

House Agriculture Committee

Full Committee Hearing

Hearing Title: 21st Century Food Systems: Controlled Environment Agriculture's Role in Protecting Domestic Food Supply Chains and Infrastructure

Witness: Karim Giscombe, CEO, PLANT-AG

Today, I speak on behalf of the people, which you as a committee, and the broader administration serve; the American people, people who represent multiple generations and races, and who share a common thread- the belief that we can be our best, achieve the most, and expect the best, here, in America. I also speak on behalf of a broader Ecosystem of industry participants serving the fresh produce supply chain, who collectively cover not only all the key roles from seed-to-plate, here in America, but do so all over the world, and can provide valuable context and insight to the delivery of a 21st Century Food System.

However, today, those very things are at risk as COVID-19 and adverse weather instances such as the droughts being experienced in the Colorado basin, continue to force our collective appreciation of the fragility of the essential services which enable the people who then enable the economy. I am here because my children, just as every child in America deserves fresh, nutritious, contaminate-free fruits and vegetables they can trust. I am here because no parent should have to come face-to-face with their child's mortality, especially not from the simple act of eating a salad the way Lucas Parker's parents have had to. I am here because it is critical that you, our trusted lawmakers, fully appreciate the threat facing our way of life, the clear and present danger to our agricultural system, and act to protect our domestic food supply chains and infrastructure while stewarding our collective environmental impact.

I am here because we can no longer ignore the obvious, no more than we can go back to simpler times, and we do not have time to over-think this situation. If we want to ensure no other country such as China, or Russia, or Mexico, or even Canada, can control our fresh produce supply, it is absolutely necessary to decrease our reliance on these imports which currently top some 53% of consumption, and swiftly and with intention, increase the scale of Controlled Environment Agriculture production in America.

Sometimes looking back is necessary as to see far enough ahead to understand what the choices made today, mean for tomorrow. This country has never forgotten the value of our independence as we grill hotdogs and hamburgers every July 4th, and I ask everyone here, and watching, to tell me what you see when you hear the word *hamburger*. Truth is, that image does not need to be verbalized, because we all know exactly what it looks like.

Two of the ingredients synonymous with that image, lettuce and tomatoes, are statistically the most commonly consumed and purchased products in America, and more broadly, the world. Today, sourcing them has become more and more challenging across the globe. The USDA just issued

guidance this week regarding increasing food prices, and that is in-line with global trends. Later this year, when lettuce prices skyrocket because of the California droughts, it's the American consumer who you represent that will be the ones impacted, *again*. This is but one of the reasons we are having and must continue this conversation.

This conversation is about choice. First, the right of every person who eats a sandwich, salad, taco, wrap, slice of pizza, or a bowl of cereal with fruit in it, or who drinks a smoothie, at home, or from a foodservice retailer in this country, to trust their choice of product and to trust their choice of outlet or restaurant to be fresh, nutritious and safe. The actions of the FDA through the recent Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) are to-date, the best steps toward enabling this trust for the consumer, but it is and will only be as effective as the infrastructure in place to support its mandates as outlined in the New Era of Food Safety Blueprint. This is about the choice you, as lawmakers, must make to understand and acknowledge the role of the underdog in this story, Controlled Environment Agriculture, as not only a necessary contributor, but the most viable solution if the American people want to trust their food again.

This is about the choice to build the infrastructure necessary to enable American producers to have a viable platform to grow and expand their businesses and be competitive in an open market where the consumer speaks with their dollar as they do with their vote.

So let's go back to where I started today, this is about people; the people you serve; EVERY BODY.

Members of the committee, you need look no further than the hard working franchisees of Subway, the largest foodservice retailer in the world, with more than 30,000 locations, and listen to their highly publicized complaints against the corporation regarding the lack of quality and consistency of the "fresh" lettuce they are forced to serve their consumers. How much longer before other sandwich retailers encounter the same.

In closing, I respectfully ask this committee to consider the following:

1. With what you now know, the urgency to protect our fresh produce supply chain should be beyond question, and your first choice is whether the American consumer will pay for it with their tax dollars or to enable the financial institutions representing private capital to utilize their experience supporting essential infrastructure to do their jobs within the socially responsible framework being presented here.
2. To reaffirm your commitment to protecting the American people and supporting the development of American industry.

3. And lastly, to realize that we cannot be afraid of new technology or the small-minded perceptions of those who do not wish to embrace progress, but must look at what is known as a baseline on which to innovate. Given the challenges we in America and the rest of the world now see as existential, and the benefit of being able to remember a time when people would have asked for faster horses instead of cars, and the fact that today major global conglomerates like GM and Mercedes are following in the stead of the once unknown upstarts like Tesla and making the shift to all-electric act in favor of progress.

Because this generation and the ones that follow are depending on you to do so.