



March 12, 2018

House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

To the Honorable Members of the House Committee on Agriculture:

Re: 2018 Farm Bill Statement from the OC Food Access Coalition

Orange County is often incorrectly perceived as an area of uninterrupted affluence. In reality, the county is home to large groups of people in need of basic services and many pockets of significant poverty. Financial challenges make it difficult for these people to access the fresh and nutritious foods that can improve their health—disproportionately so for minority populations. Children are especially vulnerable to the effects of poor nutrition in their developmental years: these issues range from short-term health problems to learning disabilities, with significant effects on their long-term health outcomes.

In 2018, nearly one-third of households in Orange County will struggle with food insecurity. Orange County currently ranks 10th in the nation for childhood food insecurity and 5th in the state for adult food insecurity. The health of many low-income Orange County residents is poor, tending toward obesity and the many conditions related to it: diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, orthopedic problems, and depression.

Food security in our county is affected by many factors, including local and state policy, non-profit and charity advocacy, and existing socioeconomic structures. But no single piece of legislation has as much impact on food policy—in Orange County and nationwide—as the Federal Farm Bill. The Farm Bill, scheduled for renewal every five years, is a massive and comprehensive funding and policy package which provides assistance for agriculture, conservation, research, rural development, and food security—touching the daily lives of everyone in our county.

The reauthorization of the Farm Bill in 2018 offers an opportunity to improve, innovate, and strengthen policies surrounding food production, food education, food access, and food literacy. Though the Bill is tremendous in scope, OCFAC has identified six key policy goals for the next iteration of this crucial piece of legislation.

1. The reduction of food insecurity through the strengthening of existing and effective federal food programs.
2. The expansion of community/school gardens and urban farms through support of urban agriculture policies and access to credit and crop insurance for beginning farmers, historically-underrepresented farmers, and small farmers.

3. Protection and support of food literacy and nutrition education programs through SNAP-Ed and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program.
4. Increased funding for successful SNAP incentive programs, such as Market Match at Farmers' Markets, to increase the purchase and consumption of fruits and vegetables, thereby supporting farmers and consumers at the same time.
5. Supporting fruit and vegetable producers by increasing funding to the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. This program supports research, agricultural extension activities, and programs for the specialty crop industry.
6. Increased support for Farm to Institution programming, including: Farm to School; Farm to Hospital; Farm to Jail; and Farm to Senior Center. These programs support life-long learning about our food systems, behavior modification for chronic disease, and provide diverse mental health and emotional benefits for participants.

1. The reduction of food insecurity through the strengthening of existing and effective federal food programs:

Currently, 1 in 12 residents of Orange County are enrolled in the SNAP program. According to the USDA, this program brings a total of \$720 million in economic activity and over 4,000 jobs to our county. Congress should protect and strengthen SNAP by resisting calls to make it a block grant or provide other structural changes to the program. Additionally, we believe that Congress should pass H.R. 1276 — the “Closing the Meal Gap Act of 2017” so that individuals and families no longer have to choose between food and other basic necessities. Increasing the base SNAP allotment from the Thrifty Food Plan to the Low-Cost Food Plan will allow for the purchase of more healthful food items—as fruits and vegetables tend to be more expensive than processed, packaged items high, which are frequently high in sodium, sugar and saturated fat. In combination with increased SNAP-Ed, these changes will help individuals choose and pay for a nutritionally adequate diet.

Overall, SNAP responds quickly and effectively to people recovering from natural disasters or economic crises as well as reaches key vulnerable populations. Currently the majority of people on SNAP are children, seniors, and people with disabilities. The SNAP program has a well-documented history of assisting people out of deep poverty.

Other Federal Food programs such as, WIC, T/EFAP and CSFP are also vital in preventing hunger and some of the worst outcomes of poverty when income falls short for our residents and we stand by to support continued expansion of them as well.

2. The expansion of community/school gardens and urban farms through support of urban agriculture policies and access to credit and crop insurance for beginning farmers, historically-underrepresented farmers, and small farmers.

Farm-based education helps foster a life-long appreciation of our food systems and encourages healthy food choices. Urban production farms, community gardens, and educational farms are at the center of community resiliency in the event of natural disasters, and encourage local eating trends that are friendly to the environment. Unfortunately, USDA is behind in developing substantial policies that support urban agriculture in both issues of zoning and of funding. Urban farms are often run by non-traditional or beginning farmers who need access to capital and insurance in order to properly serve the community. These farmers require access to capital, insurance, and continuing education, and may not have evidence of viability or collateral to offer. Changes should be made to the Farm Bill that support these non-traditional farmers and farms—not just to encourage new and diverse agriculture, but because these farms provide crucial support of community education, community resiliency and provision of food to the communities they are based in.

3. Protection and support of food literacy and nutrition education programs through SNAP-Ed and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program.

These programs provide targeted, effective nutrition education that empowers families and individuals to make lasting behavioral changes and build their skills in managing limited resources. These lessons encourage lifelong healthy behaviors when these families are able to access healthy food items in their communities with their limited resources. These lessons focus on skill building so that families are equipped to make healthful diet choices and lead active lifestyles, while on food assistance and beyond. From Harvest of the Month programming in our K-12 school districts to EFNEP Peer Educators training parents and older adults, healthy nutrition education and food literacy is vital to improving dietary consumption and improving health outcomes.

4. Increased funding for successful SNAP incentive programs, such as Market Match at Farmers' Markets, to increase the purchase and consumption of fruits and vegetables, thereby supporting farmers and consumers at the same time:

FINI funding encourages SNAP shoppers to purchase healthy food and empowers them to increase their consumption of fruits and vegetables. In California, there are 339 certified farmers' and mobile markets participating in the program, with new markets joining all the time. Due to this market access and increased purchasing power, SNAP participants have reported higher fruit and vegetable consumption. In Orange County, we have three farmers' markets that participate in the Market Match program. Continued funding and innovation in the FINI program will allow more individuals in Orange County to access healthy produce and increase their health and well-being by encouraging new markets to participate.

5. Supporting fruit and vegetable producers by increasing funding to the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. This program supports research, agricultural extension activities, and programs for the specialty crop industry.

The purpose of the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) is to enhance the competitiveness of so-called “specialty crops”—which include such foods as tomatoes, lettuce, and strawberries. California farms produce nearly 60% of the specialty crops grown in the United States. Our local farms are in a unique position to benefit from the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, but these funds would also support the work of farmers throughout the nation, and help lower the costs of produce items that many communities rely on for healthy, varied diets.

6. Increased support for Farm to Institution programming, including: Farm to School; Farm to Hospital; Farm to Jail; and Farm to Senior Center.

Farm to Institution programming provides broad-ranging benefits to the communities in which they are instituted. They assist in increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables amongst participants, and encourage food literacy by connecting participants with the sources of their food. Further, they help ensure markets and purchasers of local food, which in turn supports local farmers and strengthens local food systems.

In Orange County, we have a 100% participation rate in Farm to School Programming and are now beginning the conversations about Farm to Institution practices in corporate, hospital, and jail settings. Because Orange County is home to many major corporations, large research hospitals, and other institutions, the county would certainly stand to benefit from expanded and permanent federal support for Farm to Institution programs.

Concluding Statement

As deliberations on the 2018 Farm Bill continue, we urge our legislators to work together to craft a unified Farm Bill that strengthens and protects federal nutrition programs and ensures the health and well-being of residents in Orange County, California, and throughout the United States. Orange County Food Access Coalition’s Advocacy and Policy Workgroup members are particularly committed to resisting calls to develop block-grant programs or reduction of funding to farm and nutrition programming. As the backbone of our nation’s agricultural sector, the 2018 Farm Bill will ideally fund and develop programs to support local food systems, reduce poverty, ensure social safety nets, and improve public health. In doing so, the next iteration of the Farm Bill would allow us to continue developing food access and food literacy in our community.

Sincerely,



Christina S. Hall
Executive Director
Orange County Food Access Coalition
on behalf of
the OC Food Access Coalition Advocacy and Policy Workgroup

Cc: Rep. Mike Conaway, Texas, Chair
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