

# Los Angeles' Good Food Purchasing Policy *Worker, Farmer and Nutrition Advocates Meet...and Agree!*

Alexa Delwiche and Joann Lo

ON FOOD DAY, October 24, 2012, the City of Los Angeles became the first institution in the country to sign the Good Food Purchasing Pledge (GFPP). Just weeks later, the Los Angeles Unified School District—which serves 650,000 meals each day and is the largest food purchaser in Los Angeles—became the second institution to sign on. While many cities and other government entities around the country have adopted food procurement policies focused on nutrition standards or preference for locally produced food, and some cities, including Los Angeles, have sweatfree purchasing policies that include food, none has an inclusive procurement policy like Los Angeles' that addresses support for the local economy, sustainable production, a valued workforce, animal welfare, and nutrition.

The development of what has been called the most comprehensive food procurement policy in the country is an example of cross-sector collaboration to advance holistic food system change. As such, LA's Good Food Purchasing Pledge may be an example for other municipalities struggling to unite the concerns of low-income communities with those of food chain workers.



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## History of the Los Angeles Food Policy Council

In September 2009, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa announced the creation of the Los Angeles Food Policy Task Force. The Task Force convened in November 2009 and was charged with developing a Good Food policy agenda for Los Angeles—food that is healthy, affordable, fair and sustainable. Alexa Delwiche, who was hired to coordinate the process, and Task Force members met with over 200 people, and conducted roundtable discussions and listening sessions. In July 2010, the Task Force released a report called the Good Food for All Agenda (GFAA). The Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC) was created in response to one of the recommendations of the report.

The Mayor appointed Paula Daniels, then Public Works Commissioner, to create and chair the LA Food Policy Council (LAFPC). Alexa Delwiche was hired as the coordinator and the only full time staff. A Leadership Board and staff lead an extended network of participants through working groups that focus on recommendations in the GFAA report.

Food Policy Councils (FPC) have existed for decades. They take many different shapes and serve various functions, but share a common purpose of bringing stakeholders together from across fields and sectors to examine a local food system in its entirety and develop and advocate for holistic food policies to build a more equitable, sustainable and healthy food system. Typically, FPCs have addressed “equity” in terms of disparities in healthy food access impacting low-income communities and communities of color. Many FPCs aim to connect underserved urban communities with economically marginalized small

and mid-sized farmers in neighboring food-producing regions. While the plight of farm and food workers is sometimes mentioned in FPC vision statements, few have actually developed policies or initiatives that address the rights of food workers. With LA being the epicenter of the U.S. labor movement and its reputation for progressive public policy, the LAFPC recognized it needed to address issues of food labor to be relevant locally and to build the necessary coalitions to advance truly transformative food policy. Procurement became the first opportunity for the LAFPC to incorporate food workers into an LA food policy.

### **Early Stages of the Good Food Purchasing Pledge**

Procurement was the first recommendation addressed immediately following the Task Force’s presentation to the Mayor in July 2010. Both the Chair and Coordinator saw procurement policy as pivotal to achieving the rest of the GFFA recommendations, so it was a clear first step for the City to take.

There was, and still is, growing local and national interest in food procurement from various stakeholder communities: labor, environment, animal welfare and public health organizations. This interest coincided with federal policy and administrative procurement changes occurring during the early years of the Obama Administration. Local and healthy sustainable food procurement policies were being adopted across the country. Major national food service companies, responding to consumer demands, were rapidly developing their own internal food purchasing guidelines.

By April 2011, the LAFPC Working Group “Build a Market for Good Food” decided that it would develop a model “good food” purchasing template to be made available for various purchasing institutions to adopt. Working Group members and organizations fluctuated throughout the process, but key participants were Joann Lo, Executive Director of the Food Chain Workers Alliance; Jill Overdorf, a chef from a local produce distribution company; the head of food purchasing for a major international food company; Vanessa



Photo: Haan-Fawn Chau

Farm worker harvesting strawberries in the fields

Zajfen, the Farm to School program coordinator for the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD); and, later in the process, the LA County Department of Public Health, the Natural Resources Defense Council and Compassion Over Killing, an animal welfare organization. Other participants included local farmers, processors, distributors and municipalities.

The Working Group decided to develop the template to establish a unified and operational definition of Good Food that would create clarity around differing demands being placed on food vendors as more procurement policies bubbled up across the country, and which would also provide a more coherent, operational definition for the term “good food”. Specifically, the Working Group decided that its contribution to the field would be to clarify definitions for “labor” and “local” (in terms of geography and farm size) because of the diverse expertise and interests represented, as well as the lack of attention given to these issues by most, if not all, procurement policies across the country.

A few key members of the Working Group and the LAFPC Coordinator compiled and reviewed purchasing policies and bid language. From this research, they developed a skeleton draft and tasked specific experts with fleshing out details in areas related to their expertise.

There were interesting and sometimes heated exchanges among stakeholders involved in the creation of the initial draft policy as the group attempted to develop a comprehensive document that supported a sweeping set of values. Tensions between support for fair labor practices on farms and support for small, local farmers rose to the surface. One early version of the document used union farms as a proxy for fair labor practices as a tool to assist purchasers in understanding this value, since union farms provide workers with wages slightly above the industry average, healthcare benefits, seniority, a voice on the job and other benefits. The reality is that most union farms are large industrial farms, which employ thousands of workers, but don’t necessarily employ strong environmental practices.



Photo: Scott Robertson

Three farm workers carrying tomato buckets overhead in fields of Immokalee, Florida



A local food distributor—and LAFPC Leadership Board member—whose mission was to connect retailers to small, local farmers, objected to the template’s explicit support of industrial farms. Conversely, a food worker organizer—and LAFPC Leadership Board member—took issue with supporting small farms without strong labor protections for their workforce. The Working Group chair attempted to address this tension head on by asking for Working Group member input.

A conference call was held. It was a tense discussion, but ultimately a compromise was reached to encourage purchasers to support union farms, with a link to a list of such farms rather than a list included in the document. Similarly, purchasers would be encouraged to also support small, local farms with links to various produce distributors with local produce lines and to farmers’ markets in the area. The group continued to struggle with how to develop a holistic food purchasing policy when few farms simultaneously support strong environmental sustainability, worker equity and small farmers.

### **Finalizing the GFPP and Adoption**

By mid-January of 2012, a new draft was completed which was a significant departure from the earlier iterations. One of the most promising elements of the draft was the early development of a tiered approach, with a requirement that a baseline standard be met in each of the five value categories, so that, for example, both labor rights and a preference for smaller and local farmers must reach a certain threshold. The baseline requirement gave equal weight to the values, which was a major contribution in achieving consensus.

The Working Group decided to circulate the document to local and national experts in various fields. In March, the Working Group sent the document to over 80 stakeholders from a diversity of backgrounds: food service providers, farmers, distributors, academics, health professionals, farm and food worker advocates and labor representatives, chefs and restaurateurs, animal welfare activists, environmentalists/sustainability experts and government officials. Overall, the document received very positive feedback from reviewers, and several reviewers commented that it was the most compre-



Photo: Haan-Fawn Chau

Proud chef showing off her dish for cooking contest

hensive, far-reaching procurement document they had seen. Bob Gottlieb, a professor at Occidental College and director of the college’s Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, commented, “The breakthrough of this document is that it moves beyond local and embraces a much deeper value system. This focus reflects the work and mission of LAFPC and can change the discourse nationally.”

A June 2012 Working Group meeting stands out as one of the most important moments in our long process. The group made the strategic decision to integrate nutrition into the document rather than leave it as an appendix. Working Group members with backgrounds in fields other than nutrition—including labor, local foods and animal welfare—argued for the need to incorporate health as a fundamental principle. The group had come a long way.



Image: Anisha Hirgorani

Good Food Purchasing Pledge values with definitions

The Working Group presented to the LAFPC Leadership Board in July 2012, which enthusiastically endorsed the draft document. LAFPC board member David Binkle, Director of Food Services at Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), was at the meeting and was impressed. He mentioned that school districts across the country were also interested in uniform food purchasing practices and this policy could be the model. Shortly after this meeting, Binkle approached School Board Member Nury Martinez to introduce a Good Food Procurement resolution.

From there, the Good Food Purchasing Pledge (GFPP) moved quickly. A diverse group of Working Group members and supporters presented to a committee of

the LA City Council and then to the entire Council on October 24, when the Mayor issued his executive directive and the full Council approved a motion to adopt the GFPP. A few weeks later, LAUSD also adopted the GFPP. Then in the Spring of 2013, a major food service company signed the Pledge on behalf of two large corporate cafeterias in Los Angeles.

The goal of the GFPP is to harness the purchasing power of major institutions to encourage greater production of sustainably produced food, healthy eating, respect for workers’ rights, humane treatment of animals and support for the local small business economy. The Good Food Purchasing Guidelines emphasize five key values: (1) **Local Economies**, (2) **Environmental Sustainability**, (3) **Valued Workforce**, (4) **Animal Welfare** and (5) **Nutrition**. Participating institutions must meet the baseline purchasing criteria described in the “Good Food Purchasing Guidelines” document. A tiered, points-based scoring system allows participants to choose which level of commitment best suits the Good Food goals of their organization. Participants are then awarded one to five stars based on their total score.

Whether the GFPP makes an impact on the five value areas and helps make Los Angeles a “Good Food” region remains to be seen, but we have high hopes. The University of Wisconsin is helping develop an evaluation system to measure its impact. Already, we have laid the groundwork here—in less than two years, our Leadership Board members, who hold positions of influence, and Working Group members, who are experts in their fields, have dramatically expanded their understanding of labor issues and broadened acceptance that the treatment of workers is a fundamental component of “good food”. Local purchasers and their suppliers are beginning to understand the tools to operationalize that concept. Likewise, by agreeing to engage in the dialogue, the labor movement is beginning to play an active role in developing holistic food policy solutions that embrace good jobs, a healthy environment and a thriving community.

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