

THE HILL

Thousands call on Olive Garden to improve food, labor policies



Courtesy Friends of the Earth

By Lydia Wheeler
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Environmental groups are calling on Olive Garden to improve the national restaurant chain's food-sourcing and labor practices.

More than 130,000 people signed a petition generated by the Good Food Now campaign — a partnership of Friends of the Earth,

Restaurant Opportunities Center United, the Food Chain Workers Alliance, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Green America and the Animal Welfare Institute.

The petition will be hand-delivered to Olive Garden restaurants in New York City, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston and San Francisco on Thursday.

The petition specifically calls on the chain's parent company, Darden Restaurants Inc., to reduce meat and dairy purchases by 20 percent; source meat from producers that adhere to verifiable, higher-than-industry animal-welfare standards and do not administer routine antibiotics; improve worker wages; and increase local and organic options.

"While Olive Garden claims to be sourcing its food responsibly, serving meat and dairy produced in polluting factory farms with routine antibiotics is anything but responsible," Kari Hamerschlag, deputy director of Friends of the Earth's Food and Technology program, said in a statement. "To stay competitive, Olive Garden must give food-conscious families what they want: healthier, local and organic options -- including more plant-based entrees and more humane meat raised without routine antibiotics."

Good Food Now said the company has already agreed to phase out battery cages for egg-laying hens by 2018 and gestation crates that severely restrict the movement of pregnant pigs by 2025 from its supply chain.

Environmental and animal welfare groups, however, said Olive Garden still has a long way to go.

Darden's Spokesman Rich Jeffers told The Hill Olive Garden listens to the preferences of its guests and will continue to evolve to address their needs. He said the company has already committed to switching to cage-free eggs by 2018 and cage-free pork by 2025.

"We talk to 300,000 guests a month, 4 million guests a year, we will continue to evolve and evolve at a pace that's right for our business not at the demands of an organization that closely aligned with the Restaurant Opportunities Center-United."

Jeffers said the group has waged a disparaging campaign against the restaurant.

"We're not going to deal with people who do business through intimidation and harassment,"