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June 23, 2022

President Joe Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20500

Ambassador Susan Rice  
Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden and Ambassador Rice,

On behalf of Friends of the Earth and our more than 3 million U.S. members and supporters, thank you for convening the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. Despite crucial anti-hunger policies that were created and expanded during the White House's first conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, we face an even more dire landscape today, 50 years later. We are contending with an ongoing global pandemic, the consequences of which are exacerbated by the epidemic of diet-related diseases like heart disease that increase COVID-19 morbidity. Thirty-eight million Americans, including 11 million children, are food insecure, and, relatedly, we have seen an uninterrupted widening of economic inequality over the last 40 years. The growing political and economic power of agri-food and beverage corporations has driven us toward unhealthy and unsustainable food production and consumption patterns. And we face a looming climate catastrophe that threatens the resilience of our already fragile, highly consolidated food system. All these trends disproportionately harm Black, Indigenous, Latina/o/x, and other people of color. The good news is that there are solutions, and we are hopeful that this Conference will help to propel the bold policies needed to ensure nutrition security for this and future generations.

Friends of the Earth U.S., founded in 1969, works to defend the environment and champion and healthier and more just world. To accomplish our mission, we work at the nexus of environmental protection, economic justice, and social justice to fundamentally transform the way our country and the world value people and the environment. Several our campaigns intersect with the White House's pillars for the conference. For example, our Healthy, Climate-Friendly Food Program is working to shift federal foodservice and food purchasing programs, as well as school meals, to include more healthy, plant-based and plant-forward offerings.<sup>1</sup> Our climate-friendly school food policy work grew out of our on-the-ground work with more than 50 school districts to expand the availability of healthy, plant-based options, helping to ensure food access for the many people following plant-based diets for ethical, religious, cultural, health, or other reasons. Beyond the climate benefits, plant-rich menus also foster greater alignment with the U.S. Dietary Guidelines, help to integrate nutrition and health, and empower all consumers to make healthy choices. Finally, increasing consumption of plant-based foods can also be a

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<sup>1</sup> "Plant-based" refers to foods or meals that contain no animal products or byproducts. "Plant-forward" refers to foods or meals that emphasize plant-based foods but are not strictly limited to them.

major cost-saving strategy<sup>i</sup> since major medical and public health organizations agree that shifting toward more minimally processed, plant-forward diets helps to reduce chronic diseases.<sup>ii</sup>

The policy recommendations put forth in this letter are not comprehensive, and we urge the White House to listen deeply to and follow the guidance of individuals and organizations with lived experience with hunger, nutrition, and health. We also urge the White House to recognize that hunger, health, and nutrition are inextricably linked to broader challenges that must be addressed in its solutions, including income inequality and poverty, climate change, and corporate power.

### **Friends of the Earth Policy Recommendations for the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health:**

**1. Issue an Executive Order to require that the Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities (FSG) be updated to incorporate health equity and sustainability considerations and be implemented across all federal agencies.** Developed by an interagency working group led by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the FSG are evidence-based, currently voluntary best practices to align food service in federal facilities with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and advance food safety, facility efficiency, environmental support, and community development. In alignment with President Biden’s Executive Orders on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (E.O. 1395), Catalyzing Clean Energy Industries and Jobs Through Federal Sustainability (E.O. 14057), and Climate-Related Financial Risk (E.O. 14030), the White House should issue a new Executive Order directing CDC to update the FSG to incorporate racial equity and sustainability considerations and require implementation of the FSG across all federal foodservice operations.

The FSG are a critical tool to leverage government purchasing power and operations to improve health outcomes and reduce long-term health care costs for the millions of people who rely on federal food service operations, including federal employees, veterans in Veterans Affairs hospitals, members of the armed services, and people who are incarcerated in federal prisons. Robust implementation would send a clear signal to all that the federal government is willing to “walk the walk” when it comes to promoting healthy diets.

**2. Continue to advocate for universal free school meals.** The pandemic has underscored that our school meal programs are a lifeline for millions of families. We urge the administration to do all within its power to advocate for school meals to remain free-of-charge and be reimbursed at a higher rate, at least in the coming school year.

**3. Expand access to healthy, plant-based meal options in K-12 schools.** We cannot provide healthy school meals for all until all students – including those who prefer or require plant-based options for religious, ethical, cultural, or health reasons – have options to eat at school. Despite growing demand from students and their families and commendable efforts from many school food operators, plant-based options are typically lacking in school cafeterias. Our analysis of California lunch menus<sup>iii</sup> found that meat- and cheese-centric options dominated school meal offerings, with only 4% of entrees being plant-based (and half of those were nut butter and jelly). To diversify protein intake consistent with the DGA recommendations – particularly around lowering processed meat consumption and increasing fiber and legume consumption – and to ensure that all students have access to healthy food, USDA should support schools in overcoming the technical, financial, and regulatory barriers to expanding their plant-based offerings. Specifically, we recommend that USDA:

- a) **Include the pilot program envisioned by the Healthy Future Students & Earth Act (HFSEA) in USDA's newly announced Healthy Food Incentive Fund.** Introduced by Representatives Velázquez and Bowman in response to requests for more plant-based school meal options from constituents who were unable to process lactose, the HFSEA (H.R.4108) would establish a new \$10 million voluntary grants program to support school districts in procuring, preparing, and marketing plant-based meal options. This is perfectly aligned with the spirit of the \$100 million Healthy Food Incentive Fund to improve the nutritional quality of meals for students. USDA should devote a portion of this funding to pilot a program modeled after the HFSEA to expand healthy, fiber-rich entree options, bringing student protein, legume, and fiber intake into better alignment with the DGA relative to current NSLP participant intakes.<sup>iv</sup>
- b) **Adopt regulatory flexibilities at USDA that facilitate plant-based and plant-forward meal options.** As USDA plans to propose new school meal nutrition guidelines in January, the agency should include regulatory flexibilities supported by dozens of school districts and organizations that would make it easier for school food operators to offer plant-forward and plant-based menu offerings.<sup>v</sup>
- c) **Offer technical assistance to School Food Authorities in serving more plant-based foods and fiber-rich entrée options.** Food and Nutrition Services could help operators navigate challenges to serving more plant-based foods by offering technical assistance and sharing best practices for procuring, menuing, and marketing plant-based meal offerings.
- d) **Expand the availability of plant-based ingredients and ready-to-serve plant-based food options in the USDA Foods Program.** The USDA Foods Program offers limited plant-based ingredients and ready-to-serve plant-based food options like a black bean burger or falafel. Expanding these offerings such that schools can purchase plant-based food options through their entitlement dollars will help schools cost-effectively offer more diverse protein choices.

**4. Include at least one plant-based meal choice at every meal in federal foodservice venues, including VA hospitals, DoD facilities, and federal prisons.** By adding plant-based meal offerings in federal foodservice venues, the administration can make it easier for those who rely on the federal government for meals to choose a healthy, culturally appropriate option. A 2016 Pew Research poll<sup>vi</sup> found that 8% of African Americans follow a plant-based diet, and preferences for plant-based and plant-forward diets are growing rapidly among Americans on the whole, particularly for younger generations.<sup>vii</sup> We urge the administration to ensure that these options are available as a choice for our veterans, armed service members, people who are incarcerated, and others depending on federal foodservice.

**5. Continue to support and expand access to SNAP and WIC, with a focus on increasing benefits for healthy foods like fruits and vegetables.** We applaud the administration's efforts to support and protect these crucial anti-hunger programs. We particularly commend USDA for its recent announcements of additional investments in the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, the GusNIP Produce Prescriptions Program, and the Healthy Food Financing Initiative. We urge the administration to continue to advocate for increased funding for these and other programs that make it easier for people who are food insecure to access healthy food. We also urge the administration to fund research and pilot programs to test other strategies for incentivizing healthy food and disincentivizing unhealthy food purchases without causing stigma or restricting access.

Thank you for your consideration. Friends of the Earth stands ready to work with you to support these priorities.

Sincerely,

*Chloë Waterman*

Chloë Waterman

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<sup>i</sup> Brigham and Women's Hospital. "Healthy diet could save \$50 billion in health care costs." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 17 December 2019. [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/12/191217141314.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/12/191217141314.htm)

<sup>ii</sup> Friends of the Earth. "Public Health Consensus for Reduced Meat Consumption." <https://foe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Public-Health-Consensus-for-Reduced-Meat-Consumption-kh-final.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Friends of the Earth. "The State of School Lunch in California," (2021). <https://foe.org/resources/the-state-of-school-lunch-in-california>

<sup>iv</sup> USDA. *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Volume 4: Student Participation, Satisfaction, and Dietary Intakes*, (2021). <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study>

<sup>v</sup> California School Districts: Letter to Administrator Long. Sent on April 23, 2021. [http://foe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Letter-USDA-CA-school-districts-Plant-forward\\_organic\\_higher-quality-meat-4-23-2021.pdf](http://foe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Letter-USDA-CA-school-districts-Plant-forward_organic_higher-quality-meat-4-23-2021.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> Pew Research Center. "The New Food Fights," (2016). <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2016/12/01/the-new-food-fights/> <sup>vii</sup> NielsonIQ. "Growing Demand for Plant-Based Proteins," (2021). <https://nielseniq.com/global/en/insights/analysis/2021/examining-shopper-trends-in-plant-based-proteins-accelerating-growth-across-mainstream-channels/>