Food System Dashboard

Fair: Good Food Purchasing Program

CASE STUDY: Equitable from The Outset: Improving Labor Standards Through Institutional Purchasing Policies

650,000 is a lot of mouths to feed. Managing to feed 650,000 mouths five days a week, nine months of the year is a monumental task. And yet the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has been feeding its school children lunch for decades, amounting to $50 million in food purchasing in 2013. That amount of money has the ability to influence industry, or so Paula Daniels saw it. If she, through partnerships and her work at the Los Angeles Food Policy Council, could raise the standards required by LAUSD’s Food Services Division, it could trigger a shift towards Good Food Values in our food systems.

The Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP) focuses on five value categories: environmental sustainability, supporting diverse local food operations, animal welfare, nutritious menu planning, and fair conditions and wages for all food chain workers. This last Good Food Value seeks to provide healthy and safe working conditions for the employees of local food and agricultural industries.

In California, the annual mean wage of a farmworker or laborer was just $26,400 in 2018, and benefits like health insurance and sick and vacation leave are uncommon. For a family of four, this is well below the 185% of the federal poverty line (at $45,510), meaning that their children qualify for free or reduced meals through the National School Lunch Program. This is just one way that the working conditions for these farm workers impacts their families and communities.

The ten counties in the Los Angeles Foodshed continue to be amongst California’s top producers, and agricultural growth in the United States continues to outpace the rest of the economy. This demand growth, along with nearly full employment in the U.S., and a multitude of changes to immigration policies, have led to a shortage in workers. In this current environment, leveraging GFPP, through the purchasing power of public institutions in Southern California, has a unique and authoritative opportunity to bring change to wages and working conditions for local farm workers.

When an institution signs on to the Good Food Purchasing Pledge, they have met the baseline standards in all five value categories. They are monitored on an annual basis, and progress is measured. Since adopting the Good Food Purchasing Policy, over 220 jobs have been created in the LAUSD supply chain, with 20% of annual purchasing coming from local producers, and 12% from high-road employers. These high-road employers have – or are seeking – certification from the Equitable Food Initiative or the Agricultural Justice Project. This is just one case of how adoption of all the Good Food Values impacts the working conditions of local workers. Utilizing environmentally sustainable practices by decreasing pesticide use and minimizing antibiotics for farm animals improves the public health of the local communities that farm workers reside in. These examples illustrate how closely tied farm workers, producers, purchasers, and consumers are, and how higher standards benefit us all.
The Center for Good Food Purchasing continues to scale up, and LA County is progressing toward being the largest county in the nation to adopt the Good Food Purchasing Policy. Expanding GFPP to LA County would impact over 37 million meals a day. In August 2018, the Good Food Purchasing Policy Working Group hosted over 400 parents and students at Mayberry Park in Whittier, CA to expand awareness of LA County’s Summer Lunch Program and engage community residents in a campaign to expand GFPP in LA County. In March 2019, the Board of Supervisors voted to pilot the Good Food Purchasing Program through the Summer Lunch Program, which serves over 200,000 youth in County parks during the summer months. A full assessment and report back to the Board of Supervisors is expected fall 2019. If adopted by all 11 food service departments in LA County, GFPP could: (1) save LA County close to $630,000 in annual health care expenses through improved nutrition standards; (2) reduce carbon emissions by 4 million kg annually—equivalent to taking 870 cars off the road through sustainable food strategies; (3) reduce water use by 520 million gallons a year, enough water to fill 790 Olympic-sized swimming pools, through plant-based menus; and (4) redirect up to $13 million annually into the local economy through local purchases.