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Promoting Sustainable Food Service Operations

Lessons Learned from a Climate-Friendly Food Service Pilot Project

May 2025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Scientists overwhelmingly agree that shifting global eating habits towards predominantly plant-based diets is one of the most powerful tools we have to combat the climate crisis and improve human health.[1] In response, dozens of private companies, universities, and governments have implemented innovative, no-cost or low-cost climate-friendly food procurement and food service strategies. Successful strategies include reducing food waste and expanding low-emission plant-based and plant-forward menu options while maintaining customer choice.[2] Shifting towards plant-forward menus is not only an effective strategy to reduce emissions since plant-based proteins tend to have a lower carbon footprint than animal proteins;[3] it also increases healthy, fiber-rich menu items and helps to meet diverse dietary needs and preferences of all customers.

Friends of the Earth, Greener by Default, and Sodexo partnered to design, implement, and evaluate a pilot project aimed at reducing food-related emissions at a client cafeteria that serves an average of 2,500 meals per day. During the eight-week pilot project, with technical support provided by Greener by Default and Friends of the Earth, Sodexo expanded plant-forward menu offerings and utilized behavioral design strategies to make the food service operation's menus and cafeteria more inclusive and climate-friendly. This report describes the pilot program design, implementation strategies, and results, including carbon footprinting and revenue analyses. It also summarizes key lessons that can be employed to replicate the inaugural pilot's success and scale strategies across facilities.

During the pilot, the Sodexo-operated cafeteria replaced one meat-based menu option with a plant-based one on the main Entree line, ensuring that for every two meat-based entrees, one plant-based entree was available to customers. New plant-based items were also added to the Deli and Grill stations.

In addition to a shift in ratios of meat-based to plant-based, they utilized behavioral design (nudge-based) strategies to guide customers to choose the climate-friendly menu (e.g., placing plant-based options first in service lines and adding appealing names for those options). The pilot team assessed the impacts of the pilot strategies on the Entree, Deli and Grill stations.

Key findings from the pilot include:

- Implementation of this simple suite of strategies **reduced the estimated carbon footprint of the food service operation's Entree, Deli and Grill stations by 11,764 kg CO$_2$e**, equivalent to emissions from driving over 26,000 miles – more than the circumference of the earth.[4]

- Sodexo increased the share of the pilot cafeteria's revenue relative to the other food retail options in the dining facility, an indication that these shifts were well received by customers.

- Enthusiastic leaders and engaged frontline food service staff are key to a successful climate-friendly food service initiative.

In conclusion, the pilot team found that adding plant-based menu options coupled with behavioral design strategies is a cost-effective, achievable, and high-impact strategy for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This result is consistent with similar previous institutional climate-friendly food service pilot projects. Scaling this strategy across food service operations is a powerful way to reduce procurement-related greenhouse gas emissions, while making the healthy choice the easy choice, and ensuring we meet the dining needs of all the consumers.

THE CASE FOR CLIMATE-FRIENDLY FOOD SERVICE

The Food and Climate Connection

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that agricultural production accounts for ten percent of total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.[5] The share of total emissions associated with the U.S. food system increases to between one quarter and one third after accounting for emissions associated with imported foods and emissions from other parts of the food supply chain (e.g., land use changes, retail, transport, consumption, and waste management).[6] U.S. beef and dairy production – including the production of animal feed, grazing, enteric fermentation, and manure – accounts for almost 80 percent of agricultural greenhouse gas emissions.[7] Animal agriculture is also the largest contributor to U.S. methane emissions.[8] If current global trends in meat and dairy consumption continue, greenhouse gas emissions are projected to exceed global climate targets, even with dramatic emission reductions from transportation, buildings, and other sectors. In fact, a 2020 analysis by Clark et al. stated that even if fossil fuel emissions were cut completely, emissions from the food system alone would prevent reaching the climate goals set out by the Paris Agreement.[9] Therefore, it is imperative that attention and resources are focused on reducing the climate footprint of the food system.

Because plant-based foods typically have a lower carbon footprint, there is a growing scientific consensus that shifting to plant-rich diets is a critical climate solution. In fact, Project Drawdown ranked "plant-rich diets" as the second most effective climate mitigation strategy among hundreds that it comprehensively evaluated.[10]

Meeting Consumer Demand

Demand for plant-based options has grown dramatically over the past decade.[11] Ensuring that plant-based options are available will help accommodate people who avoid animal products for religious, health, philosophical, or other reasons, and help the majority of Americans who are trying to incorporate more plant-based foods into their diets.[12]

Improving Health Outcomes

The *2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommend diversifying protein intake, increasing fiber consumption, and replacing processed meats with pulses - all of which are supported by expanding minimally-processed plant-based menu options.[13] Further, the Scientific Report of the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) highlights research that plant-rich diets reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, colorectal cancer, and conditions associated with cognitive decline.[14] They also highlight that, like animal products, plant-based foods can be a great source of protein, offering a wealth of vital nutrients, such as dietary fiber, antioxidants, and other phytonutrients, while also being lower in saturated fat than animal-sourced foods.[15] The evidence is clear that shifting toward more plant-forward diets offers numerous health benefits. Furthermore, given that chronic, preventable diseases now account for an estimated 86 percent of all healthcare costs, with total costs of just heart disease estimated at $252 billion in 2019, a shift toward more plant-based foods will save billions of dollars in health care costs.[16]

Plant-Forward Food Service: A Growing Track Record

This pilot project builds on the success and lessons learned from similar projects aimed at reducing emissions of food service operations by increasing plant-forward menu options. These initiatives include:

- A plant-based default at NYC Health + Hospitals that led to a 36% reduction in carbon emissions and a reduction in costs by $0.59 per meal, all while maintaining high diner satisfaction rates.[17] A key component of this pilot was training and engaging frontline food service staff in the project.

- Friends of the Earth partnered with the Oakland Unified School District to measure the impact of a two-year project that reshaped the menus towards more protein-rich legumes and vegetables. The shifts generated considerable water and climate benefits including 42 million gallons of water saved and a 14% reduction in carbon footprint from food purchasing, while providing a cost-savings of $42,000.[18]

- Health Care Without Harm, partnered with the Humane Society of the United States, to conduct plant-forward culinary trainings in hospitals. Eleven facilities served plant-based versions of traditional dishes twice per week for four weeks. Across all participating facilities, 10.6 metric tons CO_2e were avoided due to the plant-forward recipe swaps. An additional 47 metric tons CO_2e associated with deforestation and land use change were avoided if considering the carbon opportunity costs. If this pilot were scaled across the hospital system by replacing just two inpatient meals a week with plant-forward meals, a total of 40,218 metric tons of CO_2e would be avoided per year. These savings are comparable to avoiding 103 million miles driven by an average gasoline-powered passenger vehicle.[19]
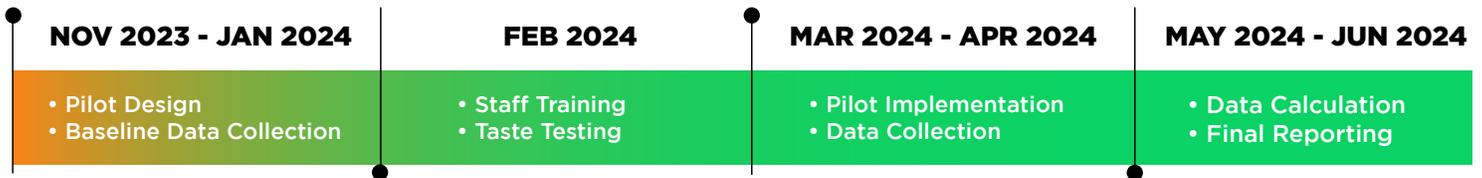
In November 2023, Greener by Default, Friends of the Earth, and Sodexo began planning for a pilot project aimed at assessing the impact of expanding plant-based options and implementing behavioral design strategies to promote greater adoption of plant-based meals at a client cafeteria serving 2,500 meals per day on average to employees and visitors. Before the pilot project, the Entree station, a popular "hot bar," typically did not offer plant-based options. For the eight-week intervention, the Sodexo team replaced one of three meat entrees at the Entree station with popular plant-based items from the Sodexo recipe database. The pilot also added additional plant-based items to the Grill and Deli stations. The menus at the other four stations remained unchanged.[i] Additionally, Sodexo paired the menu shift with behavioral design strategies (described below) to increase the appeal of the plant-based menu options.

Pre-pilot Training for Food Service Staff

Prior to the rollout of the pilot, Friends of the Earth and Sodexo led a training for frontline food service workers, which included an overview of the benefits of plant-forward food service, Sodexo's commitment to reducing the emissions of their food service operations,[ii] and interactive activities like small group discussions and taste testing plant-based dishes. This provided employees with an opportunity to try the items and brainstorm language for how to describe the new options to guests, so that they could convey genuine enthusiasm to diners. Additionally, broader conversations about the benefits of plant-based foods and the reasons for the pilot helped to foster a sense of ownership among the food service team.

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i   On Taco Tuesdays, the Entree station had four meat options and that shifted to three meat options and one plant-based option, so the overall percent increase of plant-based options for the entire intervention was slightly less than one third (approximately 31%).

ii   Sodexo is committed to reduce their carbon emissions by 34% by 2025 compared to their 2017 baseline. In November 2022, Sodexo committed to reach Net Zero by 2040.

Figure 1: **Project Timeline and Process**

NOV 2023 - JAN 2024	FEB 2024	MAR 2024 - APR 2024	MAY 2024 - JUN 2024
• Pilot Design • Baseline Data Collection	• Staff Training • Taste Testing	• Pilot Implementation • Data Collection	• Data Calculation • Final Reporting

The infographic illustrates the process and timeline for the pilot project.

Behavioral Design Strategies

To increase the appeal of the new plant-based items, Greener by Default assisted with renaming the dishes in the pilot project. Research shows that diners are more drawn to dishes with names that feature descriptive language indicating cultural provenance, flavors, and/or cooking techniques rather than dishes labeled as "vegetarian" or "meatless."[20] Dish names that feature unfamiliar ingredients can be off-putting to diners.[21] For instance, "Quinoa Stuffed Zucchini" became "Mediterranean Stuffed Zucchini" and "Lentil Shepherd's Pie" was renamed to "Hearty Shepherd's Pie." Additionally, the plant-based items were placed first in the buffet line, which research has shown increases uptake.[22]

Because emphasizing that food is plant-based can be perceived as excluding omnivores who do not identify as "plant-based" or "vegan",[23] the increase in plant-based options was not advertised to the guests. Signage simply listed the new dishes with their appealing descriptors.

Mushroom carnitas tacos is a popular plant-based dish from the pilot.

Measuring Impact

Evaluating the success of the pilot required tracking shifts in procurement or sales. However, this posed a challenge because procurement data for the Entree station could not be disaggregated from purchasing for the facility as a whole. Additionally, because the Entree station sales are rung up by weight at the point of sale (POS), rather than by type of item, the only way to track uptake of plant-based versus meat-based items was to manually tally the number of servings prepared and compare it to the number of servings leftover after the meal period. The on-site team used this method to track uptake during a baseline period as well as during the pilot. The team also used POS data to track sales of meat, vegetarian, and vegan items at the Deli and Grill stations during baseline and pilot to make sure that meat sales from the Entree station were not simply being displaced to other stations. Due to other operational constraints, we were not able to adequately measure impacts of the pilot intervention on diner satisfaction or food costs. However, we were able to assess the impacts of the pilot on the overall revenue of the cafeteria by comparing the percentage of the cafeteria's revenue to other food retail operations at the site. These findings are described in the revenue analysis section.

RESULTS

During baseline, vegetarian items made up 2.3% of total sales at the Entree, Grill, and Deli stations. The majority of vegetarian sales at the Grill and Deli stations were items like quesadillas and Impossible burgers. During the pilot, one of the three daily meat-based items at the Entree station was replaced with a fully plant-based item and additional vegetarian items were added to the Grill and Deli stations. Sales of the vegetarian Grill and Deli station items remained roughly constant between baseline and intervention, while the new plant-based entree items accounted for anywhere from 8% to 20% of total sales between the three stations. With the addition of the new entree items, plant-based dishes accounted for 16.5% of entrees sold during the eight weeks of the intervention period, a seven-fold increase equating to 5,143 additional entrees sold, or approximately 640 per week.

Figure 2: **Vegetarian Sales Before and During Pilot Project**
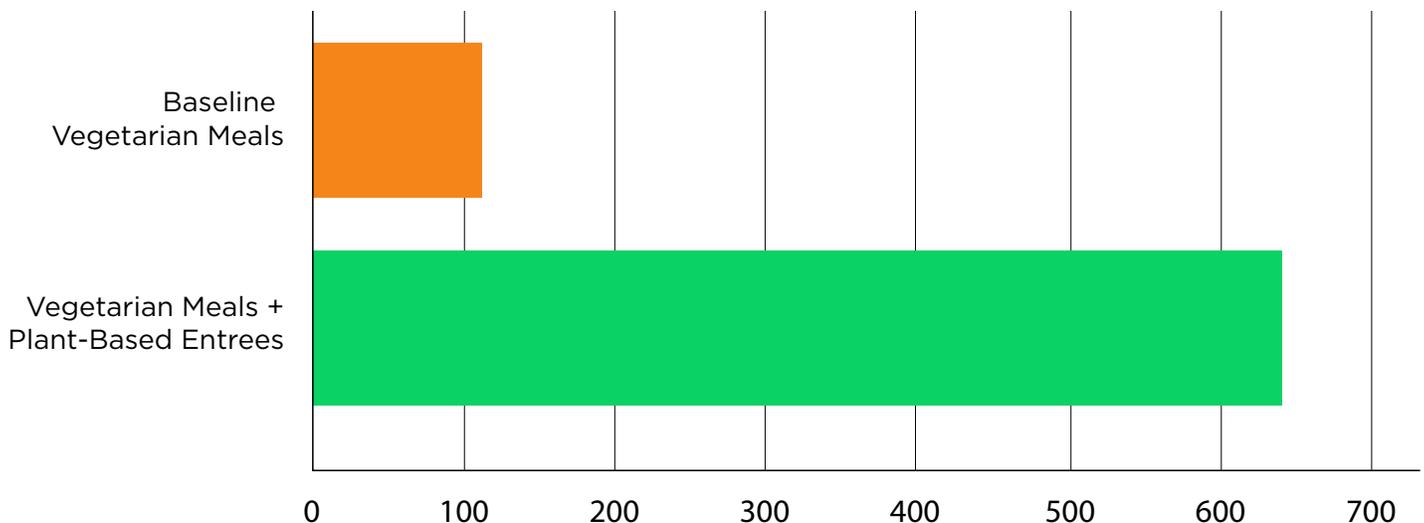
An average of 101 vegetarian meals were served per week before the pilot. During the pilot this number jumped to an average of 640 per week.

Carbon Footprint Analysis

Calculating the precise carbon savings was not possible due to the absence of disaggregated procurement data, so Greener by Default estimated carbon savings by comparing actual emissions from dishes served during the intervention to simulated "business-as-usual" emissions. In order to simulate each day of serving data for the business-as-usual scenario, the proportion of each type of protein dish sold at baseline (e.g., pork, chicken, beef, fish, bean, tofu) was calculated and then multiplied by the number of entrees sold on that day of the intervention. This accounts for differences in the number of meals sold during the baseline and intervention periods by applying the baseline purchasing behavior to the intervention meal count, rather than comparing emissions from all meals sold at baseline to emissions from all meals sold during the intervention.

The total sales of each type of protein during the intervention and business-as-usual scenario were calculated using serving size estimates for each type of dish provided by the onsite Sodexo team (e.g., entrees were 5 oz. of protein, sandwiches were 4 oz.).

To estimate emissions, the total weight of each type of protein was multiplied by each protein's carbon footprint, using established life cycle analysis data from the World Resources Institute's Coolfood Calculator.[24] Total intervention emissions were calculated using the same process with actual intervention serving data. Then, estimated carbon savings were calculated by subtracting intervention emissions from business-as-usual emissions.

Our analysis found that the displacement of sales of meat-based items with plant-based items resulted in estimated carbon savings of 11,764 kg CO_2e emissions, a 14% reduction compared to what would have been expected given diners' purchasing behavior at baseline and the number of meals sold during the intervention. These savings are equivalent to emissions from driving over 26,000 miles – more than the circumference of the earth.[25] If the pilot intervention were continued over the course of a year, the facility would be expected to save more than 76,000 kg CO_2e – equivalent to the carbon emissions sequestered by 88 acres of forest.[26]

Figure 3: **Emissions Reductions During the Pilot Project**

Pilot Impact: Shifted over **5,000** meals from meat-based to plant-based, reducing the carbon footprint by **14%**, saving…

CO_2 **11,674** kg CO_2e

carbon equivalent to charging over **650,000** smartphones

carbon equivalent to driving over **26,000** miles - more than the circumference of the earth!

Revenue Analysis

A key concern for many facilities as they consider shifting towards more plant-forward menu items is whether these climate-friendly items will be appealing to customers and thus good for business. Therefore, we conducted a revenue analysis to determine any financial impacts, positive or negative, related to implementing the pilot strategies. To assess financial impacts, the pilot project team calculated the percentage of revenue at the cafeteria where the pilot took place and compared it with other food service operations on site (mostly fast casual chain restaurants) to ensure that the pilot was not displacing sales from the cafeteria to other vendors. As illustrated in Table 1, the revenue share at the pilot site increased over the course of the pilot from 63% at baseline to 65% during the pilot. Further, according to the Sodexo site manager, production costs remained consistent, noting no noticeable increase or reduction in costs associated with creating a more climate-friendly menu. Since the pilot strategies did not cost more to implement, and because they led to an increased share of revenue for the cafeteria, the site manager decided to continue the pilot strategies indefinitely.

Table 1: **Revenue Impact of the Pilot Project**

Baseline

Cafe	Bistro	Food Court
$62,375	$5,462	$31,679
63%	5%	32%

Pilot

Cafe	Bistro	Food Court
$71,482	$5,848	$32,474
65%	5%	30%

The cafe that participated in the pilot project had slightly increased revenue during the eight-week pilot period compared to the other food service operations in the building that did not participate in the pilot. Food costs remained constant.

DISCUSSION
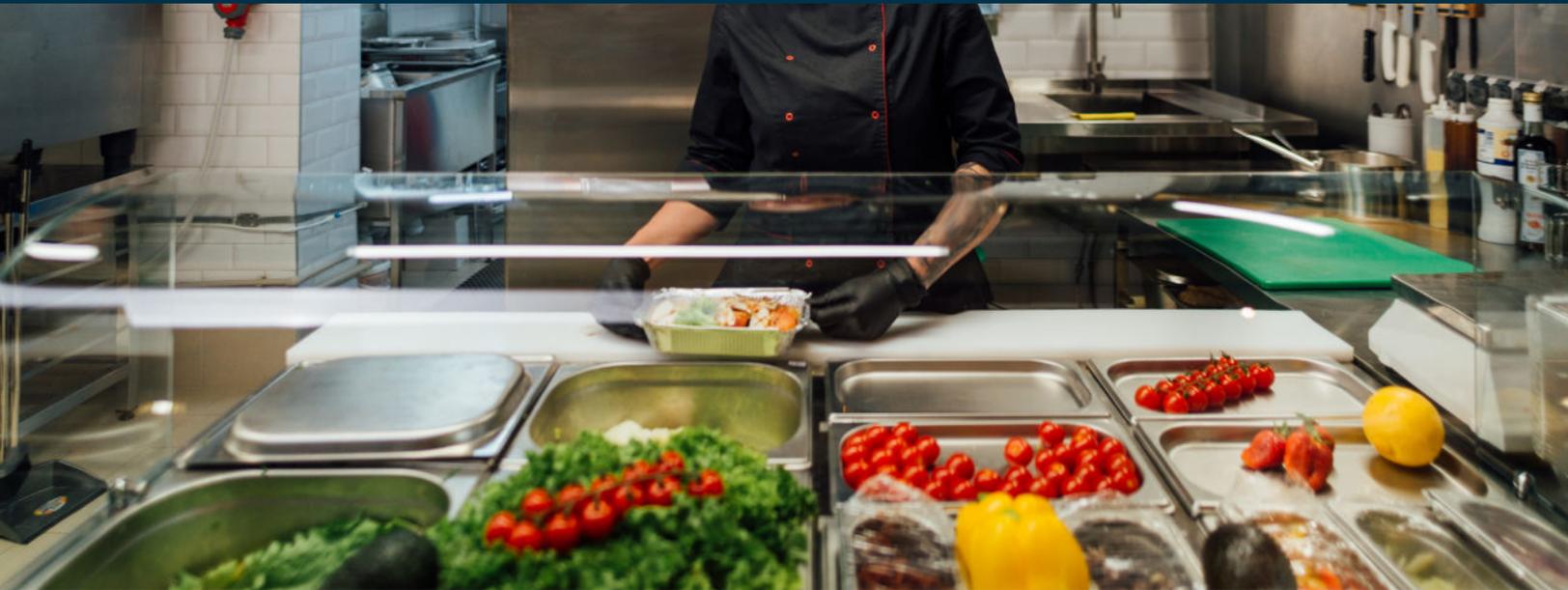
The pilot demonstrated that increasing the ratio of plant-based options and presenting them in an inclusive, appealing way can increase the uptake of healthy, low-carbon foods while preserving freedom of choice.

Buy-in from Leaders and Frontline Staff is Critical

One aspect of the pilot that contributed to its success was the buy-in and enthusiasm from leadership at both Sodexo and the client site. The commitment from these leaders was not only necessary to implement the pilot, it also encouraged frontline food service staff to be more invested in the success of the pilot. Leaders that are willing to support innovative climate-friendly food service strategies are essential to the success of these types of initiatives.

The pilot team also aimed to engage food service staff throughout the pilot process. Frontline food service workers had positive feedback about the pilot, with one worker sharing, **"I like the variety on the menu, and the customers enjoy it,"** and another expressing, **"I like that we have healthier entrees to choose from if we want."** Several of the food service workers noted that as a

result of the training and the pilot, they tried to eat more plant-based meals at home with their families, though cost was perceived as a barrier. Additionally, food service staff received informal feedback from vegetarian customers that they appreciated the increase in healthy, plant-based menu options that met their dietary needs.

Plant-Based Comfort Foods with Appealing Names are Most Popular

There was a difference in the popularity of the plant-based items. The pilot found that plant-based "comfort foods" with rich, familiar flavors and appealing names proved to be the best sellers. The four most popular dishes by number of units sold were: Buffalo Cauliflower, Blackened Tofu, Paella, and Creole Grits. The four least popular dishes were: Stuffed Zucchini, Tofu Curry, Black Eyed Pea Casserole, and Moroccan Eggplant. Based on these findings, Sodexo will focus on adding plant-based comfort foods that feature bold and familiar flavors.

Limiting Beef Entrees Could Increase Climate Benefits

While the intervention did result in a significant decrease in emissions, plant-based options tended to displace poultry and pork selections. On days when beef was offered, there was often an increase in the proportion of people choosing beef dishes compared to baseline, which undermined the carbon savings from the plant-based options. Thus, the carbon savings could be greatly increased by limiting the amount of beef entrees offered at the Entree station and/or reducing the serving size of beef by combining it with plant-based ingredients like mushrooms, beans, or lentils in entrees like stew or tacos.

Data Limitations

There were some limitations to the pilot. Because it was not possible to access procurement data for the pilot location, the calculations rely on staff tallies of the number of servings sold for each type of hot bar entree, and on estimates of the average amount of protein per serving. It is possible there were errors in the serving data, which are more subject to human error than procurement data. It is also possible that the amount of protein in each dish varied slightly from the standard serving sizes. Additionally, data was only provided for three of the seven cafe stations, so while we accounted for spillover effects between these three stations that tend to be the predominant sources of sales of meat-based items, we could not estimate spillover effects to other cafe stations. It is possible that the intervention caused some people who would have eaten at one of the three stations we monitored to eat at other stations in the cafe or at retail locations in the food court (though this is unlikely based on our revenue analysis). Depending on the food items those customers actually chose and what they would have chosen without the intervention, this could increase or decrease the estimated carbon savings. Additionally, logistical limitations prevented robust surveying of diner satisfaction pre- and post-intervention.

There was also significant variability in the number of meals sold from day to day, with up to 300 additional visitors attending conferences on site and purchasing meals on certain days during both the baseline and intervention periods. These visitors are from diverse backgrounds and may have different meal preferences than the on-site employees who were present continuously throughout the baseline and intervention periods. The calculations account for some of this variability by normalizing the meal count between the two periods, but if a large number of people during either time period had vastly different purchasing behavior, this would make it challenging to isolate changes in emissions caused by the intervention from changes caused by having different meal preferences. Lengthening the duration of the baseline and intervention periods would further account for the effects of visitors and increase the validity of the carbon savings estimate.

As a next step, Friends of the Earth, Food for Climate League, and Greener by Default are creating resources to make the frontline food service worker training easily replicable, and to help operators create delicious, appealing plant-based options that are high in protein, which is a concern for sites where food service operators are serving high performing populations with unique nutritional needs. Sodexo will use these resources to continue to expand their delicious climate-friendly offerings and support greater adoption of low carbon meals in accordance with their climate commitments.

CONCLUSION

This pilot project builds upon the work of other organizations, government agencies, campuses, companies, and food service management providers striving towards climate-friendly procurement. These innovators are testing and implementing a wide range of strategies to reduce the carbon footprint of food procurement-related emissions in food service operations.

One promising strategy, that is both effective at reducing emissions and low- to no-cost, is to increase climate-friendly food options by shifting a portion of the menu to plant-based options. The pilot project showed that even a modest shift to one-third plant-based options can significantly reduce the carbon footprint of a food service operation – in this case by more than 11,000 kg CO_2e over only eight weeks.

This impact could be magnified by scaling climate-friendly food service strategies across more sites and adopting these strategies full-time. The pilot project site featured in this report decided to continue implementing the pilot strategies even after the pilot project ended. If sales of plant-based items remain consistent, then the site will have reduced their carbon footprint by 76,000 kg CO_2e after 12 months of offering an expanded number of plant-based options. Further progress would be achieved by increasing plant-based options at more food service operations.

Acknowledgments

Appendix A: Resources

Food Service Playbook for Promoting Sustainable Food Choices
World Resources Institute
This playbook outlines effective behavior change strategies that food service companies can use to serve up sustainable food options diners will want to buy. These strategies are based on up-to-date evidence from behavioral science research combined with expert input from the food service industry.

Greener by Default Resource Guide
Greener by Default
A Greener by Default menu features plant-based meals as the default, while giving diners the choice to opt into meat and/or dairy. This resource guide presents the evidence for going Greener by Default and explains how to implement the concept in any dining setting.

Plant-Forward Future
Practice Greenhealth
This is the landing page of a set of curated resources from Practice Greenhealth, Health Care Without Harm, and partners that will help health care facilities set a plant-forward goal, menu and market plant-forward dishes, and track their progress. The three main subpages include a high-level **how-to guide**, the **case for plant-forward** from the viewpoint of different stakeholders, and an extensive library of additional **resources** to support implementation, marketing, and tracking.

Food Waste Solutions
Practice Greenhealth
This resource guides institutions through each food waste reduction strategy in the EPA food recovery hierarchy from source reduction to food donation to recycling and will help make a plan for achieving waste reduction goals. The primary audience is healthcare institutions but the guidance is broadly applicable to other institutional food service operations.

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