



April 15, 2026

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor of California
1021 O Street, Suite 9000
Sacramento, CA 95814

CC: Senate President pro Tempore Mike McGuire; Assembly Speaker Robert Rivas; Senate Budget Chair Scott Wiener; Assembly Budget Chair Jesse Gabriel; First Partner Jennifer Newsom

RE: Budget Request – \$1 Million to Expand Access to Plant-Based Milk in California Schools

Dear Governor Newsom,

On behalf of the undersigned California school districts, food and farm organizations, plant-based food companies, environmental advocates, and health organizations, we write to respectfully request **\$1 million one-time allocation in the FY 2026–27 budget** to enable select high-need K-12 schools to offer fortified plant-based milk options alongside dairy milk.

We recognize that this request comes late in the budget cycle. However, this opportunity has only recently become available following the passage of federal legislation – The Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act (S.222) – in January 2026, which for the first time allows schools to proactively offer nutritionally equivalent, non-dairy milk options on the lunch line. Since the law’s enactment, it has become clear that cost remains a primary barrier to school district implementation. Without targeted state support, most districts cannot absorb the additional per-serving cost of plant-based milk, despite strong student demand and clear benefits.

A \$1 million one-time budget allocation would allow California to act quickly and strategically – supporting early adopters, generating real-world data, and informing potential future scale-up.

Offering Non-Dairy Milk Advances Nutrition Equity and Student Access

For many students, the school lunch line presents an impossible choice: drink the milk offered and risk stomach pain, discomfort, and difficulty concentrating in class, or skip it and miss out on critical calories and nutrients. Lactose intolerance disproportionately affects students of color—including approximately 95% of Asians, 60% to 80% of African Americans, 80% to 100% of American Indians, and 50% to 80% of Hispanics, according to the [National Institutes of Health](#)—making this a daily reality for millions of children.

In California, where nearly 80% of public school students are students of color and roughly 60% are from low-income households and rely on school meals as a primary source of nutrition, this barrier has significant equity implications. Students who cannot consume dairy are often left without a nutritionally comparable option, despite the state’s leadership on School Meals for All.

Until January, schools were only able to offer plant-based milk options in response to parental or doctor notes. The [new federal flexibility](#) allows school districts to proactively offer nutritionally equivalent non-dairy beverages on the lunch line. But without funding assistance to school districts, access will remain limited in practice.

Ensuring plant-based milk is available to all students—without stigma or barriers—means that students who are lactose intolerant, allergic to dairy, vegan, or observing religious dietary practices can participate fully in school meals and access the nutrition they need to learn and thrive.

Offering Non-Dairy Milk Supports California's Climate Goals

California has set ambitious climate targets, and school food procurement is an important but underutilized lever in achieving emissions reductions.

[Research from Johns Hopkins University](#) found that dairy contributes approximately 32% of greenhouse gas emissions from school meals, with the majority coming from cow's milk. The study found that substituting soy milk for cow's milk would reduce overall school meal emissions by 25%, without requiring any changes to menus or nutrition standards.

This represents a high-impact climate strategy aligned with your leadership on climate-smart procurement.

Expanding Nutritionally Appropriate Beverages Will Reduce Food Waste

Milk is one of the most wasted items in school cafeterias and a major contributor to food-related emissions. Nationally, approximately [45 million gallons of milk](#) are discarded each year in schools.

Offering appropriate alternatives can reduce milk waste, ensuring that taxpayer-funded meals are actually consumed.

Why State Investment Is Needed Now

California has been a national leader in advancing healthy and sustainable school meals, including through the School Food Best Practices Fund, which helped districts expand access to plant-based food and beverage options. However, that funding stream has expired at a moment when schools are newly able – but not yet equipped – to act on this new federal flexibility to offer non-dairy milk.

Non-dairy milk continues to cost schools an additional \$0.20 to \$1.00 per serving due to longstanding federal subsidies and supply chain structures that favor dairy.

A targeted investment would address this barrier directly, enabling a small number of high-need districts to implement this new option and generate real-world data to inform future investments that build on California's prior leadership and existing school food infrastructure.

Given the climate and waste reduction benefits, this proposal is well-suited to funding through existing climate or sustainability-focused funding streams, as well as other available state

funding sources. This proposal is intended to complement, not compete with, California's School Meals for All program by ensuring all students can fully access school meals

By acting now, California can continue its national leadership in school meals, climate policy, and educational equity by ensuring this new federal flexibility translates into meaningful benefits for students – expanding equitable access to school meals, reducing food waste, advancing climate goals through procurement, and generating the data needed to guide future policy.

We appreciate your consideration of this request and would welcome the opportunity to provide additional information or connect you with school districts eager to participate.

Sincerely,

School Districts and Charter Schools

Albany Unified School District	Montague Elementary School District
Alta Public Schools	Monterey Peninsula Unified School District
Brisbane School District	Napa Valley Unified School District
Carpinteria Unified School District	New West Charter School
Coalinga-Huron Unified School District	Palmdale Elementary School District
Forestville Union School District	PUC Schools
Garvey School District	Redwood City School District
General Shafter Elementary School District	San Marino Unified School District
Gravenstein Unified School District	San Ramon Valley Unified School District
Kings River Union Elementary School District	Santa Paula Unified School District
Lewiston Elementary School District	Tamalpais Union High School District
Lighthouse Community Public Schools	Templeton Unified School District
Mariposa County Unified School District	Upper Lake Unified School District
Menifee Union School District	West Contra Costa Unified School District
	YES Charter Academy

Organizations and Companies

2nd Harvest Foundation	Coalition for Healthy School Food
Acterra: Action for a Healthy Planet	Common Threads
Balanced	Conscious Kitchen
Center for Biological Diversity	Eat for the Earth
Center for Environmental Health	Ethics in Education Network
Center for Jewish Food Ethics	Farm Animal Rights Movement
Center for Science in the Public Interest	Farm Forward
Ceres Community Project	Farm Sanctuary
Ch'il Indigenous Foods	Food Revolution Network
Chef Ann Foundation	Food Studies Institute
Christian Animal Rights Association	Food System Innovations

Forager Project
Free from Harm
Friends of the Earth
Friends of the Noyo River Conservation
Research Center
Good Food Institute
Healthy Kids, Happy Planet!
Humane Farming Association
Humane World for Animals
Hunger Free America
In Defense of Animals
Jewish Vegan Life
Kind Heart Coalition
Liberate In Mind
Milkadamia
Nature's Dietician®
Nutrient Density Initiative
Oatly

Oceanic Preservation Society
Physicians Committee for Responsible
Medicine
Plant Based Foods Association
Plant Based Foods Institute
Plant Futures at UCLA
Plant Futures Initiative
Planted Society and Eat for Impact
Santa Cruz Climate Action Network
Sly Park Environmental Education Center
Social Compassion in Legislation
Strategic Action For Animals
Strategies for Ethical and Environmental
Development (SEED)
The Changemaker Project
The Humane League
Vegans of LA
Youth Empowered Action (YEA) Camp

Individual School Foodservice Professionals

Gemma Capua, Student Services
Coordinator
Kristen Collarini, Food Service Director
Adrienne Garza, Director of Food Services
Melissa Herrera, Director of Food Services

Rosa Rubio, Director of Food Services
Suzy Sayre, Director of Nutrition Services
Kelly Verburgt, Director of Food and
Nutrition Services