CALIFORNIA FOOD POLICY COUNCIL



GROWING THE FUTURE TOGETHER:

FINDINGS FROM THE 2025 CALIFORNIA FOOD POLICY COUNCIL CONVENING



GROWING THE FUTURE TOGETHER

In September 2025, more than 75 food leaders, farmers, fishers, food business owners, advocates, policymakers, and community members gathered in Salinas, California—known as the "Salad Bowl of the World"—for the first in-person statewide convening of California Food Policy Councils since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over two days of farm tours, farmers' market visits, coastal innovation showcases, and collaborative sessions, participants built a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities shaping California's food future.

The convening underscored four major themes:

- 1. Sustainable & Innovative Production
- 2. Equity, Access & Care
- 3. Public Systems for Good Food
- 4. Resilience & Future Leadership

MAIN THEMES / PILLARS

1. Sustainable & Innovative Production

California's farms are disappearing, and the average farmer is aging rapidly.

To sustain our food future, we need to cultivate a **new generation of producers**—farmers who work at a smaller, more human scale and combine sustainable farming with sound business practices. That means creating real pathways: **access to training programs, affordable land and capital, and markets** that pay fairly for local food.

Meanwhile, innovation is expanding what's possible. From the nation's largest **on-land seaweed farm** and **high-capacity indoor mushroom operations** to **Reservoir Farms**—an experimental site linking tech investment with working agriculture—California is becoming a testbed for the future of farming.

2. Equity, Access & Care

From the **Bracero** tragedy memorial to the stories of today's **ICE raids**, this convening underscored a truth that runs deep in California's fields: the people who feed America deserve dignity, stability, and respect. Immigrant workers—too often vilified—are the knowledgeable and dedicated producers of our food. They must be recognized, supported, and given real opportunities to become farm owners and community leaders. Our visit to large grower-shipper, **Tanimura & Antle**, provided an excellent example of an **employee-owned farm** that has even built **housing** for H-2A visa program workers.

Equity also means care. The convening revealed how **small childcare providers are using their own food stamps** to feed the children in their care—an alarming sign of how fragile our food access systems remain. Programs that purchase from local farmers and distribute food through trusted community networks—farmers' markets, childcare centers, and immigrant-serving organizations—help close these gaps while strengthening local economies.

By linking care and commerce, California can build a food system rooted in fairness, where every hand that feeds the state is nourished and respected in return.

MAIN THEMES / PILLARS



"Legacy of the Braceros Mural" by muralist Hanif Panni

3. Public Systems for Good Food

Public dollars can and should be used to build a healthier, more equitable food system that works for both farmers and families. **Good Food Purchasing** standards show how institutional procurement—from schools to hospitals—can create steady, values-driven markets for local producers. When government contracts reward sustainability, fair labor, and nutrition, they don't just feed people better—they reshape entire supply chains.

At **Rancho Cielo** in Salinas, a nonprofit vocational charter school, students are learning to grow and cook exceptional local food. Meanwhile, programs like **Market Match** and **Medi-Cal's CalAIM** initiative, which funds produce prescriptions and medically tailored meals, demonstrate that subsidized access changes habits, creates lasting demand, and strengthens local markets.

4. Resilience & Future Leadership

Resilience in the food system means being ready for crisis as well as opportunity. Fisheries demonstrate that with strong management, ecosystems can rebound, yet infrastructure gaps keep this sector from reaching its potential. Building resilience also requires stronger leadership within the CAFPC network. **Working groups**—starting with Food Hubs—must take the lead in advancing a values-based vision of cooperative ownership and widely shared benefits.



FOOD HUBS & LAND ACCESS DISCUSSION

At Convening 2025, one of the most critical breakout conversations focused on **Food Hubs and Land Access** — the twin challenges of how farmers can secure land and resources, and how communities can ensure local food reaches the people who need it most. The discussion surfaced four key dimensions:

1. Land & Training for Farmers

Farmers cannot thrive without secure land tenure, sufficient capital, and comprehensive training. Participants shared inspiring examples of success when these elements come together—such as graduates of the **ALBA** incubator scaling up into smallholder and even cooperative farms, sharing equipment, and even piloting group invoicing to sell produce to local schools. The group emphasized that helping farmers obtain land yields high returns: for instance, ALBA's grant-supported farmland purchases have generated an estimated \$50 million in economic output for the region. Cooperative and collective ownership models (including **Mexico's ejido system** of communal land) were highlighted as promising ways to keep land in community hands and empower immigrant and next-generation farmers.



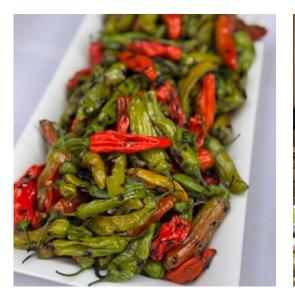
Maria Gonzalez (Green Thumb Organic Farms / Community Farmers) set the tone.

2. Organizing Buying & Sales

Ensuring fair, direct market links is just as important as land access for sustaining small farmers. One promising model discussed was **student housing cooperatives** that manage their own dining budgets and choose to buy food from local farmers instead of defaulting to large distributors like Sysco. Traditional farmers' markets also remain vital as aggregation points that diversify farmers' incomes and connect them with consumers. Additionally, participants noted that institutions like childcare centers, food banks, MEHKOs and community kitchens could serve as anchor buyers for local farm products — provided they receive support to develop the needed infrastructure and procurement systems. In short, to keep family farms viable, communities must organize demand as well as supply.

3. Defining & Scaling Food Hubs

The term **"food hub"** has gained buzz, and interest in establishing hubs far outstrips current funding. The **California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA)** expected ~70 applications in a recent food hub grant round but received 225 — a testament to the unmet demand for local food infrastructure. Food hubs can take many forms (from a cooperative produce packing house to a dockside fish market), but participants warned of **"small-washing,"** where large corporations co-opt the label without truly serving community needs. The group called for clearer definitions and standards for what constitutes a community-based food hub, alongside dedicated working groups and funding streams to help authentic hubs start and scale. By setting ground rules and securing support, California can ensure that "food hubs" remain mission-driven facilities that genuinely connect local producers with local consumers.





Green Thumb Organic Farms provided produce for the student-made lunch.

4. Connecting Food to Vulnerable Populations

Throughout the conversation, it was stressed that food hubs and land access are about equity and care, not just economics. An example from Los Angeles illustrated this point: the **Los Angeles Food Policy Council's "Canastas del Campo"** program, small neighborhood markets purchase 5-pound produce bundles directly from local farmer aggregators. These bundles are then distributed through community-based organizations such as day labor centers, reaching immigrant workers who might otherwise face barriers to accessing fresh food due to eligibility restrictions or fear of ICE enforcement across Los Angeles. The **Monterey Bay Fisheries Trust** shared how they implemented the **Catch Together** program, which raised funds to purchase local seafood from small-boat fishers for distribution through community food networks. Perhaps most striking were reports that some in-home childcare providers have been using their **own CalFresh benefits** to feed children in their care, a stark indicator of gaps in the food safety net.

On a hopeful note, participants pointed to student co-ops and immigrant mutual aid networks as existing strengths to build upon, showing that when empowered, communities can create their own solutions to feed those in need.

Conclusion

The Food Hub and Land Access discussion revealed a clear mandate: invest in land, training, and cooperatives for farmers; strengthen fair and direct sales: define and fund food hubs as community-owned infrastructure; and ensure food flows to the most vulnerable populations. Without these, small farms and equitable markets risk being squeezed out by consolidation and corporate control. With them, California has the foundation for a resilient, just, and future-ready food system.



Los Angeles Food Policy Council Executive Director, **Alba Velasquez**, joined us remotely.



A Food Hub Working Group was proposed by Ave Lambert (Yolo Food Hub Network).



ADVOCACY & GOOD FOOD PURCHASING POLICY

Grecia Marquez-Nieblas of the nonprofit **Fullwell**, delved into how policy advocacy and procurement reform can transform the food system. The focus was on the **Good Food Purchasing Policy (GFPP)** as a lever to channel institutional food spending toward equity, sustainability, and local economies. Four key dimensions of this discussion included:

1. Policy Foundations & Expansion

GFPP is a policy framework originally launched by the Los Angeles Food Policy Council that provides metrics and guidelines for large institutions to improve their food purchasing along **five core values** (local economies, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, animal welfare, and nutrition). It has already **influenced over \$1.1 billion in food spending nationwide**. The current challenge discussed was scaling up GFPP adoption across California. Participants noted that while cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco have championed GFPP, many regions have yet to engage. **Expanding GFPP statewide** would mean more school districts, county hospitals, universities, and other institutions committing to purchase food in line with these values, thus shifting substantial public dollars toward a better food system.

2. Procurement as a Lever

Baseline assessments are the **primary tool** for shifting institutional food systems. By mapping how and where public dollars are spent, councils and advocates can identify leverage points and track progress. Embedding these assessments into policy — through frameworks like the Good Food Purchasing Policy (GFPP) — transforms good intentions into mandates, committing food service managers and institutional leaders to act and report on their results.

3. Storytelling & Advocacy vs. Lobbying

A key takeaway was the distinction between **traditional lobbying** and **education and advocacy**, and the crucial role of storytelling. Participants emphasized that influencing policy makers often requires painting a vivid picture of what change looks like on the ground. For instance, some counties in California have documented their journey of improving food in hospitals or schools and produced short videos showcasing healthier meals and local farm partnerships. Sharing these success stories with elected officials and the public builds support in ways that dry statistics cannot.

The session also noted that advocacy can include convening stakeholders and building coalitions, which is different from direct lobbying and generally accessible for nonprofit organizations to undertake. An international example was cited from Canada, where Indigenous-led farm-to-school programs have students grow, harvest, and cook traditional foods — a powerful narrative that ties cultural revitalization to food policy. By coupling data with human stories and cultural context, advocates can inspire leaders to embrace policies like GFPP not as mandates, but as community-driven imperatives.

4. Overcoming Barriers & Next Steps

Implementing policies like GFPP is not without challenges. **Common barriers include turnover among institutional staff**, **perceived cost concerns**, and simple lack of awareness or understanding of the policy. However, participants noted that many GFPP-aligned changes can ultimately save money (for example, starting a composting program can reduce waste disposal costs for a school district). The group identified several next steps to advance advocacy and adoption of good food purchasing principles:

- **Collaborative Advocacy:** Coordinate efforts during local, state, and federal budget cycles to push for funding and legislation that support equitable food procurement. Councils and allies can unite to ensure food system priorities are heard during budget hearings and appropriations.
- Local Procurement Networks: Relaunch or strengthen regional procurement
 working groups. These networks would bring together "champions" inside
 institutions (like school food service directors, hospital dietitians, or procurement
 officers) to share best practices and keep momentum on GFPP goals despite staff
 turnover.
- **Use Budget Hearings Strategically:** Encourage food policy council members and community advocates to participate in public budget hearings and forums. By voicing support for dedicating public funds to healthy, local food (in schools, healthcare, etc.), they can hold officials accountable and generate political will.
- Bridge Agriculture and Fisheries: Create alliances between sustainable
 agriculture advocates and sustainable fisheries advocates two groups that often
 work in parallel. Aligning their policy asks (for example, on procurement standards
 or funding programs) can create a stronger, unified voice for local food across land
 and sea.

 Data & Public Awareness: Continue to collect data on the impact of good food purchasing (e.g. dollars reinvested in the local economy, improvements in student nutrition) and pair it with compelling community stories. These should be shared widely — via reports, social media, community meetings — to educate policymakers, media, and the general public about the tangible benefits of GFPP initiatives.

Conclusion

The Advocacy and Good Food Purchasing discussions underscored that procurement is one of the strongest levers for food system equity. By embedding core values into institutional spending, educating legislators through real stories, and building cross-sector coalitions, participants saw a pathway to shift billions of dollars in public food purchasing toward healthier, more sustainable, and more local systems.

There is still enormous room for education and advocacy. Councils and partners must continue building relationships with legislators and agencies, cultivating a chorus of informed voices—especially during budget season—to ensure that public dollars truly serve the public good.



Inviting legislators and their staff to our gatherings and events is a great way to educate and involve them in co-creating a better food system.



FOOD IS MEDICINE

A third breakout session — led by Genevieve LeBlanc (Blue Zones), Denisse Becerra (Fullwell), Tiffany DiTullio (Salinas Valley Health), and Hester Parker (Everyone's Harvest Farmers Markets) — explored how healthcare systems can integrate food as a form of medicine for both prevention and treatment of chronic diseases. With dietrelated chronic illnesses accounting for roughly 90% of America's \$4.1 trillion annual health care expenditures, participants discussed how "Food is Medicine" programs could improve health outcomes while reducing healthcare spending. Four central themes emerged:

1. Policy Foundations & Medicaid Integration

In California, the **CalAIM** initiative allows **Medi-Cal** to cover certain nutrition interventions — including medically tailored meals, produce prescription programs, and nutrition counseling for eligible patients. However, CalAIM is **set to expire in 2026.** The group discussed the urgency of making these food benefits permanent and expanding the network of food-is-medicine providers in the healthcare space to serve more patients and broaden geographic reach. Advocates from Fullwell and advocates from the Food is Medicine movement are pushing to embed food interventions into Medi-Cal through state policy so that all health plans must include food-based interventions as fully covered, permanent benefits.

2. Program Models & Outcomes

The session highlighted several local Food is Medicine programs that have shown impressive results. For example, **Salinas Valley Health** piloted in partnership in 2014 with **Everyone's Harvest**, a produce prescription program where doctors "prescribed" fruits and vegetables which has grown to 100 patients struggling with diet-related conditions (redeemable at the hospital farmers market). Along with nutrition education and cooking tips, this intervention led to measurable health improvements. Everyone's Harvest also offers nutrition incentives and produce prescription programs in all of its **six Farmers Markets**. The market developed a program offering \$35 per week in farmers' food vouchers to low-income individuals, paired with nutrition classes and healthy recipes. **Participants saw a clinically significant 2% drop in A1C** on average, indicating better blood sugar control. Meanwhile, local healthcare providers have partnered with organizations to deliver medically tailored meals (fully-prepared, condition-specific meals) to patients recently discharged from hospitals.

A typical offering might provide 14 nutritious meals per week for 12 weeks, plus checkins with a dietitian — yielding improved recovery rates and establishing healthier long-term eating habits. These examples demonstrate that investing in food interventions can tangibly improve health outcomes, while also channeling money into local farms, markets, and food businesses.

3. Community-Based Delivery & Equity

A recurring theme was that **community-based organizations (CBOs)** and **local food vendors** are the linchpins of effective Food is Medicine delivery. Because they are embedded in communities, CBOs can tailor programs to be culturally appropriate and build trust with participants in ways large institutions sometimes cannot. By leveraging existing community assets like farmers' markets, local grocers, and community-based food providers, Food is Medicine initiatives can ensure inclusivity, service quality and respect for the dietary needs and services of the people they serve.



Denisse Becerra (Fullwell) co-leads the Medically Supportive Food & Nutrition Knowledge Network, a community of practice that aims to support food-is-medicine providers in collectively learning and building capacity for implementing programming under healthcare partnerships.

4. Advocacy, Data & Next Steps

To move Food is Medicine from successful pilots to standard healthcare services, the group agreed that robust advocacy and evidence are critical. They encouraged food policy councils and partners to join forces in advocating at multiple levels. At the state level, that means backing legislation and budget requests that support the long-term integration of r nutrition interventions in healthcare. Locally, participants were urged to engage with their county Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNAs) periodic reviews that hospitals and required non-for-profit organizations conduct to set health priorities — and ensure food access and nutrition are included in those priorities. It also means working with the boards of directors of local health plans and hospital systems, educating them on the cost savings and health improvements these programs can generate. Collecting solid data from the pilot period was seen as essential: data on reduced hospital readmissions, improved health outcomes, and cost effectiveness can convince skeptics and purse-string holders. Finally, the session highlighted the power of building a broad coalition of voices. When patients, healthcare providers, farmers, and community leaders together speak up for integrating food into healthcare, policymakers are more likely to listen. The convening's attendees were encouraged to organize storytelling campaigns — for example, patients sharing how access to healthy food helped them recover from illness — to put a human face on the statistics.

Conclusion

The vision emerging from the 2025 convening calls for a food system that heals ecosystems, empowers communities, invests in innovation and housing for food workers, and builds cooperative ownership across the entire value chain. Achieving this vision will require bold imagination, robust investment, and unprecedented collaboration. As a statewide network of networks, the California Food Policy Council is poised to play a pivotal role in making it happen. By leaning into its convening power and systems-level perspective — connecting local councils, championing visionary policies, and sharing resources — CAFPC can help ensure that California's food future is rooted in resilience, equity, and shared stewardship.



Hester Parker (Everyone's Harvest Farmers Markets) said she can help CBOs to become part of this program.



VISION MOVING FORWARD

In the closing session, participants stepped back to envision the future of California's food system beyond the next year or two. They articulated a forward-looking vision that weaves ecological health, economic justice, and community equity into one shared horizon. Key elements of this vision include:

- Ecological Stewardship: A healthy food system was seen as inseparable from a healthy environment. Participants stressed protecting and restoring ecosystems from soil to sea as foundational to food security. They pointed to efforts like sustainable fisheries management, ocean research on the Western Flyer, and the Sunflower Star restoration project as examples of how science-based stewardship can enhance biodiversity and climate resilience. In the future, California's food system should actively heal the land and oceans even as it feeds the people.
- Education & Cultural Shifts: Food education and cultural change were identified as critical levers for long-term resilience. Attendees talked about the need for robust food and nutrition education in schools, so that every child learns where food comes from and how to eat healthily. They also emphasized uplifting cultural food traditions especially of Indigenous and immigrant communities as a source of knowledge and resilience. Some participants urged bold ideas like exploring a universal basic income (so people can afford healthy food) and challenging extractive economic models that keep communities impoverished. The underlying belief is that widespread change in how we value and understand food must occur at the cultural level, not just through policy.
- Innovation & Investment: The convening highlighted the importance of directing innovation and investment toward the public good of the food system. Examples like Reservoir Farms showed how Silicon Valley tech can be repurposed to solve onthe-ground farming problems. Participants want to see more funding for technologies and business models that help small and mid-size farms, reduce waste, and adapt to climate change. Equally important is investing in the people behind the food system: ensuring farmworkers, food processors, and service workers have living wages, housing, healthcare, and education. In the envisioned future, high-tech solutions and basic worker protections go hand-in-hand to create a food system that is both cutting-edge and humane.

• Cooperative Ownership & Value Chains: A transformative idea that resonated was creating a federation of cooperatives to own and manage key pieces of the food supply chain. In this vision, farms, food hubs, distribution companies, and retail coops could be linked, ensuring that the value created in the food system is equitably shared. Public agencies and philanthropy would prioritize funding cooperative and community-owned enterprises. By moving away from corporate consolidation toward democratic ownership, California's food system could keep wealth and decision-making in local communities. "From land to hand," as some put it, the goal is for the people who produce and eat food to also own the means of doing so.

- Strengthening the California Food Policy Council: Finally, attendees reflected on the role of the California Food Policy Council itself in driving this vision. They called on CAFPC to step up as a true "council of councils" a backbone organization that links local Food Policy Councils into a powerful statewide force. Proposed steps to strengthen CAFPC included:
 - Establishing a system of representative delegates from each local council to participate in CAFPC decision-making, ensuring better communication and collective strategizing across regions.
 - Updating and expanding the statewide map of Food Policy Councils to recognize new councils and identify gaps, thereby helping to coordinate support where new councils could form.
 - Building CAFPC's capacity as a cross-sector hub for leadership development, policy strategy, and advocacy campaigns that no single local council could accomplish alone. By providing this connective tissue and big-picture perspective, CAFPC can amplify local innovations into state-level impact and help secure the policy changes needed for the envisioned food future.

Conclusion

The vision emerging from the 2025 convening calls for a food system that heals ecosystems, empowers communities, invests in innovation and housing for food workers, and builds cooperative ownership across the entire value chain. Achieving this vision will require bold imagination, robust investment, and unprecedented collaboration. As a statewide network of networks, the California Food Policy Council is poised to play a pivotal role in making it happen. By leaning into its convening power and systems-level perspective — connecting local councils, championing visionary policies, and sharing resources — CAFPC can help ensure that California's food future is rooted in resilience, equity, and shared stewardship.



APPENDIX: EVENT ITINERARY & AGENDA

California Food Policy Council Statewide Meeting

September 16–18, 2025 | Salinas, California

Pre-Conference – Early Bird Welcome

Venue: Villa Azteca

Session: Welcome Meet-Up (Happy Hour / Dinner)

Hosts: CAFPC Co-Executive Directors Theme: Mexican Independence Day

Day 1 – Immersion in Place: Tours & Reception

Meet-Up & Registration

Featuring: El Charrito Burritos + Brewjee Coffee

ALBA Farms

Hosts: Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA)

Focus: Future of Farming influenced through training and incubation

Partner: Resource Conservation District of Monterey County

Tanimura & Antle Farms

Focus: Employee-Owned Farm, Reservoir Farms, and

the Center for Land-Based Learning

Lunch and Learn

Venue: Natividad Certified Farmers' Market

Featured Vendors: Central Coast Charcuterie, Ely's Pupusas, Viva Mexico, Chava's Corn,

Dulce Vida Desserts, Barajas Frutas Frescas, Stackhouse Brothers Ranch

Pezzini Farms "Choke Coach"

Focus: Agritourism and On-Farm Food Truck

APPENDIX: EVENT ITINERARY & AGENDA

California Food Policy Council Statewide Meeting September 16–18, 2025 | Salinas, California

Day 1 - Immersion in Place: Tours & Reception (continued)

Spore & Shore Tour - Moss Landing

- Far West Funghi
- Monterey Bay Seaweeds
- Moss Landing Marine Laboratories (Sustainable Aquaculture)
- Sunflower Star Laboratory
- Western Flyer
- Lusamerica Seafood

Welcome Reception & Dinner

Venue: Culturas Hidalgo y Oaxaca

Theme: Networking Dinner celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month

Day 2 - Building the Future Together

Venue: Rancho Cielo

Morning Gathering & Breakfast

Featuring: Otto's Bread Co., The Sweet Life Pastries, Beerded Bean Coffee, Chorizo I a Cotola

Welcome & Overview

Speakers: CAFPC Co-Executive Directors + Local Host Committee

Land Access and Food Hub Operations

Speaker: Maria Gonzalez. Green Thumb Farms / Community Farmers

Advocacy for Local and Regional Councils

Speaker: Grecia Marquez-Nieblas (Fullwell)

Topic: "Encourage Change: Examples from the Good Food Purchasing Policy"

Breakouts: Central Coast Community of Practice Clusters

APPENDIX: EVENT ITINERARY & AGENDA

California Food Policy Council Statewide Meeting

September 16-18, 2025 | Salinas, California

Day 2 - Building the Future Together (continued)

Harvest and Share

Format: Partnerships + Burning Topics Discussion

Lunch at Rancho Cielo

Speakers: Mayor Dennis Donahue (Salinas), Gilbert Ramos (Office of Speaker Rivas)

Hosts: Chef Estevan Jimenez and Students

Lunch featuring Green Thumb Organic Farms produce and Pisoni Vineyards "Lucy" Rosé of Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands and Shale Canyon Estate Mourvèdre Arroyo Seco

Food is Medicine

Moderator: Genevieve LeBlanc, Blue Zones

Speakers: Denisse Becerra (Fullwell), Tiffany DiTullio (Salinas Valley Health), Hester

Parker (Everyone's Harvest)

Topic: "Medically Supportive Food & Nutrition in California: Current Landscape &

Advocacy Opportunities"

Councils Resource Interactive Session

Participants: Council Representatives + Ally Networks

Future of CAFPC: Priorities & Commitments

Facilitators: CAFPC Co-Chairs + Councils

Wrap-Up and Closing

Facilitators: CAFPC Co-Chairs + Councils

After Hours - Pizza Party

Venue: Heirloom Pizza



APPENDIX: PARTICIPANTS

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