

Date of Hearing: April 23, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Alex Lee, Chair

AB 2535 (Gallagher) – As Amended March 16, 2026

SUBJECT: School meals: State Healthy Food Access Policy

SUMMARY: Revises state policy to recognize the right to sufficient, affordable, and healthy food to include locally grown and raised food. Requires specified state agencies to incorporate this state policy when revising, adopting, or establishing policies, regulations, and grant criteria, and identify strategies to strengthen farm-to-fork infrastructure. Requires the California State University (CSU) and California Community Colleges (CCC) to reflect this state policy in campus food procurement, while encouraging the University of California (UC) to do the same. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Revises state policy that declares every human being has the right to access sufficient, affordable, and healthy food to include locally grown and raised food.
- 2) Clarifies that all relevant state agencies consider 1) above when revising, adopting, or establishing policies, regulations, and grant criteria when those policies, regulations, and criteria are pertinent to the distribution of sufficient California locally grown and raised, affordable, and healthy food.
- 3) Requires specified state agencies to, within existing resources, identify opportunities and strategies to improve farm-to-fork infrastructure, including, but not limited to, aggregation, processing, distribution, storage, and procurement systems that support increased access to, and use of, California locally grown and raised food in public programs, particularly school meals and other nutrition initiatives.
- 4) Requires the Trustees of the CSU and the Board of Governors of the CCCs to also consider 1) above in their policies, guidelines, and procurement practices related to campus food services and student nutrition. Encourages the Regents of the UC to consider this state policy in similar efforts.
- 5) Makes the following findings and declarations:
 - a) Ultra-processed foods, which are high in added sugars, unhealthy fats, sodium, and calories, while low in essential nutrients and fiber, now account for over 60% of children's calorie intake in the United States (U.S.), including California. This overconsumption is linked to serious health risks and chronic diseases later in life;
 - b) California locally grown and raised whole food products offers a healthier alternative, as these fresh and nutrient-dense options provide higher levels of vitamins, minerals, and fiber that support children's physical and cognitive development while reducing reliance on ultra-processed options;
 - c) Expanding access to locally sourced products supports California's agricultural economy, bolsters family farms, and promotes sustainability by reducing transportation-

related environmental impacts, while helping reconnect Californians with the origins of their food supply; and,

- d) States legislative intent to reduce consumption of ultra-processed foods by expanding access to California locally grown and raised whole food products, which are among the healthiest and most nutritious available, meeting the highest standards for quality, safety, and sustainability.

EXISTING LAW:

State law:

- 1) Declares that every human being has the right to access sufficient affordable and healthy food. (Welfare and Institutions Code [WIC] § 18700(a)(1))
- 2) Defines food insecurity as the occasional or constant lack of access to the food one needs to live a healthy life and the uncertainty of being able to acquire enough food to meet the needs of an individual or household due to insufficient money or other resources. (WIC § 18700(a)(2))
- 3) Requires all relevant state agencies, including but not limited to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), the California Department of Health Care Services, the California Department of Education (CDE), and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) to consider the right to affordable and healthy food when creating policies or regulation related to the distribution of affordable food. (WIC § 18700(b))
- 4) Requires a California state-owned or state-run institution, excluding public postsecondary education or local educational agencies (LEA), that purchases agricultural food products to implement necessary practices to achieve a goal of ensuring that at least 60% of the agricultural food products that it purchases in a calendar year are grown or produced in the state by December 31, 2025. (Food and Agricultural Code [FAC] § 58595(a))
- 5) Requires an LEA that solicits bids for the purchase of an agricultural food product to accept a bid or price for that agricultural food product when it is grown in California before accepting a bid or price for a domestic agricultural food product that is grown outside the state, when both of the following are met:
 - a) The bid or price of the California-grown agricultural food product does not exceed the lowest bid or price for a domestic agricultural food product produced outside the state; and,
 - b) The quality of the California-grown agricultural food product is comparable to that domestic agricultural food product produced outside the state. (FAC § 58595(c))

Federal law:

- 6) Requires school food authorities to procure food in compliance with federal, state, and local laws ensuring full and open competition, adhere to the Buy American requirement, and limit non-domestic food purchases to no more than 10% by July 1, 2025, 8% by July 1, 2028, and

5% by July 1, 2031, of total annual commercial food costs, while allowing the use of geographic preference for locally grown or raised agricultural products. (7 Code of Federal Regulations § 210.21)

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown, this bill has not been analyzed by a fiscal committee.

COMMENTS:

Background: *Food Insecurity.* The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which monitors food insecurity and oversees the nation’s largest food assistance program, defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” The USDA categorizes food security into four levels: high, marginal, low, and very low food security, reflecting a range from consistent access to adequate food to disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake due to lack of resources.

Although California declared food as a human right through SB 628 (Hurtado), Chapter 879, Statutes of 2023, and produces nearly half of the nation’s fruits and vegetables, food insecurity remains a significant issue. Food insecurity disproportionately affects low-income households, communities of color, rural communities, and households without reliable transportation. An estimated 1.75 million California households, or 12.5%, experienced food insecurity at some point between 2022 and 2024.¹ Food insecurity is driven by factors including poverty, geographic isolation, rising grocery prices, inflation, housing costs, and transportation barriers. For many households, the choice is often between purchasing food and meeting other basic needs such as rent, utilities, transportation, or medications.

Food insecurity is also closely linked to diet quality and structural access to healthy food. National data indicate that between August 2021 and August 2023, more than half of total caloric intake in the U.S., 55% overall and nearly 62% among youth under 19 years of age, is derived from ultra-processed foods, which are typically more affordable, widely available, and heavily marketed than fresh, whole foods.² While consumption of these foods is often framed as a matter of individual choice, research and policy analyses consistently show that dietary patterns in low-income communities and communities of color are shaped by structural factors, including limited access to full-service grocery stores, higher relative prices for fresh foods, transportation barriers, and the concentration of convenience stores and fast-food.

Limited access to nutritious food is associated with negative health, developmental, and economic outcomes across the lifespan, including poor birth outcomes, developmental delays, lower academic performance, mental health challenges, and increased risk of chronic diseases like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. These health disparities disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color, contributing to broader health inequities and intergenerational cycles of poor health and poverty.

Farm-to-Fork & Farm-to-School. A farm-to-fork approach aims to strengthen connections between agricultural producers and consumers by improving how food is grown, distributed, and accessed across the state. This framework emphasizes building regional food systems that support local agriculture, increase access to fresh, nutritious foods, and promote environmental

¹ https://ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/_laserfiche/publications/113623/ERR-358.pdf?v=25442

² <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/174612>

sustainability. Public institutions, particularly schools, play a central role due to their scale and reach into communities.

Farm-to-school strategies implement local procurement, nutrition education, and hands-on learning and are associated with increases of approximately 0.99 to 1.3 additional servings of fruits and vegetables per day.³ California schools serve nearly six million meals daily, making them key access points for improving diet quality.⁴ Evidence shows farm-to-school programs can increase fruit and vegetable consumption by up to 135% among students with the lowest intake and improve nutrition knowledge and behaviors. These programs also support local economies, with California schools spending about \$167 million on California-grown food,⁵ and each \$1 invested generates \$0.60 to \$2.16 in additional economic activity.⁶

This bill directs specified state departments to identify opportunities and strategies to strengthen farm-to-fork infrastructure, including improving systems for aggregation, processing, distribution, storage, and procurement that are critical to integrating local food into school meals and other large-scale nutrition initiatives.

Food Access Programs. California operates several food assistance, nutrition incentive, and food access programs administered by various state departments to reduce food insecurity, increase access to healthy foods, and support local food systems.

Programs administered by CDSS include, but are not limited to:

- The CalFresh program, California’s implementation of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as SNAP, is the largest food safety-net program in the state and the nation, and provides monthly food benefits to approximately 5.5 million low-income Californians each year. Due to the passage of the federal H.R. 1 on July 1, 2025, CalFresh has significantly altered its eligibility criteria, including changes to work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents, restrictions on utility deductions that reduce benefit amounts, and changes to immigrant eligibility that exclude certain lawfully present noncitizens, which are expected to reduce eligibility and benefits for hundreds of thousands of households and increase food insecurity.
- The SUN Bucks program, California’s implementation of the federal Summer EBT program, was launched in summer 2024, which provides a \$120 food benefit to children from low-income families during the summer months when school is not in session. Eligibility is tied to free and reduced-price meals, with automatic eligibility for children participating in CalFresh, Medi-Cal, and Head Start, as well those experiencing homelessness, in foster care, or in migrant families. In summer 2025, SUN Bucks served 5.6 million children and delivered \$672 million in benefits. H.R. 1 changes that reduced CalFresh eligibility may also reduce automatic eligibility for SUN Bucks, since many children qualify through CalFresh

³ https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5c469df2395cd53c3d913b2d/611027419232d281ad2f51ff_BenefitsFactSheet.pdf

⁴ https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Farm_To_School_Report_20220222-small.pdf

⁵ https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Farm_To_School_Report_20220222-small.pdf

⁶ https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5c469df2395cd53c3d913b2d/611027419232d281ad2f51ff_BenefitsFactSheet.pdf

participation, resulting in fewer children being automatically enrolled and increasing the risk that eligible children do not receive benefits.

- The CalFresh Fruit and Vegetable EBT Pilot provides CalFresh households with up to \$60 per month in additional benefits when purchasing fruits and vegetables at participating retailers. The pilot operated from February 2023 to April 2024, followed by a second phase from October 2024 to January 2025, and a third phase began in November 2025, following the federal government shutdown, which continues to operate. The CDSS 2025 evaluation found that the pilot distributed nearly \$18 million in incentives to over 155,000 CalFresh households and that 98% of incentives were redeemed, demonstrating strong demand and program effectiveness.
- The CalFood Program provides funding to food banks to purchase California-grown foods and supports both food banks and California farmers while increasing the availability of fresh foods for low-income households. CalFood funding increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, rising from a baseline of \$8 million to an average of \$62.7 million annually between July 2022 and June 2025, and has continued as an ongoing state food access and agricultural support program, particularly during federal government shutdowns, states of emergency, and when federal policy changes, such as the passage of H.R.1., reduce CalFresh eligibility. In 2024, 80 million pounds of food were purchased by food banks.

Programs administered by CDE include, but is not limited to:

- The National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program provide free or reduced-price meals to income-eligible students. Beginning in the 2022-23 school year, California implemented a fully state-funded Universal School Meals Program, ensuring all students in prekindergarten through grade 12 can receive up to two free meals per school day, regardless of income eligibility. In March 2025, the USDA canceled more than \$1 billion in funding for programs that allowed schools to purchase food from local farms, including the Local Food for Schools and Local Food Purchase Assistance programs, with no new funding proposed.⁷

Programs administered by CDFA include, but are not limited to:

- The Farm to School Incubator Grant Program aims to transform school food supply chains to improve child health and well-being, increase climate resilience, and expand opportunities for socially disadvantaged food producers who have historically been excluded from these markets. The program connects children to locally sourced, whole foods in the cafeteria, classroom, and garden. Since 2021, CDFA has awarded \$86.8 million across three cohorts of grantees.
- The Farm to Community Food Hubs Grant Program provides grants to support regional food hubs that aggregate, process, store, and distribute locally to schools, food banks, and community food access programs. In 2025, CDFA awarded approximately \$13.75 million to 12 projects to support the planning, development, and expansion of food hubs, including funding for infrastructure, distribution equipment, and operations, with projects focused on

⁷ <https://ipmnewsroom.org/usda-ends-programs-that-help-schools-and-food-banks-buy-locally-grown-food/>

increasing market access for California farmers and supplying locally produced food to schools, food banks, and tribal and community food programs.

- The Market Match program, funded by the California Nutrition Incentive Program, provides matching incentives to CalFresh participants who purchase fruits and vegetables at participating farmers' markets and is funded through a combination of state and federal funding. In 2026, CDFA awarded approximately \$1.7 million to 11 organizations to support nutrition incentive programs at farmers' markets.

Programs administered by CDPH include, but are not limited to:

- The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, a federally funded program that provides supplemental foods, nutrition education, and healthcare referrals to low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, as well as infants and children up to five years of age who are at nutritional risk. Eligible households may also receive \$30 in Farmers' Markets Nutrition Program coupons to purchase food from authorized farmers and markets.

Programs administered by the California Department of Aging include, but are not limited to:

- Nutrition programs that provide meals to adults 60 years of age and older through congregate settings, such as senior centers, and home-delivered services like Meals on Wheels, with priority for those with the greatest economic or social need. Services are delivered through Area Agencies on Aging and programs such as Community-Based Adult Services, Adult Day Services, and the Multipurpose Senior Services Program.

Current law requires these state departments to consider the state policy that access to sufficient, affordable, and healthy food is a human right when adopting, revising, or establishing policies, regulations, and grant criteria related to food distribution. This framework guides program design and funding decisions across major nutrition programs but does not explicitly prioritize the source of food, including whether it is locally grown or produced in California. As a result, while the state aims to advance access to healthy food, it does not consistently align those efforts with support for local agriculture or regional food systems, which *this bill* aims to do.

Institutional Purchasers of California Grown Food. State law requires California state-owned or state-run institutions, excluding public postsecondary education and LEAs, to ensure that at least 60% of the agricultural food products they purchase are grown or produced in the state by December 31, 2025. LEAs are required, when soliciting bids for an agricultural food product, to give preference to California-grown products over domestically grown products from outside the state, if the California-grown product is priced at or below the lowest out-of-state bid and is of comparable quality. While state law promotes local purchasing, several programs, including those that serve vulnerable populations, do not follow a bid process or are exempt from this law.

This bill requires the CSU and CCCs to consider this policy when developing policies, guidelines, and procurement practices related to campus food services and student nutrition and encourages the UC to do the same.

Author's Statement: According to the Author, "California produces the healthiest, safest, and most sustainable food in the world—right here in our own fields. Yet current state policy recognizes every Californian's right to healthy food without ever prioritizing the fresh, nutrient-

rich, locally grown and raised options our farmers produce, allowing ultra-processed foods to dominate over 60% of our children's calories.

“[This bill] is essential because it closes this critical gap by updating the state's Healthy Food Access Policy to explicitly include California-grown whole foods and directing agencies to strengthen farm-to-fork infrastructure, with a particular focus on school meals. Californians, especially our kids, deserve meals built around these real, locally grown whole foods.”

Equity Implications: By prioritizing California's locally grown and raised food, *this bill* may improve access to fresh, nutrient-dense food in publicly funded programs that disproportionately serve low-income communities, including school meals and other nutrition initiatives. *This bill* may also generate economic equity by expanding market opportunities for small and mid-sized California farmers, including producers from historically underserved or socially disadvantaged groups, who often face barriers to entering large institutional supply chains. Strengthening farm-to-fork infrastructure could help reduce these barriers and support more inclusive participation in public procurement systems.

Arguments in Support: A Voice for Change Advocacy writes, “We support this bill that would strengthen California's food access policy by establishing every person's right to sufficient, affordable, and healthy food that is locally grown and raised. [This bill] takes direct aim at the dominance of ultra-processed products in children's diets by directing key state agencies to build out farm to fork infrastructure within existing resources, from aggregation and processing to distribution and procurement, with particular focus on integrating locally sourced whole foods into school meals and public nutrition programs. The bill further extends these obligations to the California State University and Community College systems while encouraging the university of California to align campus food services and student nutrition practices with this strengthened statewide policy.”

Arguments in Opposition: None on file.

RELATED AND PRIOR LEGISLATION:

AB 936 (Lee) of 2025, would have renamed the California Fruit and Vegetable EBT Pilot Project to the CalFresh Fruit and Vegetable Supplemental Benefits Program and would have made the program permanent. *AB 936 was held on the Assembly Appropriations Committee suspense file.*

SB 444 (Hurtado) of 2025, was substantially similar to this bill. *SB 444 was held on the Assembly Appropriations Committee suspense file.*

SB 628 (Hurtado), Chapter 879, Statutes of 2023, declared that it is the established policy of the state that every human being has the right to access sufficient affordable and healthy food and require relevant state agencies to consider that right when making policies.

AB 778 (Garcia), Chapter 576, Statutes of 2022, required a California state-owned or state-run institution, excluding public postsecondary education or local educational agencies, that purchases agricultural food products to implement necessary practices to achieve a goal of ensuring that at least 60% of the agricultural food products that it purchases are grown or produced in the state by December 31, 2025.

AB 2153 (Arambula) of 2022, would have established the California Fruit and Vegetable Supplemental Benefits Expansion Program to enroll authorized retailers to enable those authorized retailers to provide supplemental benefits to CalFresh recipients who purchase California-grown fresh fruits and vegetables. *AB 2153 was held on the Assembly Appropriations Committee suspense file.*

SB 108 (Hurtado) of 2021, was substantially similar to SB 628 (Hurtado) of 2023. *SB 108 was held on the Assembly Appropriations Committee suspense file.*

AB 1811 (Committee on Budget), Chapter 35, Statutes of 2018, created the California Fruit and Vegetable EBT Pilot Project to increase the purchasing power of CalFresh recipients to buy California-grown fruits and vegetables.

AB 822 (Caballero), Chapter 785, Statutes of 2017, required all California state-owned or state-run institutions, except public universities and colleges and school districts, to purchase agricultural products grown in California when the bid or price of the California-grown agricultural product does not exceed by more than 5% the lowest bid or price for an agricultural product produced outside the state.

AB 1661 (Bonta) of 2014, would have established the Healthy Options for Everyone (HOPE) Act of 2014, to authorize the creation of HOPE Incentive Zones designed to increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, and other grown foods. *AB 1661 was held on the Assembly Appropriations Committee suspense file.*

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

A Voice for Choice Advocacy
Happy Valley Fresh

Opposition

None on file.

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