

Land of Plenty

How Should We Ensure that People Have the Food They Need?

All of us affect, and are affected by, the food system: students who grow and eat carrots and tomatoes from their school garden; farm owners who maintain patches of natural habitat for bees; immigrants who hand-pick our apples, grapes, and oranges; public employees who design food-nutrition labels and monitor food safety; restaurant workers who take our orders and serve our meals; food reporters who write about ethnic cuisine; local groups of gleaners who keep edible food out of the dumpster and put it to good use; food pantries that teach teenagers to garden on vacant lots; parents who work to stretch their food budgets to the next payday; policymakers who determine agricultural subsidies; community members who advocate for policies to ensure that all of us have the food we need.

While we have one of the most productive and efficient food systems in the world, millions of people in the US still fall between the cracks. People who may have enough to eat today worry about the availability and quality of food for future generations.

This guide explores different approaches and actions that are, or could be, taken to create a food system that works for all of us. While the approaches overlap in some respects, they do suggest different priorities and involve different trade-offs. With this in mind, what should we do to ensure that people from all walks of life have the food they need?

OPTION 1:

Improve Access to Nutritious Food

Despite our nation's abundance of food, some people still don't have enough to eat, which undermines their health, productivity, and overall well-being. According to



this option, we need a food system that ensures everyone has a stable source of affordable, nutritious food. We must strengthen our school nutrition programs and food assistance for low-income families, as well as improve access to fresh food in rural and low-income communities.

Examples of What Might be Done

- Strengthen food safety-nets, such as SNAP, WIC, and school nutrition programs
- Bring more fresh food into areas that lack grocery stores
- Help people grow their own food
- Discourage people from choosing unhealthy foods

Trade-offs and Downsides to Consider

- Food-assistance programs alleviate immediate needs, but don't address the root problem of people not making enough money to buy their own food.
- To have a significant impact, local food producers need a sufficient population size, enough tillable land, and a suitable climate.
- Taxing certain foods undermines people's freedom to choose what they eat, and disproportionately affects poor people.

OPTION 2:

Pay More Attention to the Multiple Benefits of Food

We have drifted away from traditions and principles that once helped us enjoy a healthier relationship to food, according to this option. We all need to be better in-



formed about the foods we choose, their nutritional value, and how they're produced and processed. Rather than allowing food advertisements to determine our choices, we need to pay closer attention to what we value about our food, traditions, and well-being.

Examples of What Might be Done

- Provide accessible and trustworthy information about food
- Build nutrition education into school and community food programs
- Emphasize and preserve the social and cultural aspects of food
- Recognize the healing qualities of food

Trade-offs and Downsides to Consider

- Tailoring the food system to individual needs and customs may be a luxury we can't afford with a growing world population and problems that threaten food production.
- Our food preferences and traditions are not always healthy ones, and society shares in the consequences of higher health-care costs due to diet-related problems.
- Integrating food programs with health-care systems could add to bureaucracy and costs.

OPTION 3:

Be Good Stewards of the Food System

We are not managing our food system as well as we should, according to this option. We must do more to safeguard the quality and availability of food for generations to



come. Good stewardship is needed at every link in the food-supply chain, from the seeds we plant to the reduction of food waste. It also includes preserving our natural resources, choosing sustainable methods of production, and strengthening the food-system workforce.

Examples of What Might be Done

- Strengthen our commitment to a healthy ecosystem
- Keep food out of landfills
- Realign our diets and food subsidies to support nutritious, sustainable food
- Strengthen the food-system workforce

Trade-offs and Downsides to Consider

- Conservation-oriented agriculture can be more time and labor intensive, resulting in higher prices for consumers.
- Exports make up 20 percent of US agricultural production according to the USDA. Reducing current crop subsidies could make the US less competitive in the global market.
- Raising the minimum wage for fast-food franchise workers could force some owners to close stores, raise prices, or cut positions.