



## MEMO

**TO:** INTERESTED PARTIES

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**RE:** Considerations for the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

### SOWING THE SEEDS FOR A HEALTHY FUTURE

The White House's September Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health is an important moment to galvanize efforts to reduce hunger, malnutrition, and diet-related diseases in America. But to make lasting progress on these fronts, comprehensive food and agricultural system transformation is required. The bottom line is that we cannot have healthy people without healthy farming, and healthy farming requires a healthy planet. We reap what we sow.

We must seize the opportunity to transform the U.S. food and agricultural system to address hunger, nutrition, and disease. Doing so will not only help our nation become healthier, but it will also unlock solutions to other interconnected and critical challenges of our time like curbing climate change, restoring biodiversity, advancing racial equity, improving local and regional food systems, and strengthening farm, ranch, and rural economies.

Making meaningful strides toward building a healthier future for people and the planet requires an all-hands-on-deck approach that capitalizes on the promise and ingenuity of American agriculture. Building a more sustainable, resilient food and agricultural system that fosters healthy, thriving communities is within our grasp—so long as we work across sectors and commit to aligning behind shared priorities and policies that can get us there.

### PRIORITIZING FOOD PRODUCTION AND AGRICULTURE

The White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health marks a historic opportunity to convene stakeholders working toward ending hunger, improving nutrition, increasing physical activity, and reducing diet-related diseases in the United States. We applaud the administration for elevating these timely and important issues.

More than [1 million](#) Americans die from diet-related diseases each year, and an estimated [38 million](#) individuals were living in food insecure households in 2020. While the conference focuses on several key priorities—improving food access and affordability, integrating nutrition and health, investing in consumer empowerment, increasing physical activity, and expanding research for enhanced nutrition and food security—**there is an urgent need and a unique opportunity to ensure that we produce food in a way that supports the health of people and the planet upon which we depend.**

While we understand that no one conference or initiative can be all things to all people, any effort to end hunger and improve nutrition must also consider how America produces, distributes, and makes use of its food; the people who produce it; and the ecosystems and natural resources that food production depends on.

To make meaningful strides toward building a healthier future for all, we need a whole-of-society, cross-sector approach that puts America's food and agricultural system at the heart of any discussion. Why? Because the health of the American people is inextricably linked to the health of our food supply, and all that goes into securing it. Right now, our food system is facing multiple threats that are putting our collective health at risk. The loss and degradation of soil health, freshwater resources, and biodiversity—along with extreme weather events like droughts and floods—threaten our food supply. And the fragility of our supply chains and workforces, made even more vulnerable during COVID-19 and further tested by ongoing global conflicts, are a stark reminder of how quickly food access can be jeopardized.

Leveraging the power of America's food and agricultural system to seek solutions for addressing these threats will ensure America is more resilient and healthier for generations to come. To do that, a coordinated strategy that brings together government, private, and civil society actors from across sectors—including agriculture—is required.

### ESSENTIAL PRIORITIES FOR THE PATH FORWARD

The last White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health in 1969 profoundly shaped the direction of the country's food policy agenda over the last 50 years. The conference led to [1,800 policy recommendations](#) resulting in outcomes like the expansion of food stamps (now called Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP) benefits; the establishment of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the National School Lunch Program; and more.

**We hope this year's conference will kickstart a more comprehensive effort to transform the U.S. food and agricultural system to advance human and planetary health for the long term.**

The link between human health, food systems, and environmental health is clear. We cannot have healthy people without healthy farming, and we cannot have healthy farming without a [healthy planet](#), which must include conservation of both climate and nature. The U.S. food and agricultural system is one of the most powerful in the world, but how it's been built over time has come at the cost of our collective health.

The agricultural sector produces more than [11%](#) of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions and contributes to the [rapid loss](#) of biodiversity and ecosystem function. Conventional food production practices, encouraged by long-standing policies, have resulted in soil being lost [faster](#) than it can naturally be replenished. Some experts believe that [90%](#) of Earth's soil could be threatened over the next 30 years. The agricultural sector is the [primary consumer](#) of freshwater resources. As climate change accelerates and worsens droughts, agricultural water use is increasingly put in direct competition with drinking water and other basic household uses in many communities. Taken together, challenges like these threaten the viability of our natural ecosystems, the well-being of rural communities, and the strength of our long-term food supply, as well as human health. In fact, as the impacts of climate change worsen and the degradation of natural ecosystems continues, poor human health outcomes are likely to [compound](#).

Many farmers, ranchers, agricultural companies, and others who are central to the U.S. food system are stepping up to address these challenges, yet we must do far more to equip and support them to get the job done. We acknowledge that U.S. policies and programs have supported one of the most efficient and productive food and agricultural sectors in the world, while recognizing the urgent need to improve nutrition and reduce hunger, and simultaneously addressing climate and conservation in the process.

Any effort to end hunger and improve nutrition must recognize the vital role the U.S. food and agricultural system can and must play in achieving optimal health outcomes. If we build more diversity into America's food and agricultural system—from the variety of crops we grow to the markets and supply chains that bring it to the table, to the farmers, ranchers, and workers who make it all possible—the country will be healthier and stronger. It will bring us closer to the White House's goals and help mitigate against other growing risks to our climate, economy, and the natural world.

We see the following priorities as necessary to bring a more sustainable and resilient American food and agricultural system to life:

- 1 **Align agricultural policies to support the production and consumption of healthier foods.** If designed thoughtfully, food and agricultural policies and programs can encourage the production of more diversified crops on more diversified farms, including integrated crop-livestock operations, to help bring more affordable, nutritious food options to the table. Public support of agriculture influences the decisions farmers make about what crops to grow and livestock to raise, and the availability of certain commodities affect the pricing and availability of different foods. Right now, too many Americans consume too many highly processed foods and excessive quantities of meat. That's in part because current policies shaping agricultural subsidies and insurance programs support the production of large quantities of a small number of crops, including corn and soy, while simultaneously acting as a barrier to the adoption of more diversified systems and inadvertently subsidizing environmentally damaging industrial livestock production.

Demand-side interventions will be necessary to begin to change market conditions and consumer preferences that can lead to better dietary outcomes. However, it is just as important that the policies and tax dollars that support the U.S. agricultural system encourage the broad adoption of practices that positively benefit people and the ecosystems we depend on. A key component of making the transition toward a more resilient food system will be encouraging diversification, reducing food loss and waste, and implementing [true cost accounting](#), which is a powerful tool for evaluating policy and resource allocation options. Basing agricultural policies and investments on a fulsome account of their impacts on the economic opportunity of rural communities, the environment, animal welfare, and public health is a critical way to achieve a more sustainable food system.

- 2 **Support and incentivize farmers and ranchers to implement sustainable, resilient agricultural practices.** Farmers and ranchers take their role as providers and stewards of the land seriously. But as extreme weather worsens and rising costs burden their operations, producers need more support—including better tools in the toolbox. Implementing interventions that keep producers in business while also mitigating their greenhouse gas emissions, building resilience to the effects of climate change, and protecting natural ecosystems are essential. Agricultural conservation practices and more diversified farming systems can, with the right investments and incentives, boost productivity, lower costs, restore soil health, protect natural lands and waters, and increase resilience over time. That will not only strengthen the long-term viability of the food supply but also strengthen producer profitability. This is important for myriad reasons, most notably the impacts of a changing climate on production.

To help farmers and ranchers transition to sustainable, nature-positive practices, there is a need for more investment in conservation programs, better on-the-ground technical assistance, and a renewed commitment to public food and agriculture research. Sustainable practices like cover cropping, resource-conserving crop rotations, carbon-rich soil amendments like biochar and compost, agroforestry, and managed rotational grazing can strengthen biodiversity, improve soil health, reduce carbon emissions, reduce waste, and protect the planet's resources in mutually beneficial ways. It is also important to ensure the right support and incentives are in place to limit grassland and prairie [conversion](#) for the expansion of new agricultural acres that accelerate climate change and threaten natural ecosystems. Instead of converting new acres for agricultural use, a focus should be put on making current agricultural land more productive and ensuring that our best acres remain in agriculture. Promoting sustainable agricultural practices can help make that possible and contribute to healthier people, communities, and the planet.

- 3 Integrate a social and racial justice lens in food and farm policies to create equitable outcomes across the U.S. food system.** The White House has demonstrated real leadership by prioritizing the need for equitable solutions in its approach to ending hunger and improving nutrition, and that should extend to food production and labor too. Farmers and ranchers of color have been disenfranchised and pushed out for generations. For example, discriminatory loan servicing and lack of access to legal services led to the dispossession of **98%** of Black-owned agricultural land throughout the 20th century. Since the end of slavery and the establishment of the USDA in the 1860s, Black farmers and ranchers have been subject to **unequal** access to government funding, assistance, and land, which persists today. Farmworkers who are disproportionately immigrants and people of color have also long been denied basic labor rights and protections.

If we are to transform the U.S. food and agriculture system, it's critical that we integrate equity throughout our approach to ensure that the farmers, ranchers, and food and farm workers who have been or are being excluded and disadvantaged are given access to capital, support, and workplace protections that can help them thrive. That includes ensuring food sovereignty—especially for Indigenous communities—to support the restoration of their relationship with the land, water, and foods that are a part of their cultural heritage and identity. If a more diverse set of producers and laborers are empowered, they can be a part of bringing healthier and more nutritious food to the table—especially to communities that for too long have gone without.

- 4 Create the conditions for more diversified market systems to strengthen and expand healthy food access.** The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how reliant the nation's food and agricultural system is on a small number of highly consolidated supply chains and under-scored the drastic impact that disruptions can have on food security for millions of families. In most cases, food travels a long way from field to fork and producers reap small margins on the food they grow. There is an imperative to invest in more regional and local food chains that can complement national and global networks—an important priority to ensure that all communities have reliable access to healthy and affordable foods in a way that also benefits producers.

Diversifying agricultural supply chains and re-instituting fair and competitive markets will also take on added importance in the face of climate change and increasingly extreme weather events that threaten yields. More people in more places—especially often overlooked communities—must be empowered to produce, process, and deliver healthier foods. This can build resilience to future supply chain disruptions, increase farm income, improve food security, and ultimately help solve America's hunger and nutrition crisis.

## WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

Achieving the White House's **goal** to “end hunger and increase healthy eating and physical activity by 2030 so that fewer Americans experience diet-related diseases like diabetes, obesity, and hypertension” will take a cross-sector, whole-of-society approach. Building a more sustainable, resilient, and diverse U.S. food and agricultural system through comprehensive, transformative change should be central to that effort. It's a monumental task, but one that America is more than capable of achieving so long as we work together and account for all of the inputs responsible for how we got here.

The right blend of policies can help us confront the greatest challenges of our time—not only hunger and nutrition, but also accelerating climate change, dwindling ecosystems, and struggling farm, ranch, and rural economies. The White House conference should kick off bigger, broader conversations about our food and agricultural system's impact on human and planetary health. And as we head toward the 2023 Farm Bill and other future policy debates, we must ensure those conversations turn into tangible policy outcomes so we can transform our food and agricultural system for good.