

**Testimony of Elly Brown
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U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on the Climate Crisis
Community-Driven Regional Food System: Healing from the Climate Crisis

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Chair Castor, Ranking Member Graves, and members of the Select Committee, thank you for the invitation today and recognizing the important role that the food system plays in the climate crisis. I am Elly Brown, Co-Executive Director of San Diego Food System Alliance (Alliance).

The Alliance is a diverse and inclusive network that works across sectors to promote collaboration, influence policy, and catalyze transformation in the food system. Our work is grounded in our shared platform, [San Diego County Food Vision 2030](#)¹, and is informed by the experience and expertise of our network and the broader community. Together, we are working to cultivate justice, fight climate change, and build resilience in our food system.

Food System and the Climate

The food system is interconnected to the climate crisis. The industrialized global food system is one of the biggest drivers for global greenhouse gases (GHGs), while simultaneously being extremely vulnerable to the changing climate. On the other hand, a regionalized and community-driven food system is one of the most promising solutions to the climate crisis. Building soil health and closely connecting to our food sources, while confronting the injustices and redistributing power, allows us to ensure sustainability into our future.

We have really lost our way as a society. The industrialization of the global food system has directly contributed to the climate crisis. Land use changes like cutting down forests to make fields, practices that lead to soil erosion, fossil fuel use for equipment, transportation, refrigeration, and processing, and methane emissions from livestock and food rotting in landfills make up 21-37% of global greenhouse gas emissions².

Increased greenhouse gas emissions in turn trigger climate changes —droughts, fires, and other extreme weather events—that threaten our food supply, the viability of farms and fisheries, producer and worker livelihoods, ecosystem resilience, and human health. Low-income, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, and other socially

¹ San Diego County Food Vision 2030, <https://sdfoodvision2030.org/>

² IPCC, 2019, Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems, [P.R. Shukla, J. Skea, E. Calvo Buendia, V. Masson-Delmotte, H.-O. Pörtner, D. C. Roberts, P. Zhai, R. Slade, S. Connors, R. van Diemen, M. Ferrat, E. Haughey, S. Luz, S. Neogi, M. Pathak, J. Petzold, J. Portugal Pereira, P. Vyas, E. Huntley, K. Kissick, M. Belkacemi, J. Malley, (eds.)], <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl>.

disadvantaged communities are disproportionately impacted by the consequences of climate change.

These negative impacts, both for nature and society, can be directly attributed to the consolidated power within the dominant economic system. Market concentration has created a culture of cheap and fast food for short-term gains. Rather than nourishing communities, the industrialized food system, heavily influenced by the decisions of this country, often plays a destructive role. Instead of keeping us healthy, it fuels chronic disease. Instead of supporting resilient communities, it exploits workers, worsens racial and income inequality, and drains money from local economies. Instead of working with nature in a regenerative, sustainable way, today's industrial farming methods devastate ecosystems, pollute air and water, and accelerate climate change. There is a significant cost to these social and environmental externalities, making us vulnerable and limiting our ability to build resilience in our food system and our society as a whole.

A way forward is to *recognize interdependence as a core value*, as indigenous communities have been for millennia. Interdependence is the recognition that one's well-being is tied to another's, as well as nature's. The earth is needing us now to heal and restore balance by shifting power to communities and respecting nature in the highest regard.

San Diego County Food Vision 2030

Rooted in a participatory process, the Alliance launched [San Diego County Food Vision 2030](https://sdfoodvision2030.org/)³ with the understanding that the time to reimagine and reconfigure our food system is now. The development process of Food Vision 2030 involved in-depth research and broad engagement, including over 250 cross-sector organizations and nearly 3,000 individuals, primarily low-income residents, tribal communities, food producers, businesses, and workers. Food Vision 2030, visualized through a report and an interactive website and indicator dashboard, outlines 10 objectives positioned to transform our regional food system to accomplish 3 goals: 1) cultivate justice, 2) fight climate change, and 3) build resilience. The 10 objectives are to:

1. Preserve agricultural land and soils, and invest in long-term food production
2. Increase the viability of local farms, fisheries, food businesses, and workers
3. Scale up local, sustainable, and equitable food value chains
4. Expand integrated nutrition and food security
5. Improve community food environments
6. Scale up food waste prevention, recovery, and recycling initiatives
7. Elevate wages and working conditions, and improve career opportunities
8. Build a movement that uplifts a local, sustainable, and equitable food system
9. Increase leadership by BIPOC communities across the food system
10. Plan for a resilient food system

³ San Diego County Food Vision 2030, <https://sdfoodvision2030.org/>

There is no question that the current path of our food system is unsustainable and transformations must take root at the community level. Decisions made about food have a powerful ripple effect in all aspects of society. Changing the way we grow food, move food, share food, and think about food ultimately changes the way we treat the planet and each other. The food system is a powerful lever for transforming our communities, and provides significant opportunities to elevate social, environmental, and economic equity for all.

As we look beyond the impacts of the pandemic, there is a significant opportunity to invest in a more localized food system and increase the amount of local food that is retained in the regional food economy, creating a multiplier effect. According to a 2019 food system economic impact baseline analysis the Alliance commissioned with the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corp, food system activities in San Diego County generate over \$35 billion in economic output and account for 15% of all jobs in the region, representing a major contribution to the regional economy.

The role of the Alliance to steward Food Vision 2030 forward is through our four Operating Strategy tactics: 1) Build Networks, 2) Influence Policy, 3) Shift Culture, and 4) Increase Capacity. Our work is guided by a 21-member diverse Food Vision 2030 Stewardship Committee, a governing body for the broad network around this movement. Food Vision 2030 Stewardship Committee is a multi-sector committee representing the diverse set of strategies addressed in Food Vision 2030. The majority of the Food Vision 2030 Stewardship Committee members are organizers from communities most marginalized by the industrialized food system including food insecure neighborhoods, tribal communities, food and farm workers, immigrant owned businesses, and small farmers and fishermen. Our community organizing partner committee members are compensated for their involvement with the committee as well as support with community accountability and inclusion.

Some of the initial policy priority areas to move Food Vision 2030 forward include public land access and ownership for urban agriculture, wages and conditions for worker justice, supportive environments for community-wealth building models, and food recovery infrastructure. The Alliance has taken on an intentional community-led approach to policy development and prioritization, leveraging the wisdom of the Food Vision 2030 Stewardship Committee members and the communities they are engaging with.

The Alliance has also recently completed a co-design process with beneficiaries to launch the Local Food Economy Lab, a key program of the “Increase Capacity” pillar. The Lab centers equity and community ownership and works to support the viability of small farmers, fishermen, food business owners, and the communities they serve in San Diego County. We have recently received a 3-year U.S. Department of Agriculture Regional Food System Partnership implementation grant for the incubation of the Lab. Through the Lab, we plan to continue our partnership with the Federal government to achieve the mission of building a local food economy that works for everyone.

Requests for our Federal Government

To combat the climate crisis, we request the Federal government to engage in a comprehensive effort to reform the food system through two strategic initiatives:

1. **Community Governance:** Shift power of the food system to community control

The current racial and climate inequities of the food system can directly be attributed to where power resides. We must shift power away from industry and top-down government control to local community governance. We must elevate the leadership of BIPOC communities who not only bear the brunt of climate change impacts but also actively practice the traditional wisdom and worldviews, living in harmony with nature.

While the Federal government has proactively made investments to community food projects, it has also facilitated the industry-control of the food system through subsidization and broadly speaking, an economic system tainted by institutionalized inequities. In order to truly address the climate crisis for the food system, we must reimagine what democratic governance of our food system looks like and how to scale this out through in a decentralized manner. A truly community-governed and accountable food system is the only pathway to ultimately resolving the climate crisis.

2. **Resource Nimble & Enable:** Eliminate barriers and move resources to community-driven food system work nimble and without strings attached

Resources from the U.S. government rarely move nimble to support community food projects led by communities marginalized by the industrial food system (BIPOC grassroots groups, small farmers, small fishermen, small food entrepreneurs, etc.). We need to remove burdensome barriers around permitting, applications, monitoring, compliance, and reporting if we are to create a supportive environment and resource impactful projects on the ground. Climate dollars, even if accessible, come with too many strings attached around monitoring and reporting. We need to build resource distribution systems which include both trust and accountability. Currently, the system is off-balance, placing too much emphasis around excessive and unrealistic accountability mechanisms.

For example, our network partner Foodshed Distro, a small farm aggregation hub, has recently taken on the leadership challenge of applying for a \$5 million Federal grant to launch a “Carbon Sink Incentive Fund Pilot”. While it’s great these types of funds are available for small farmers, the match requirement and other strings make these types of applications incredibly difficult (and nearly impossible for most).

If we are serious about achieving climate and Justice40 goals, we need to place our energy on process, governance, and cultural innovations. We need to figure out how we can humanize and make these processes much more accessible. A local community-

governed mechanism is a way in which decisions can be distributed about how these resources move to communities more directly. Meanwhile, our U.S. government should invest in deep capacity building and humanize processes to eliminate administrative barriers and move resources nimbly and quickly to community-driven food projects without excessive and unrealistic accountability requirements.

The common narrative told is that our food system is broken. However, further examination of the power dynamics illustrates that the system is actually working in the way it was designed. It concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a few, while externalizing social and environmental costs.

We produce more than enough food to feed our population. Scarcity is not the problem. As Frances Moore Lappé has highlighted, people do not go hungry from a lack of food but rather, from a lack of power—power to access food and power to acquire land to grow food.

Our goal should not be to “fix” our broken food system. It should be to transform it completely by confronting the injustices that underpin it and redistributing power across communities. Our Federal government is one of the most important stakeholders in this transformation and we encourage all of us to approach this issue with open-minds and creativity.

Thank you for your commitment to cultivating a just, sustainable, and healthy food system and addressing the climate crisis.