees and maintain their operations. In some instances, owners even raised wages but many have not raised wages beyond the federal tipped minimum wage, which is $2.13. The Biden-Harris Administration must work with Congress to continue investing in this effort while also ensuring that administrative challenges are resolved and that wages are raised in the process.

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12 https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2021.01.21.21250266v1.full#T3  
13 https://food.berkeley.edu/events/covids-hidden-toll-discussion-with-filmmakers-policy-leaders/  
17 https://onefairwage.site/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/OFW_NeedReliefAndRaises.pdf  
19 https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/state/minimum-wage/tipped  
3) Urban and Rural Agroecology

a. Urban agriculture must be invested in as a conduit for increasing food access and as a medium for increased physical activity in public spaces.

The USDA refers to urban agriculture as the cultivation, processing, and distribution of agricultural products in urban and suburban settings, including things like rooftop and community garden spaces.\(^{21}\) At BFI, we view urban agriculture as an opportunity that allows communities to produce fresh, healthy food while offering green space, ecological benefits, and tangible health improvements to entire communities.\(^{22}\) Tending to, working in, and harvesting food from community gardens and urban agricultural spaces, like urban farms, is a sure way of getting in physical activity, for both children and adults. Options for physical activity can be limited depending on how the built environment is made. Prioritizing green space, which can include urban agricultural spaces, ensures that physical activity can be accessed by entire communities. The value of these spaces increased exponentially during the Covid-19 pandemic because for many, outside spaces were safe and accessible.\(^{23}\) The Biden-Harris Administration must continue to work with Congress to provide pathways for states to create more green space that enhances access to food and physical activity.

b. Investments must be made into research that can provide practical insights on the interconnectedness of food production, soil health, land use, and water.

As we collectively undertake the task of ending hunger and increasing food security, we must also understand that the food we eat is produced in environments that are impacted by climate change and a warming planet. Investing in this type of research will help us better understand how everyone’s futures can be more food secure and adaptable. Researchers at UC Berkeley, and across the UC system, are deeply invested in understanding healthy soil practices and other agro-ecological topics that help to ensure that food can continue to be grown in sustainable ways.\(^{24}\) How water and land are stewarded will also determine the future of how we eat, and how some will struggle to. The Biden-Harris Administration must work with Congress to ensure that sufficient investments are made into research that will help us plan and strategize for how food will continue to be produced in the face of climate change and the crises that can emerge from this. The USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) leads this work at a national level and enables institutions, like UC Berkeley, to continue this research.\(^{25}\)

4) Racial Equity in the Food System

a) Hunger and food insecurity, especially in rural areas, must also be understood in the context of injustices experienced by Black farmers and producers in the United States.

\(^{21}\)https://www.nal.usda.gov/legacy/afsic/urban-agriculture
\(^{22}\)https://food.berkeley.edu/priorities/agroecology/urban-agriculture/
\(^{24}\)https://food.berkeley.edu/food-policy-news/policy-brief-connecting-soil-health-and-water-in-california/
\(^{25}\)https://www.nifa.usda.gov/
Black American farmers and producers in the United States have faced steep challenges holding onto their land, accessing farm credits and loans from the federal government, and competing for market access. The Biden-Harris Administration is committed to fighting racial inequality, as evidenced by Executive Order 13985, which seeks to advance racial equity and support for underserved communities across the federal government.\(^2\) This is increasingly important as new research reveals that an increase in reporting on racial disparities from Covid-19 can generate apathy and reduced support for safety precautions among White U.S. residents.\(^2\)

While the Biden-Harris Administration has acknowledged that racial equity and climate change are important, farms owned and operated by African Americans - which comprise less than 2% of all farms in the United States - are the bedrock of where these issues converge. It was encouraging for Black Farmers to receive support through the American Rescue Plan, but more must be done to remediate the historic losses in these communities. BFI held a virtual event in Fall 2021 titled, “Justice for Black Farmers: A Conversation to Uproot Racist Policy and Plant Seeds of Redress”, in partnership with Black Belt Justice Center and many others.\(^2\) Black farmers have always prioritized the well-being of their communities, especially as it relates to feeding people and maintaining their livelihoods, often in disinvested areas of the country. The Biden-Harris Administration must work with Congress to make sure that Black farmers are made whole from the injustices they’ve faced so that they can continue to supply fresh and farm-raised goods to their communities, and/or compete for market access on par with their White farmer counterparts.

\(^2\)https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S027795362200257X#