

From Zero to \$5.5 Million: California Schools Add Organic Through DoD Fresh

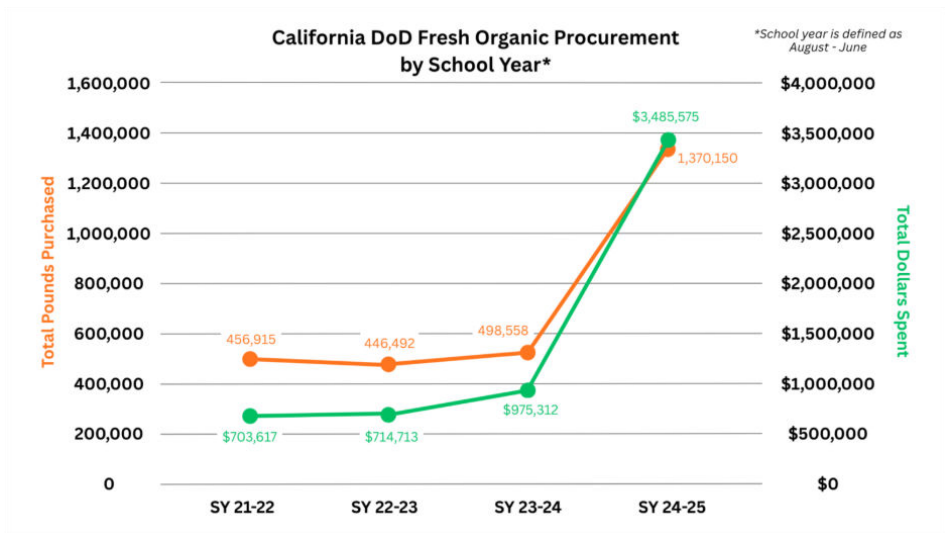
In just five years, California schools have gone from having no access to organic produce through the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (DoD Fresh) to purchasing over \$5.5 million in organic produce grown in California.

This transformation didn’t happen by accident. It’s the result of strategic, persistent advocacy led by Friends of the Earth and visionary partners who saw an opportunity to shift to more climate-friendly, organic offerings for students. We hope this successful story provides a useful roadmap and inspiration for USDA and State Departments of Education to encourage DoD Fresh vendors in other states to similarly make organic produce available through the program to school districts across the country.

Tracking the Growth of Organic School Food Procurement

Since 2021, Friends of the Earth, in partnership with the California Department of Education, has tracked organic purchases through the DoD Fresh Program. Our analysis tells a compelling story of growth and momentum. Since July 2021, California Schools have purchased nearly \$6 million in organic produce from the DoD Fresh Program. In the 2024-2025 school year alone, California schools purchased \$3.5 million, amounting to 1.4 million pounds of organic produce.

The variety of organic offerings has increased over time. Starting at zero in 2020, and steadily growing each year, DoD Fresh added 14 distinct organic items in 2024-25, bringing the cumulative total to 36 unique items offered across the program. Participation has expanded as well, with 394 school districts buying organic in 2024–25, and 466 districts having purchased at least once since July 2021. These numbers show more than just growth —they show a movement. California schools are not only increasing the amount and variety of organic produce they serve but showing how federal procurement dollars can be used to support regenerative organic farming and healthier food for kids.



Brief Roadmap: How Other States Can Learn from California's Success in Adding Organic Options Through DoD Fresh

In 2020, not a single organic item was available through DoD Fresh in California. That changed in the Fall of 2021, when several school districts working with Friends of the Earth expressed a desire to use their USDA entitlement funds to buy organic produce. We listened —and launched a strategic advocacy campaign to make it happen. Here's how we did it:

- **Identified the opportunity:** With over 800 California school districts spending tens of millions annually through DoD Fresh, we saw a chance to redirect school purchasing dollars toward organic agriculture.
- **Partnered with the California Department of Education (CDE):** We reached out to ask CDE's help with connecting us to California's Prime Vendors – two distributors awarded contracts to operate DoD Fresh in Northern and Southern California. We shared with the Vendors the significant interest from school districts in purchasing organic through the program, then worked with the contracted vendors to enable school districts allocated entitlement funds to be used toward organic purchases.
- **Met with Prime Vendors:** Over the past four years, we have maintained steady communication with Coast Citrus and now Valley Produce (Southern California) and ProPacific (Northern California) to inform them about demand from school districts and offer suggestions for additional certified organic fruits and vegetables to add to their FFAVORS catalogs.
- **Garnered Support from School Nutrition Service Directors:** We mobilized school nutrition directors in CA to write letters to their Prime Vendor requesting organic DoD Fresh produce items. We also encouraged and supported districts with technical assistance, training, and resources to encourage organic procurement from local farmers and ranchers beyond DoD Fresh.
- **Educated Students on Organic Benefits:** Friends of the Earth has helped to grow this demand by providing organic marketing materials to help schools promote organic offerings in their cafeterias and classrooms. Some of these materials, including or [Organic School Food Roadmap](#), are available [here](#).

The Role of Key Partnerships

The California Department of Education (CDE) played a vital role in making this success possible. CDE supported school districts in allocating their USDA entitlement funds to the DoD Fresh Program and championed the inclusion of organic options in the FFAVORS system. Their collaboration has enabled California's DoD Fresh Program to better meet the growing demand for climate-friendly, locally sourced foods. In addition, Conscious Kitchen, a California based non-profit that advocates for organic school meals sourced locally, has supported the onboarding of new California organic farms into the program, including Frog Hollow Farm, Wild River Fruit, Durst Organic Growers, and Tomatero Farm —further expanding access to fresh, organic produce for schools statewide.

Champion Districts Leading the Way

More than 466 school districts across California have purchased organic produce through the DoD Fresh Program, and that number continues to grow. Many districts that started small are now making organic purchases a regular part of their school meal programs, increasing both the frequency and volume of their organic fruit and vegetable orders each year.

Among these, Capistrano Unified School District, the fifth largest district in California and a long-time Friends of the Earth partner, stands out for its leadership. In School Year (SY) 2024–25, under the direction of Nutrition Service Director, Kristen Hilleman, the district spent \$126,722 (55,121lbs) on organic produce, representing 20% of its total DoD Fresh entitlement of \$613,461.

Hacienda La Puente Unified School District, also a Friends of the Earth partner and a participant in a current peer learning cohort of 18 California school districts coordinated by Friends of the Earth, continues to lead in organic purchasing as well. In SY 2024–25, the district devoted 34% (\$42,762) of its \$125,000 DoD Fresh entitlement to organic purchases.

Prime Vendors Stepping Up to Support CA Organic Farmers

Both prime vendors, ProPacific and Valley Produce (beginning in December 2024), have been key partners in driving this transformation. Along with the former Southern California vendor Coast Citrus (prior to December 2024), these distributors have played a crucial role in expanding the selection of organic produce available through the FFAVORS system in their respective regions of California.

With support from Conscious Kitchen, their efforts have opened new market opportunities for California organic farmers, including Frog Hollow Farm, Durst Organic Growers, and Tomatero Farm.

- **Frog Hollow Farm**, a 280-acre regenerative organic farm in Brentwood, CA, is known for its tree-ripened fruit and deep commitment to soil health.
- **Wild River Farm**, a third-generation family owned farm located along the Yuba River in Yuba, CA. They are CCOF-Certified Organic and grow about 30 unique fruit varieties on 400 acres.
- **Durst Organic Growers**, located in Esparto, CA, is a California Certified Organic Farmer (CCOF) and actively farms approximately 500 acres, producing a wide range of seasonal vegetables.
- **Tomatero Farm**, a 40-acre CCOF-certified organic farm in Watsonville, CA, supplies high-quality greens, berries, and other produce to schools and communities across the region.

Together, these partnerships are helping bring more fresh, organic, and climate-friendly food to students across California while supporting local farmers and strengthening regional food systems.

What's Next?

California's journey from zero to nearly \$6 million in organic produce purchases through the DoD Fresh Program is more than a milestone. It is proof of what can happen when educators, farmers, advocates, and policymakers work together toward a shared vision: nourishing students with food that supports both human and planetary health.

The work does not stop here. Friends of the Earth continues to advocate for expanded organic offerings through the DoD Fresh Program and the FFAVORS system nationwide, encouraging more states to join this effort. As states increase their DoD Fresh organic options, school districts gain greater flexibility, and more students have access to food that is healthy and good for the planet.

What began as a bold idea to add just a few organic options to a federal food purchasing system has grown into a movement that is reshaping how schools purchase food. With the right partnerships and persistence, school food can be a powerful force for good —supporting healthy kids, thriving farms, and a more sustainable planet.

What Is DoD Fresh?

The Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (DoD Fresh) is a federal initiative that allows school districts to use their USDA Foods entitlement dollars to purchase fresh produce. Originally designed to supply military bases, the program was expanded to serve schools and tribal communities nationwide. Through a web-based ordering system called FFAVORS - Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Order Receipt System (FFAVORS), schools can select from a catalog of available produce—sourced and distributed by 2 regional “Prime Vendors” contracted by the USDA. The DoD Fresh program is one of the largest federal pipelines for distributing fresh produce food to students.

What is Organic?

Organic food is certified through robust standards governed by federal law under the USDA National Organic Program. These standards prohibit nearly all synthetic pesticides, including an estimated 17,000 pesticide products allowed in non-organic agriculture. The standards also prohibit GMOs (genetically modified organisms), synthetic fertilizers, irradiation and sewage sludge. In organic dairy and meat, the use of antibiotics, growth hormones and arsenic-based drugs is strictly prohibited, while over 450 drugs are allowed in non-organic production. The organic standards also require farmers to manage their land in ways that protect soil, water and biodiversity. For more about the benefits of organic food, please read this [summary](#).

About Friends of the Earth’s Climate-Friendly School Food Program

Friends of the Earth’s Climate-Friendly School Food Program helps school districts make shifts toward healthy, delicious, organic, plant-forward menus that are better for kids and the planet. We work with over 100 school districts in California, as well as state agencies, NGO partners and organic and regenerative farmers and ranchers to increase access to healthy, local, plant-forward food. We provide [organic procurement](#) and plant-based technical assistance and marketing materials, support student and community engagement strategies, and link school districts with the [resources](#) they need in order to be successful. Our Organic School Food Initiative, launched in California, aims to make organic foods available to every student. We also partner with school districts and NGOs to advocate for state and federal policy change. For more information or to request support please email climatefriendlyfood@foe.org.