Alternative Protein Procurement

Overview

The federal government’s food programs directly fund billions of meals for millions of Americans every year through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), school meals, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Policies and guidelines for these programs, as well as General Services Administration (GSA) contracting guidelines, also indirectly impact billions of dollars in purchasing decisions for retailers, vendors, and consumers. Adjustments in federal policy can result in more plant-based options in stores and on menus, allowing consumers to choose more sustainable options.

In each case, current guidelines sometimes encourage the inclusion of healthy and sustainable options, including plant-based options. Still, there are many opportunities to expand access and improve the sustainability of the food options available through these federal programs. For example, outdated guidelines treat protein—with an emphasis on animal protein—as if it were a nutrient of public health concern. Updated guidelines would focus on true nutrients of concern like calcium, potassium, and vitamin D and would account for the health benefits of plant-based foods. Improved guidance and incentives for retailers and contractors can also encourage greater availability of plant-based options.

Principles

**Modified Nutrient Requirements:** Policymakers should modify the protein requirements of food programs like school meals, CACFP, and WIC that can exclude foods like dairy alternatives and focusing instead on nutrients of public health concern like calcium, vitamin D, and potassium.

**Proactive Procurement:** Federal agencies, including GSA, should give explicit preference in award decisions to vendors who commit to offering plant-based options daily. They should also assist alternative-protein and plant-based companies in becoming U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) food processors for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).
**Incentives and Awareness:** Policymakers should increase awareness among school-lunch coordinators of plant-based options that can meet healthy meal plan guidelines in the NSLP and the School Breakfast Program (SBP), and provide financial incentives for weekly or daily inclusion of these plant-based meal options.

**SNAP Modifications:** The federal government should allow more plant-based products to count as multiple distinct varieties within a staple food category in SNAP retailer requirements, including the protein category. This would allow smaller SNAP retailers to stock more plant-based products. In addition, policymakers should ensure that SNAP guidance to retailers clearly describes how plant-based options can satisfy SNAP retailer requirements. For example, a recent SNAP Staple Foods overview does not list nuts, nut butters, soy products, beans, or peas as permissible protein-rich substitutes in the “Meat, Poultry, or Fish” group, and does not list soy-based milks, yogurts, and cheeses in the dairy group.