



March 12, 2021

Chairman Patrick O'Donnell  
State Capitol  
P.O. Box 942849  
Room 4001  
Sacramento, CA 94249-0070

Dear Chairman O'Donnell,

On behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity and our 1.7 million members and supporters, we ask the Education Committee for the California State Assembly to support AB 558 and help our state improve access to healthy, sustainable food for California schools and curb food emissions to meet climate goals.

Food emissions (production, transport, and disposal) account for nearly 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to meet climate mitigation targets without adjusting food policies. In fact, leading studies found that we cannot meet our global greenhouse gas reduction targets without cutting consumption-based emissions associated with meat and dairy intensive diets.<sup>2</sup> California should adopt policies to make low-carbon food widely accessible to our local and regional communities.

The state serves 540 million school meals annually and this comes with a substantial environmental footprint. For example, meat and dairy production are responsible for more than half of all food-related emissions.<sup>3</sup> Sustainable food policy centered around plant-based foods would help reduce overall state emissions. By incentivizing plant-based school meals, AB 558 increases student access to healthy food and helps California reduce food-related greenhouse gas emissions.

Meat and dairy products are resource-intensive foods, requiring large quantities of land, water, and other energy-intensive inputs. Annual U.S. beef production alone generates 337 billion pounds of greenhouse gases,<sup>4</sup> 489 billion pounds of manure,<sup>5</sup> requires 682 million acres of land,<sup>6</sup> and uses 21.2

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<sup>1</sup> Ritchie, H. (2019). Food production is responsible for one quarter of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. OUR WORLD IN DATA. Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/food-ghg-emissions>.

<sup>2</sup> Waite, R. and Vennard, D. (2018). Without changing diets, agriculture alone could produce enough emissions to surpass 1.5 degrees c. pf global warming. WORLD RESOURCES INSTITUTE. Retrieved from: <https://www.wri.org/blog/2018/10/we-cant-limit-global-warming-15c-without-changing-diets>.

<sup>3</sup> See also: <https://ccafs.cgiar.org/bigfacts/#theme=food-emissions>.

<sup>4</sup> Take extinction off your plate: A project of the Center for Biological Diversity. Hamburger v. Wildlife: The Environmental Cost of Beef. BiologicalDiversity.org. Retrieved from: [https://www.takeextinctionoffyourplate.com/extinction\\_facts/pdfs/BurgerFactsheet.pdf](https://www.takeextinctionoffyourplate.com/extinction_facts/pdfs/BurgerFactsheet.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Hamerschlag, K. (2011). EWG Meat Eater's Guide to Climate Change and Health. ENVIRONMENTAL WORKING GROUP. Retrieved from: <https://www.ewg.org/meateatersguide/>

<sup>6</sup> United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service. CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE 2012 (Table 8). Retrieved from: <https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2012/>.



trillion gallons of water.<sup>789</sup> Livestock production is one of the leading contributors to environmental impacts like polluted waterways, soil desertification, endangered species threats, loss of biodiversity and climate change.

Plant-based foods typically use fewer resources and generate fewer emissions. Veggie burgers, in comparison to processed beef burgers, for example, produce up to 90% fewer greenhouse gas emissions, reduce land use by 93% to 96% and water use by 87% to 99% and generate no manure pollution.<sup>1011</sup>

Access to healthy, sustainable food will better serve the nutrition needs of schoolchildren. According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, children are not eating enough vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, and other plant-based foods.<sup>12</sup> Despite science-driven recommendations for access to healthy, sustainable food for growing children, recent analysis shows California school menus still serve the same tired menus that focus far too heavily on cheeseburgers, meat pizzas, chicken nuggets and hot dogs.<sup>13</sup> These foods are out of alignment with leading public health guidance to serve children less processed food, particularly meat. In fact, the World Health Organization considers red and processed meat carcinogenic.<sup>14</sup> Only 4% of California school entrees are currently plant-based. California children deserve better access to healthy, sustainable food.

Improving access to healthy, sustainable food is critical to addressing equity and racial health disparities, especially among low-income children, who are disproportionately Black and Latinx. For these children, school meals are their primary source of nutrition – sometimes their only meal of the day. At the same time, in California, nearly 20% of Black and Latinx adolescents experience obesity, at a rate three times higher than their white classmates.<sup>15</sup> School lunch is a crucial point of intervention to mitigate the racial health disparities in access to healthy food.

It is also important that schools offer plant-based entrée and non-dairy milk options for students who cannot process lactose. The National Institutes of Health estimates 60-80% of African Americans and

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<sup>7</sup> Molitor, J. (2017). Habitat-fed food: grass-fed beef and sustainable solutions. *BIODIVERSITY* 18(2-3), 78-81. Retrieved from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14888386.2017.1359668>.

<sup>8</sup> Mekonnen, M.M. and Hoekstra, A.Y. (2012). A global assessment of the water footprint of farm animal products. *ECOSYSTEMS*, 15(3), pp.401-415. Retrieved from: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10021-011-9517-8>.

<sup>9</sup> United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). (2016). USDA Agricultural Projections to 2028. Table 17, p 43. Retrieved from: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/92600/oce-2019-1.pdf?v=3630.9>.

<sup>10</sup> Good Food Institute (GFI). (2009). Plant-Based Meats for a Growing World. Retrieved from: <https://www.gfi.org/files/pb-meat-sustainability.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Heller, M.C. and Keoleian, G.A., (2018). Beyond Meat's Beyond Burger Life Cycle Assessment: A detailed comparison between a plant-based and an animal-based protein source. UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN. Retrieved from: <http://css.umich.edu/sites/default/files/publication/CSS18-10.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Dietary Guidelines for Americans (2020-2025). Make every bite count with U.S. dietary guidelines. USDA. U.S. DIETARY GUIDELINES. Retrieved from: [https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/Dietary\\_Guidelines\\_for\\_Americans\\_2020-2025.pdf](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/Dietary_Guidelines_for_Americans_2020-2025.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Kraus-Polk, J. and Hamerschlag, K. (2021). The state of school lunch in California. Opportunities for improving the health and environmental profile of school food. FRIENDS OF THE EARTH.

<sup>14</sup> Harvard School of Public Health. (2015). WHO report says eating meat is carcinogenic. Understanding the findings. *The Nutrition Source*. HARVARD. Retrieved from: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/2015/11/03/report-says-eating-processed-meat-is-carcinogenic-understanding-the-findings/>.

<sup>15</sup> Babey, S. et al. (2010). Income disparities in obesity trends among adolescents. *American Journal of Public Health* 100 (11). Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2951974/>.



50-80% of Latinx people cannot process lactose. As California's schools serve a diverse population, they must ensure every student has access to culturally and nutritionally appropriate meals.

Plant-based foods and non-dairy milk are optimal for the environment, child nutrition and equity, yet school districts face financial barriers to improving menus since animal-based foods are prioritized with heavy federal subsidies. Providing additional reimbursement for healthy, sustainable plant-based foods will help schools across the state ensure more school children have access to better food.

This bill, AB 558, presents a hat-trick of accomplishments for California to improve public health, protect the environment, and increase the quality of student meals. We respectfully urge your support.

Thank you for your consideration,

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