



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY THE URGENT CALL FOR A U.S. NATIONAL FOOD STRATEGY



An Update to the Blueprint
OCTOBER 2020



FOOD LAW
and POLICY CLINIC
HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has called into stark focus the need for transformational changes to the U.S. food system. Many of the issues highlighted by the pandemic – soaring rates of food insecurity and reduced access, disproportionate impacts to underserved and BIPOC communities, inadequately protected food system workers, staggering amounts of lost income for farmers and threats to farm viability, vastly increased food waste, concentrated distribution networks, and concerns about food safety – existed before the pandemic at crisis levels. While the pandemic exacerbated these conditions, it also heightened awareness of them among the general public. As we rebuild our food system and collectively recover, it is imperative we do so in a coordinated, strategic, and comprehensive manner by taking the lessons we have learned and shaping them into long-term, resilient law and policy solutions.

In 2017, the Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic and Vermont Law School Center for Agriculture and Food Systems published *Blueprint for a National Food Strategy*, a roadmap for developing a U.S. national food strategy. Since then, there have been incremental efforts from U.S. agencies to coordinate on discrete food system issues, but no initiative has undertaken the creation of a comprehensive strategy for critical food system issues. Meanwhile, the need for a coordinated federal approach to food and agricultural law and policy has only become more dire since 2017, and our nation can no longer afford to postpone strategic food system planning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Urgent Call for a US National Food Strategy*, released in October 2020, advocates for an immediate commitment to implement a national food strategy as a response to the current crisis.

FOOD SYSTEM CHALLENGES

The food and agricultural system has an enormous impact on the United States' economy, public health, and the environment. This system contributes more than \$1 trillion to the United States' GDP annually and employs approximately 11 percent of the American workforce.¹ Yet, despite the food system's tremendous economic benefits, these benefits are not evenly distributed nor do they outweigh the significant costs imposed on society. The United States faces concurrent and interrelated crises of food-related inequality, diet-related disease, and environmental and climate disruption. As a result, the food system fails to meet our nation's most essential and basic needs in various ways.

Health Impacts: Diet-related disease, including obesity, heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and various cancers —was the most significant public health challenge facing the United States² before the COVID-19 pandemic. Diet-related disease accounts for a large portion of healthcare spending in the United States, and disproportionately affects Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) populations.³

Environmental Impacts: Various forms of food production devastate the environment by impairing water quality,⁴ degrading soils, destroying biodiversity, and emitting greenhouse gases that threaten our food system's long-term viability.⁵

Economic Impacts: Food system benefits are not distributed evenly among economic and racial groups. For example, in 2017, white farmers received 98.9 percent of government farm payments, while Black farmers received only 0.6 percent.⁶

Despite these dire societal challenges, and the intersectional nature of these issues, the U.S. food system is governed by a complex web of laws and regulations, with more than 15 federal agencies developing policies that govern the food system, many of which conflict, create redundancies, or increase inefficiencies. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted weaknesses in the US food system, including a systemic lack of concern for the safety of farm and food workers, crisis rates of food insecurity and barriers to food access, ballooning food waste, and serious threats to farm viability.



PRECEDENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A U.S. NATIONAL FOOD STRATEGY

In the wake of the food system challenges laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing movement for racial justice, our nation can no longer afford to postpone strategic food system planning. *The Urgent Call for a U.S. National Food Strategy*⁷ provides a needed and timely update to the 2017 *Blueprint for a National Food Strategy*, emphasizing the urgency for a national food strategy in light of the myriad challenges plaguing the food system. The Report analyzes and reviews new domestic national strategies, coordination approaches, and national food strategies from other countries updated or developed since 2017, ultimately providing a roadmap for the building of a U.S. national food strategy.

A national food strategy is a coordinated strategic federal approach to food system policy and regulation. The concept of a coordinated federal approach to food system law and policymaking through a national food strategy is not new – several countries have adopted national food strategies to address complex issues presented by their food systems. In 2019, Canada developed a robust national food policy, the *Food Policy for Canada: Everyone at the Table*,⁸ and allocated \$134.4 million over five years to foster

policy development and implementation.⁹ Additionally, Scotland has strengthened its commitment to implementing its national food strategy,¹⁰ while the United Kingdom recently released the first portion of a comprehensive food plan dedicated to tackling the challenges associated with COVID-19 and the UK's exit from the European Union.¹¹

In the United States, the federal government has made some progress towards coordination since the *Blueprint* was published. In 2018, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Association (FDA) formally announced their commitment to improving food safety oversight through increased interagency communication and coordination. The USDA, EPA, and FDA signed a memorandum of understanding agreeing to coordinate among the three federal agencies to make food loss and waste reduction a national priority.¹² In 2019, the USDA and FDA agreed to coordinate cell-based meat regulation. However, these agreements between a few agencies addressing only discrete food system issues cannot effectively address the broad, long-term challenges facing the food system.

The U.S. government has previously used coordinated federal strategies to address complex problems successfully. For example, the Obama Administration created the *National HIV/AIDS Strategy* in 2010 in response to sustained public support for a comprehensive response to the HIV/AIDS crisis.¹³ Under this strategy, the President's Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, an external advisory group comprised of public health officials, experts, and advocates, provided the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Office of National AIDS Policy (ONAP) with advice and recommendations on combating HIV/AIDS.¹⁴ The United States also responded strategically to other national crises such as Pearl Harbor, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the space shuttle disasters, and the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Congress, or the next presidential administration, should act to create a coordinated strategy to respond to the nation's growing food and agricultural problems, problems exacerbated by — but not created by — COVID-19. The architects of this strategy should employ a transparent, deliberate, and fair process that identifies short and long term priorities and needs for the food system, lays out a roadmap to achieve those goals, and embraces a diverse range of stakeholders' concerns. *The Urgent Call*, which endorses the recommendations from the 2017 *Blueprint*, advises prioritizing the following principles:



LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION: In order to foster greater cooperation between federal agencies, a national food strategy should **create an interagency working group** that would coordinate agencies in the food system, communicate with stakeholders, and oversee the implementation of the strategy.

The federal government should also **name a lead office or agency** to spearhead the national food strategy. The lead agency should have the ability to convene, gather information through outreach and consultation, and compel other agencies to engage in the process.



PARTICIPATION: A successful national food strategy must have the trust and buy-in of the public. In order to advance that goal, the federal government should **create an advisory council** that would engage stakeholders outside the federal government, including state, local, and tribal governments as well as the public health, agricultural and environmental sectors.

Additionally, the national strategy should **create meaningful opportunities for public input**. The federal government can learn from the HIV/AIDS strategy, where ONAP fostered public involvement by holding discussions around the country attended by over 4,200 participants, as well as look to our international allies who have thoughtfully engaged the public.



TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND ENFORCEABILITY: In order to further build public trust, the federal government should require **the publication of a written national food strategy** that details priorities, goals, expected outcomes, implementation measures, and concrete metrics for measuring progress.

Public-facing progress reports should be published annually to keep the public informed and government agencies accountable to the goals set in the strategy.

Finally, a **procedural mechanism to guide agency decision-making** should also be implemented. This could serve a similar role to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which helps govern environmental policy. The federal government should push for a guiding mechanism to ensure that agencies consider national food strategy goals before taking action, as it is proposing to address the climate crisis.



DURABILITY: To maintain the strategy's longevity, the federal government must ensure that the strategy is periodically updated to reflect changing social, economic, scientific, and technological factors.

As Americans reckon with COVID-19 and its aftermath, we must also confront the inequalities and externalized costs rampant in our food and agricultural system. A strategy guided by the principles above will ensure these critical issues are addressed. As recognized by other countries and dramatically illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this moment represents a significant societal crossroads, and the U.S. has the opportunity to rebuild strategically and thoughtfully. We can no longer afford to address these issues inefficiently and incrementally but must act to address the significant long-term threats facing our economic, environmental, and social sustainability. Without expanding interagency coordination and developing a strategic plan, discrete and responsive changes will not endure. Even worse, minor tweaks could impair other areas of the food system creating a web of new problems. There is no better time for U.S. government to commit to developing a governance framework that builds and supports a sustainable, equitable, and resilient food system that can respond to the current COVID-19 crisis while shaping long-term priorities and policies for the future.

Learn more at www.foodstrategyblueprint.org



ENDNOTES

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