



Friends of the Earth
Climate-Friendly Food
For Healthy Kids and a Healthy Planet

Climate-Smart & Regenerative Sourcing for School Food



Are you having trouble navigating what “climate-smart” and “regenerative” really mean?

You’re not alone. Across the country, school nutrition teams are looking to serve nourishing meals that protect student health, support farmers, and build climate solutions.

Terms like *climate-smart* and *regenerative* are showing up more and more—but they aren’t always clearly defined. This can make it difficult to compare vendors or labels that make similar claims and to feel confident that your purchasing decisions are supporting student health and the environment. There is no single practice that makes a farm or ranch “regenerative” or “climate smart.” Regenerative agriculture is a complex system of practices that work together to restore soil, support biodiversity, build long-term farm resilience, and foster human health and sustainable farmer livelihoods.

So, how do you make sense of it all when working with farmers or asking suppliers to prioritize climate-friendly or regenerative practices? Check out the three steps below.

1. Start by asking whether a farmer or rancher is certified USDA Organic



Organic is a leading regenerative label—USDA Organic and the labels that build on it—Regenerative Organic Certified and Real Organic Project—are the most reliable and enforceable standards when it comes to chemical use and soil health.



Organic farming keeps toxic chemicals out of our food—USDA Organic prohibits more than 900 synthetic pesticides. [Studies](#) show that just one week on an organic diet can reduce pesticides in the body up to 95%. Organic food and farming also excludes synthetic fertilizers, artificial additives and synthetic dyes, GMOs, antibiotics, and growth hormones.



Organic helps build healthy, resilient soils. The USDA Organic standard has strong requirements for soil health practices like cover cropping, crop rotations, and building soil fertility with compost and natural inputs. Learn more about the science behind why [organic is regenerative](#).



Every bite of organic food is backed by a strong standard. USDA Organic has a robust third-party verification system enforced by federal law, with supply chain traceability ensuring that food labeled organic meets the standard from farm to lunch tray.

Tips for Organic Procurement

- Ask your current distributor what organic options they already carry
- Explore organic sourcing through [DoD Fresh](#)
- Use practical guides like Friends of the Earth's [Organic School Food Roadmap](#)
- Understand the benefits—[Why Organic School Food](#)
- Lean on partners like Friends of the Earth for helpful resources: [vendor lists](#), [recipes](#), [marketing materials](#) and organic product sourcing support

2. For farmers without certifications, use our questionnaire

While USDA Organic is ideal, there are many farmers and ranchers using organic practices that are not certified due to cost or other barriers.

Friends of the Earth created a questionnaire to provide school nutrition teams, suppliers, and non-profit partners with a practical way to assess farm practices and engage directly with producers. It's designed to help identify farms using regenerative and climate-smart approaches—without relying solely on certifications.

Whether you're just getting started or looking to strengthen your sourcing criteria, this questionnaire can help guide the way.

Evaluating Farms Without Certifications

[Farmer Questionnaire for Regenerative and Climate-Smart Practices](#)

3. Look for labels that prohibit toxic pesticides

Friends of the Earth evaluated leading food labeling programs to help purchasers make informed decisions. We found that some “regenerative” labeling programs still allow harmful pesticides.

Children are uniquely vulnerable to toxic exposures; their bodies and brains are still developing. Research shows that many [commonly used pesticides are linked to health harms](#) including developmental and learning impacts, hormone disruption, and increased long-term disease risk. The latest science shows that [small exposures matter](#), and “children’s exposure to pesticides should be limited as much as possible,” according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

[Pesticides also harm soil life](#), which is at the heart of regenerative agriculture.

Reducing use of harmful agrochemicals is central to protecting children’s health and the health of the soil in which our food grows.

Here are some trustworthy labels.



**Note that CCOF and QAI certify to the USDA Organic standard*

Understanding Food Labels

[Regenerative Food Labels: What's Behind the Claim?](#)

Bottom Line for School Districts

Sourcing food that supports student health, farmers, and the climate doesn't have to be overwhelming. By starting with trusted certifications like organic, asking the right questions about labels, and using simple tools to engage with farmers, you can make confident, informed decisions.

Every purchase is an opportunity to reduce harmful exposures, support responsible farming, and build a more resilient food system. With the right approach, meaningful climate-smart and regenerative sourcing can become an achievable part of your school meal program.

Healthy children. Healthy land. Stronger farming communities. That's regenerative food done right.



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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 delicious, plant-forward and organic menus that benefit students and the planet. We work with over 100 school districts in California, as well as state agencies, NGO partners and organic and regenerative farmers. 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 reach out to our team at climatefriendlyfood@foe.org.

