

# FOOD SECURITY



## BUILDING FOOD SECURITY IN CALIFORNIA COMMUNITIES

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AT THE SAME TIME THAT AMERICA is one of the most productive agricultural nations in the world, adequate amounts of safe, nutritious, and affordable food is hardly a reality for all citizens. Despite the agricultural abundance of the state, the issue of “food security” is particularly pressing in California, where 10.8% of all households were food insecure from 1997–99, ([www.ocpp.org/2002/issue020104.htm](http://www.ocpp.org/2002/issue020104.htm)). Food insecurity in urban neighborhoods is one symptom of a food system stressed by increasing development of farmlands, environmental degradation of farming ecosystems, declining farm profits, widening distances between food producers and consumers, inequitable food distribution practices, and greater concentration in agricultural production and processing operations. These trends threaten regional self-sufficiency, stress natural resources, increase uncertainty about the food supply, and restrict access to locally grown food in urban communities. The lack of food security in our neighborhoods leads us to two key questions: 1) what programs are being implemented to increase food security in our communities, and 2) what are the roles that producers and consumers play within the larger framework of community food security?

Traditionally, agriculture and nutrition have been treated separately, which has fragmented the inter-related issues of food production, processing, distribution, and consumption. Because food security is cen-

tral to the viability of agriculture and human and environmental well-being, Community Food Security, or “all persons in a community having access to culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate food through non-emergency sources at all times” (Winne, Joseph, & Fisher, 1997) provides a new conceptual and practical framework for addressing the myriad social, economic, and environmental challenges facing America’s food system. According to Fisher (1997), central to the Community Food Security approach are the following five principles:

1. *Meeting food needs of limited income communities,*
2. *Building up a community’s food resources to meet its own needs,*
3. *Building individual’s abilities to provide for their own food needs rather than rely on outside sources,*
4. *Protecting local agriculture and building links between farmers and consumers, and*
5. *Interdisciplinary analysis of a community’s food system, and the need to plan for its food security.*

Community food security is a preventative approach that seeks comprehensive and sustainable solutions to the nation’s food and farming crisis by using environmental and nutritional enhancement as catalysts for broader social advances (e.g., social, economic, and environmental justice) as well as meeting immediate needs (e.g., hunger and poverty). According to the United States Department of Agriculture ([www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov)), policies and programs implemented under the label of Community Food Security (CSF) address a diverse range of issues, including:

- Ecologically sustainable agricultural production
- Direct food marketing
- Diet-related health problems
- Participation in and access to federal nutrition assistance programs
- Food availability and affordability
- Farmland preservation
- Economic viability of rural communities
- Economic opportunity and job security
- Community development and social cohesion

Ensuring small farm viability and preventing food insecurity requires that farmers make adequate on-farm livelihoods, that urban poor continue to be eligible for and participate in the nutritional safety net, and that reliance on public programs be complemented and phased-out with community-based entrepreneurial activities designed to increase access to food. A number of CFS initiatives nationwide are working to strengthen local food systems and promote self-sufficiency and well-being for both agricultural producers and consumers. These initiatives often provide multiple benefits and include:

- Farm-to-school programs that help local farmers sell fresh fruits and vegetables directly to school cafeterias.
- Farmers’ markets that boost incomes of small farmers and increase consumers’ access to fresh produce.
- Edible gardens that help community residents supplement their diets with home-grown produce.
- Farmer-to-consumer programs, like community-supported agriculture (CSA), that provide small scale farmers with economic stability while ensuring consumer members have high quality produce.
- Agritourism programs that provide opportunities for small-scale farmers and ranchers to share the rural experience with urban visitors as a means of generating revenue (See *Business Resources*, pp. 34–35).
- Outreach programs that help increase the number of eligible households that participate in federal nutrition programs like Women Infant and Children (WIC) food vouchers and Food Stamps.

While the CFS movement has fostered many new and innovative initiatives, it remains in its infancy. Therefore, organizations have emerged to foster CFS efforts around the state including University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE)–Alameda’s Food Security Community Development and Public Policy Program and the Center for Food and Justice. The UCCE is bringing agriculture back into the urban communities of Alameda County and the Bay Area and

strengthening the local food system by linking university researchers and communities to support community food security initiatives with research, education, outreach and technical assistance. Program activities include strengthening the food system stakeholder network, training grade school teachers in nutrition and gardening, facilitating the transition of Electronic Benefits Transfer at farmers' markets, and supporting food policy councils.

The Center for Food and Justice (CFJ) is working to establish a more just, democratic and sustainable food system in the greater Los Angeles area. As a part of the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College, CFJ helps connect local and regional farmers with communities and schools, strives to build community resources, and works to develop community-led food access programs and solutions. Since forming in 1995, CFJ has been a part of the development of gardens and other food programs in domestic violence shelters, the creation of linkages between farmers and school children, and the creation of a guide for accessing fresh, local foods in Los Angeles.

Selling and shopping at a local farmers' market is a practical way of integrating the ideas of CFS into our daily lives. Although much of the food California consumers buy at large supermarkets is grown in the state, the anonymity of the producer and lack of information about the conditions under which it was grown help to widen the gap between rural and urban communities. At the Santa Cruz Farmers' Market, Jill from Four Sisters Farm explains that selling at the market allows a small farm like Four Sisters to survive because "we can get a better price selling directly than if we were to sell wholesale. It is also always nicer to talk directly to the customer because we can get good feedback."

Leslie of Route One Farms concurs, "Route One has been farming around here for over twenty years. The farmers' market is a perfect way to turn consumers on to locally grown produce. Growing organically should be all about selling locally. The market also helps sustain the community and allows for farmers to live where they work."



▲ Leslie of Route One Farms

Sandra Ward of Greensward Farms ▼



Jill of Four Sisters Farm ▼



There are further examples of CSF initiatives at work. The Santa Monica-Malibu Salad Bar Program is

one example of a successful effort to support local farmers and promote access to fresh food among schools with high numbers of limited-income children. Working closely with the Santa Monica farmers' markets and school district food services, the Center for Food and Justice (CFJ) began developing a system whereby the school district could easily purchase farm-fresh produce for the salad bar through the farmers' market. Students, staff, and parents were closely involved in decision-making and curriculum and program development. To begin to connect students with farmers' market produce and farmers, CFJ helped facilitate farmers' market and farm tours where students meet farmers and learn about the growing cycle and growing methods. The program has been extremely successful. Nearly three thousand

student salad bar meals are purchased per week. The program now operates in nine schools in two school districts and is expanding to additional schools and districts. These salad bar purchases directly support the small farmers whose produce is purchased for the program.

While limited-income urban areas are particularly marginalized by the mainstream food system as supermarkets leaving inner cities makes access to healthy and affordable food difficult (Fisher, 1997), the Farm-Fresh Choice Program presents a practical alternative. An example of a successful CFS initiative in Alameda County is the new Farm-Fresh Choice Program that connects limited-income communities in south and west Berkeley with local farmers of color. Through the program, participating farmers drop off their produce at the Berkeley Farmers' Market, where it is picked up, brought to local childcare centers like Berkeley Youth Alternatives and displayed so that families are able to shop while they are picking up their children.

Thus, as producers and consumers of locally grown organic food, we play a vital role in the food security of our communities, our state, and ultimately, our country. Therefore, it is necessary that we strengthen our common vision for a food secure future by uniting forces and using resources like the Center for Food and Justice and the Food Security Community Development and Public Policy Program to create and sustain Community Food Security initiatives. At the same time, it is imperative that we continually challenge ourselves to increase mindfulness about consumption patterns that contribute to degradation of global food security, such as the excessive use of non-renewable resources. Hopefully Community Food Security efforts will help counteract dominant trends in the food system and eventually bring about a "new food system" — one based on social justice, environmental sustainability, and economic viability (Misako, A. and Fisher, A. 2001). 🌍