

The Case for Prioritizing Fiber-rich Foods in Federal Farm Policy

From [AFA Agriculture Fairness Alliance](#)

November 12, 2021

The following is a letter sent to Secretary Vilsack making the case for the USDA to prioritize fiber-rich foods across all farm programs.

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The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

On behalf of the Agriculture Fairness Alliance (AFA) and its members, I am writing to encourage you to adopt public farm policies that reflect USDA dietary guidelines, and in doing so, prevent thousands of Americans from developing fatal chronic diseases, equitably supply all Americans with quality nutrition, encourage climate-smart and drought-resistant food production, and help American farmers improve profitability.

In implementing these policies, we suggest the USDA promote local, urban, and organic production. Farm policy adjustments can save lives while improving local economies.

Furthermore, AFA would like to invite you to attend a December 2021 listening tour with experts in food crop production, nutrition, and food distribution.

The Agriculture Fairness Alliance is a nonprofit dedicated to ensuring fairness in American agriculture policy. AFA advocates for farmers' use of sustainable practices that reduce environmental impacts. AFA supports farm policy that prioritizes nutritious food crops, and that results in a nutrient-rich food supply that reaches all Americans. We recommend for USDA to set an agency-wide directive for all programs and departments to prioritize advancing the production and distribution of foods recommended in the American Dietary Guidelines (DGA) for 2020-2025, with a special prioritization of diverse plant foods that deliver what the USDA calls a *dietary component of public health concern*: dietary fiber.¹

Americans are dying from diseases linked to dietary fiber deficiency

The National Institute of Health reports that insufficient dietary fiber intake is associated with many serious conditions and leading causes of death: cardiovascular disease, cancer, strokes, type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, obesity, and high blood pressure. USDA experts report that 95% of Americans are deficient in dietary fiber intake,² and on average, American adults consume only half the fiber they need.³

Studies show that even small increases in dietary fiber can lower all-cause mortality,⁴ reverse type 2 diabetes,⁵ and lower risk of heart disease.⁶ Given that dietary fiber is exclusively found in plant foods like legumes, grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts, and seeds,⁷ it follows that Americans need to eat more fiber-rich plant foods. Indeed, that's precisely what the DGA recommends: that fruits and vegetables comprise half of our meals,⁸ and for adults to consume 28 to 34 grams of dietary fiber daily.⁹

Dietary fiber deficiency is most acute among socially disadvantaged groups

Dietary fiber consumption among non-Hispanic Black adults is 21% lower than among the wider U.S. adult population.¹⁰ Furthermore, dietary fiber accessibility is inequitable across economic regions; a study of one California county showed that “higher-income areas have twice as many locations with fresh fruits and vegetables compared to the lower-income areas.”¹¹ Getting dietary fiber to all Americans is an issue of equity.

There isn’t enough dietary fiber to go around

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service reports that *before accounting for wastage and spoilage*, the US food system is delivering 13% fewer grams of dietary fiber than are needed per capita.¹² With food waste in America estimated at 30-40%,¹³ that means the US food system is delivering approximately half the dietary fiber that Americans need. This correlates with the fact noted above, that Americans are *consuming* only half of the fiber they need. While some may blame Americans for making poor dietary choices, the fact is that even if everyone wanted to eat adequate amounts of fiber-rich foods, they couldn’t, given the food supply as it is.

Farm policy that prioritizes fiber-rich plant foods can prevent diseases that stem from the dietary fiber crisis

An analysis of federal farm spending shows that it significantly diverges from the USDA’s nutritional guideline priorities, especially with respect to foods that deliver dietary fiber. Analyzing publicly available data, it appears that less than 3% of total farm spending went to fruit and vegetable production, and only 5-12% of federal farm spending in 2020 was on foods containing dietary fiber.¹⁴ While the current situation presents a discrepancy, it’s really an opportunity. Simply prioritizing fiber-rich plant foods in federal farm spending could bring numerous benefits, and not just for public health.

Farm policy that prioritizes fiber-rich plant food can mitigate drought vulnerabilities and build healthy soils

Diverse crop rotations which include fiber-rich legumes can play a key role in improving water retention of soils, among many other benefits. According to the NRCS, “By farming using soil health principles and systems that include no-till, cover cropping, and diverse rotations, more and more farmers are actually increasing their soil’s organic matter and improving microbial activity. As a result, farmers are sequestering more carbon, increasing water infiltration, improving wildlife and pollinator habitat—all while harvesting better profits and often better yields.”¹⁵ Farmers in Minnesota reported improving water infiltration rates from 13-50 fold simply by adopting no-till and cover crops for two years.¹⁶ Fields that retain water need less water and are naturally drought resistant.

Plant-rich and localized food networks can be lucrative for farmers

According to a University of Iowa study, a soy-corn operation could bring in nearly four times the revenue after transitioning to diversified vegetable production.¹⁷ Farmers interested in changing what they produce could potentially make more money and provide economic opportunity and good-paying jobs in rural America if they switch to producing nutrient-rich plant foods. A challenge is that local food processing centers, distribution hubs, and infrastructure need to be available. Fortunately, developing local food hubs is already underway at the USDA.¹⁸ These initiatives can be prioritized as well.

Farm policy that prioritizes fiber-rich plant foods can mitigate the climate crisis

Climate scientists have identified that slight shifts toward plant-rich diets can both cut carbon emissions and increase sequestration.¹⁹ Fiber-rich plant foods are the most climate-smart commodities we can produce.²⁰ Depending on the degree to which plant foods are prioritized, the U.S. could potentially draw down carbon in the atmosphere by hundreds of millions of tons of CO₂ equivalent every year.²¹

Fiber-rich farm policy can be pursued in existing programs

The programs that empower agricultural producers and local citizens to deliver plant foods to where they need to go already exist.

We strongly encourage USDA's next budget request to increase funding for the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP), the Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP), the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP), the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (OUAIP), the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP), Farm to School Program (FSP), and the National Organic Program (NOP). These programs encourage the growing, processing, and distribution of locally grown specialty crops. And there's a demonstrable need for additional funding; the Congressional Research Service reports that in 2020, the agency awarded just 10-15% of funding requests submitted to FMPP and LFPP programs, and fewer than 5% of OUAIP applications were approved.²²

Furthermore, we urge the USDA to review and adjust all programs under its purview to better prioritize the production and delivery of fiber-rich plant foods. We suggest finding ways to help growers better manage risks by prioritizing fiber-rich foods in Title I commodity revenue protection and Title XI crop insurance programs. The agency can encourage farmers to grow specialty crops to increase farm rotation diversity, which is a further risk mitigation technique, and continue to promote plant-based fertility methods such as cover cropping with legumes and oats in the EQIP and CSP programs.

The agency could set targets for doubling or tripling spending on specialty food crop advancement across all programs, and farmer transition programs can be developed as requested in the latest appropriations report from Congress.²³ We are certain that if the USDA prioritizes fiber-rich food crops across the agency, that public health, environmental sustainability, and the well-being of agriculture producers can all improve.

We look forward to working with you and the USDA staff to roll out farm system policies that advance DGA guidelines and prioritize the production, processing, and distribution of fiber-rich plant foods in an equitable way to all Americans.

Sincerely,
Laura Reese
Executive Director
Agriculture Fairness Alliance

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