10 Executive Actions For A Secure Food System

How to Achieve the Priorities of the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health

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The Biden administration's National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition and Health, issued with the recent White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health, lays out a critical pathway to address food and nutrition security. Although the strategy acknowledges the intersection of climate change, food security and nutrition, the urgency of the climate crisis and its threat to our ability to continue providing adequate nutrition demands more than research — it requires immediate action across federal programs and policies.

As noted in the administration's strategy, climate-related emergencies including drought, extreme heat, flooding and severe storms — along with biodiversity loss and agricultural pollution — are threatening food production, water security and environmental justice.[1] Meanwhile, longstanding epidemics of chronic disease and food insecurity, compounded by an infectious disease pandemic, undermine the ability of our communities to face these concurrent crises. We cannot effectively address hunger, nutrition and health without fully addressing the role of the climate crisis, environmental risks and community resilience.

President Biden should follow the conference with urgent policy action to meet the goals of ending hunger and increasing healthy eating. These efforts must also embody the administration's stated priorities of fighting climate change and advancing equity.

As a next step, the president can use existing executive authority to take the following actions to begin to meaningfully address hunger, nutrition and health:

1. Immediately declare a national climate emergency to unlock key executive powers to combat the climate crisis. This should include moratoria on exports of emissions-intensive agricultural commodities such as meat, dairy and feed crops and imports of commodities responsible for high greenhouse gas emissions and deforestation like beef and palm products.

Meat, dairy and feed crops pose a risk to our ability to address the climate emergency due to their significant contribution to agricultural emissions.[2] These industries also put enormous pressure on land and water[3] during record drought and a soil crisis, all of which threatens resilience in the face of climate chaos by undermining national food security and our ability to diversify farming for healthier diets.[4,5] This threat to national food security was demonstrated during the early COVID-19 pandemic, when exports of

meat, especially pork, increased significantly, despite reported meat shortages, leading to congressional investigation of meat-industry manipulation of federal food policy.[6]

The administration can directly contribute to reduced emissions and increased resilience by using its executive authority to rein in the overproduction of meat and dairy products. It should halt exports until these industries fully account for their contribution to the climate crisis — using comprehensive, science-based, life-cycle analyses — and bring production in alignment with meeting 1.5-degree Celsius climate targets.

As a major consumer of products like imported beef and palm oil that are responsible for devastating deforestation in some of the world's most biodiverse regions, the United States also has a critical role to play in reducing agricultural emissions and impacts beyond our borders. Until this deforestation is stopped, President Biden should suspend such imports as part of a larger effort to support a just transition to agriculture that's better for people and the planet.

Eighteen nations, plus the European Union, have already declared climate emergencies.[7]

2. Immediately issue a call for nominations to create an advisory committee to provide guidance to agencies on development and implementation of the strategy discussed at the conference.

The broad, interdisciplinary participation in the conference and preceding meetings should continue post-conference to optimize the national strategy's outcomes. This advisory committee should be directed to collaborate with any appropriately funded interagency working group (once appointed) that is empowered to actively coordinate implementation of that strategy.

Such an advisory committee should not only reflect the variety of organizational stakeholders, but also the diversity of the U.S. population, especially those groups most directly affected by food and nutrition insecurity, chronic disease and climate risks. The advisory committee meetings should be open to the public and as participatory as possible.

3. Issue an executive order directing all agencies to assess the climate-related risks and impacts of their food and nutrition-related programs and policies on food security and nutrition, in accordance with EO 14008 (Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad).[8]

While additional research into the effects of climate chaos on the food system is important for long-term food and nutrition security, the federal government can apply its enormous influence to start addressing the underlying drivers of the crises of climate and food insecurity today. Given the urgency of these issues, every major government policy, program and purchase related to food, food production and nutrition — including, but not limited to, procurement, nutrition education and food assistance programs — must now be re-evaluated through the dual lenses of climate and food security.

All agencies must work with the White House to create coordinated cross-agency plan to address those risks and drive down the substantial emissions and adverse food impacts driven by federal decision-making. “Meet[ing] the moment,” as specified in EO 14008, requires nothing less.

4. Direct the Department of Agriculture to end financial bailouts for resource- and climate-intensive meat, dairy, and feed crop production; instead prioritize funding agricultural solutions that reduce emissions, improve availability of nutrient-dense foods and support Black, Indigenous and other farmers of color.

This includes ending emergency bailout funding, surplus purchases and other direct and indirect subsidies and loans under the purview of the Department of Agriculture. Using the funding saved, USDA should create incentives for small, independent and mid-sized farms growing specialty crops to further facilitate: 1) expanding markets for these farms by increasing Community Supported Agriculture programs and farmers markets; 2) use of evidence-based sustainable farming practices, including regenerative plant-based agriculture techniques that emphasize biological controls and green manure, among other non-chemical strategies; and 3) development of urban farms to improve food security and food sovereignty for local communities.

Corporate agriculture operations have received decades of preferential treatment through subsidies, loans and bailouts. These have come at the substantial expense of the environment, public health, and small, independent farmers — most notably Black, Indigenous and other farmers of color.[9] Preference must now shift to those operations that have been historically denied such benefits, as well as those committed to supporting local food security, sustainability, and protecting and restoring biodiversity.

5. Update the Federal Food Service Guidelines to recommend that all federal facilities adopt plant-based menus as the standard default option.

The Biden administration's strategy to expand access to healthier food in federal facilities, including by increasing the availability of plant-based options, can leverage the government's economic and social influence to accelerate the shift toward diets that are healthier for people and the planet.

In prioritizing plant-based foods, all agencies should emphasize these foods as standard default protein choices (such as soy foods, as well as beans, peas and lentils) for meals provided by, or under the control and direction of, any federal government body or agency, at all facilities, including worksites, military installations and facilities, national parks, and correctional institutions. Animal protein could still be available upon request, but by making the default choice plant-based, such a shift would increase sales of plant-based meals, improving nutritional quality while ultimately reducing greenhouse gas emissions in government procurement.

As plant-based meals are more universally acceptable to those with medical, cultural, religious, or philosophical dietary preferences, this is consistent with the president's stated commitments to advance fairness and equity[10] in federal procurement policies and programs. Federal contracting could also be a clear path to economic success for many producers of color by emphasizing local and regional procurement and purchasing from Black, Indigenous and other producers of color.

6. Direct the Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services to fully integrate sustainability and climate concerns into the development of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, including within the scope of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. They should ensure that the guidelines developed by the committee support food and nutrition security, are based solely on the best available nutritional science, and are free from industry influence.

The exclusion of climate change and sustainability, and their inextricable relationship to nutrition and dietary patterns, from the Dietary Guidelines development process contradicts the purpose of the Guidelines to support healthy diets and food security — and undermines the administration's stated priorities around equity and the climate crisis.[11] Climate change and sustainability must be formally incorporated into the Advisory Committee process and throughout the development of the DGA. And any process considering diet-related sustainability *outside* the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee must be scientifically rigorous, transparent, and include opportunities for public input.

7. Direct the Food and Nutrition Service of the Department of Agriculture to implement administrative action to expand access to healthy school meals with plant-based options, including more inclusive regulations around plant protein foods and non-dairy milks.

Advancing a pathway to free healthy school meals for all is a critical step toward improving childhood nutrition and food security. As the President begins the process of working with Congress to achieve this, he can use executive powers to immediately improve the nutrition of school meals, while reducing their environmental footprint. The Food and Nutrition Service should simplify school meal regulations to encourage or incentivize use of plant protein foods, especially beans and peas,[12] in school meals. This includes providing technical support, equipment and training funding to support such uses and incentivize and support scratch cooking where feasible. It should also modify regulations to mandate school compliance with a parental request for any child to access a nutritionally acceptable non-dairy milk option as part of a reimbursable school meal.

School meals have an enormous impact on student nutrition and educational outcomes, especially for those students experiencing food insecurity. Plant protein foods represent a substantial opportunity to improve student health while also reducing environmental footprints of school meals. Lack of a specific mandate for provision of non-dairy milk disproportionately affects students of color[13] — already likely to be at increased risk of nutrition insecurity — and impairs their ability to receive appropriate nutrition at school. USDA must take bold, active steps to ensure meal programs are equitably serving the needs of all participants.

8. Direct the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to develop a culturally appropriate public health education campaign[14] to increase awareness of the connection between climate and diet and promote healthy plant-based eating patterns. Such a campaign would recognize the benefits of these diets in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, advancing nutrition security and aiding in the treatment and prevention of certain chronic diseases across demographics.

Public-education campaigns have proven to be effective tools for advancing certain public health goals. To improve health and prevent disease, the federal government must take an active role in countering corporate influence over our food habits. Such corporate influence toward unhealthy choices is substantial, and the associated expenditures amount to more than 10 times the entire CDC budget for all health promotion programs.[15] Research has shown that when awareness of the connection between climate and diet increases, so does the willingness to change meat and dairy consumption.[16] Thus, a public education campaign would help advance the shift toward diets that are healthier for people and the planet.

9. Request the Office of the Inspector General of the Department of Agriculture to conduct a review of USDA-administered commodity research and promotion (aka "check-off") programs authorized by the Commodity Promotion, Research and Information Act of 1996. It should report the impacts of these programs on small and mid-sized farms, domestic food security, chronic disease risk, and environmental measures related to sustainability and the climate emergency.

In addition to addressing the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages such as fast food and sugary drinks, the Biden administration must also acknowledge the federal government's role in promoting foods and beverages that put people and the planet at risk. Check-off programs promoting overproduced beef, dairy and lamb are inconsistent with climate-related goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, while the Dairy Board's production goals appear to put small and mid-sized farms at increased economic risk.[17] This is inherently unfair to producers of healthier, more environmentally responsible foods, such as legumes, producers of which bear their own marketing and promotion costs. A thorough, evidence-based review is needed to assess the full economic and environmental cost of these check-off programs.

10. Direct the Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency to improve regulatory programs and policies to provide consistent oversight and accountability across the agriculture industry. This should include applying science-based metrics to reduce pollution and address public health impacts related to Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, or CAFOs.

Agricultural industries must now bear their fair share of responsibility for our hunger, nutrition and health crises, especially as CAFOs disproportionately affect underserved populations also suffering from food insecurity. Specific and meaningful regulation must be implemented quickly to establish control over practices that cause direct and substantial harm to the environment and public health.

These regulations cannot rely on voluntary adoption alone; there must be agency oversight, accountability, and science-based metrics. The Environmental Protection Agency must also collaborate with states to initiate counting and monitoring of CAFOs, including their location, population, size, waste and carcass-disposal practices, ownership and integration status, and air and water pollution impacts.

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