

Kaiser Permanente Policy Story, v1, No. 7

Supporting Individual and Environmental Health Through Sustainable Food Procurement

- Sustainable food is often described in terms of agricultural production and distribution that is socially just, humane, economically viable, and environmentally sound, and seeks to promote health in the broadest sense.¹
- Large institutions—such as health care organizations, school districts, universities, and government agencies—account for about 40 percent of all food purchased in the United States.
- By purchasing sustainable, locally produced foods, Kaiser Permanente reduces its carbon footprint and promotes the health of our members, staff, and the environment.
- Kaiser Permanente increased sustainable food purchases from seven percent to fifteen percent in only ten months using sustainable food criteria as a guide.

Policy Context

Although the United States is remarkably efficient in the production of food, we are learning that our large scale model of food production and distribution can have an adverse impact on health through the creation of antibiotic resistant bacteria, air and water pollution, the spread of foodborne pathogens, and the creation of climate-changing emissions. For example:

- About 30 percent of global emissions that lead to climate change are attributable to agricultural activities, including land use changes such as deforestation.²
- The U.S. food system accounts for an estimated 19 percent of the nation's fossil fuel consumption.³
- Experts agree that antibiotic use in agriculture contributes to rising drug-resistant infections in humans. An estimated 80 percent of all antibiotics consumed in the U.S. are used as non-therapeutic feed additives for poultry, swine, and beef cattle to promote growth and to compensate for diseases caused by poor animal husbandry.⁴

The Challenge

Large institutions account for about 40 percent of all food purchased in the United States.⁵ Health care institutions alone spend about \$12 billion per year on

food.⁶ These institutions can use their considerable purchasing power to promote sustainable agricultural practices and a healthier food system. However, there are many challenges associated with implementing local, sustainable food procurement programs:

- **Pricing**—The health care industry is under significant pressure to reduce health care costs to promote the affordability of care. Sustainably produced food is often more expensive, so maintaining cost neutrality can be a challenge.
- **Availability**—Large institutions often struggle to find vendors of local, sustainable products that can meet their needs in terms of volume, seasonality, and consistency of product.
- **Tracking and Reporting**—Many food and foodservice vendors do not have the infrastructure to track and report sustainable food sourcing for their customers.

Kaiser Permanente Solution—Sustainable Food Procurement Criteria

With support from Health Care Without Harm—a worldwide coalition dedicated to implementing ecologically safe and healthy practices in health care settings—Kaiser Permanente developed criteria for procuring sustainable, local, and healthy foods.

Products within each food category (dairy, produce, poultry, and so on) must meet at least one criterion to be considered sustainable. The criteria include:

- produced without added hormones
- grass fed (meats)
- produced on small to medium-scale farms (fruits and vegetables)
- third-party certified as humanely and/or sustainably produced
- produced without antibiotics
- locally produced (within 250 miles of the facility where it is served)
- third-party certified sustainable fisheries; locally and seasonally sourced (seafood)
- low in environmental toxins and sustainably produced or harvested (seafood)

Outcomes

- In 2010, Kaiser Permanente achieved a three-year goal in only ten months of increasing sustainable food purchases from seven to 15 percent of all food purchased by the organization.
- About 190 tons of the fruits and vegetables served to patients, visitors, and staff across the organization (nearly 50 percent of all fresh produce that Kaiser Permanente purchased in 2011) met our sustainable food procurement criteria.
- Kaiser Permanente now serves only rBST-free milk and yogurt in our hospitals, cafeterias, and vending machines.
- Kaiser Permanente has been able to achieve cost neutrality with our sustainable food initiatives by finding opportunities for cost savings in other areas of the food procurement budget.

Practical Implications and Transferability

Kaiser Permanente has taken a huge step to support healthy people and environments by providing sustainable food options. Other large organizations can replicate our success by establishing and aggressively implementing sustainable food procurement criteria. As more large institutions follow Kaiser Permanente's lead, America's food system will continue to shift in a more sustainable and healthy direction.

For more information, please contact:

Kaiser Permanente Institute for Health Policy at <http://www.kp.org/ihp>

- ¹ Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture, Glossary of Terms, <http://cuesa.org/page/glossary-terms>.
- ² International Assessment of Agricultural Science, Technology, and Development: Food Security in a Volatile World. IAASTD Issues in Brief, http://www.agassessment.org/docs/10505_FoodSecurity.pdf.
- ³ Pollan, M., "The Food Issue: Farmer in Chief," *New York Times*, 2008: 10(12), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/12/magazine/12policy-t.html?pagewanted=all>.
- ⁴ H.R. 965, The Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act (PAMTA), http://www.louise.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&id=1315&Itemid=138.
- ⁵ Schumacher College: Food for Thought: Transforming the food culture of universities, <http://www.schumachercollege.org.uk/courses/food-for-thought-transforming-the-food-culture-of-universities>.
- ⁶ Raymond, B., "Sustainable Food: A Conversation with Jamie Harvie—Executive Director, Institute for a Sustainable Future," *The Permanente Journal*, 2010; 14(1): 70-77, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2912710/.