2025

GREEN FOOD REPORT

Overview

District of Columbia agencies serve thousands of meals to students, seniors, and incarcerated and unhoused residents each day. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, the District spent over $46 million[1] on these meal programs, which are integral to the health and well-being of some of our most vulnerable communities.

Food systems account for a third of global greenhouse gas emissions and are a major source of climate pollution. The Green Food Purchasing Program, established by the Green Food Purchasing Amendment Act of 2021 (GFPAA) (D.C. Law 24-16, effective July 29, 2021), aims to harness the District's purchasing power to reduce carbon pollution and mitigate harmful climate impacts, while increasing access to healthy, unprocessed foods. The GFPAA mandates that the District track greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions associated with all food procurements over $10,000, conduct a baseline emissions assessment, and meet the following emissions reduction targets in relation to the baseline:

1. By FY2025, a 10% reduction;
2. By FY2027, an 18% reduction; and
3. By FY2030, a 25% reduction.

In 2022, the District signed the **Coolfood Pledge**, an initiative of the World Resources Institute (WRI) that aims to reduce food-related emissions by 25% by 2030. As a signatory, the Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE) sends annual food purchasing data to the Coolfood team at WRI, who calculates the associated GHG emissions at no cost to the District.

The Green Food program is currently managed by one full-time staff member at DOEE and is supported by staff at the Office of Contracting and Procurement (OCP). The DOEE staff member is responsible for collecting annual food purchasing data from agencies covered by the GFPAA, ensuring data quality, submitting that data to WRI, and tracking progress toward the GFPAA's reduction targets. The staff member also works with covered agencies to implement best practices in food procurement and food service operations. The seven agencies that meet the $10,000 annual food procurement threshold specified by the GFPAA are the Department of Corrections (DOC), District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Department of Human Services (DHS), Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS), Department of Aging and Community Living (DACL), and Department of Behavioral Health (DBH).

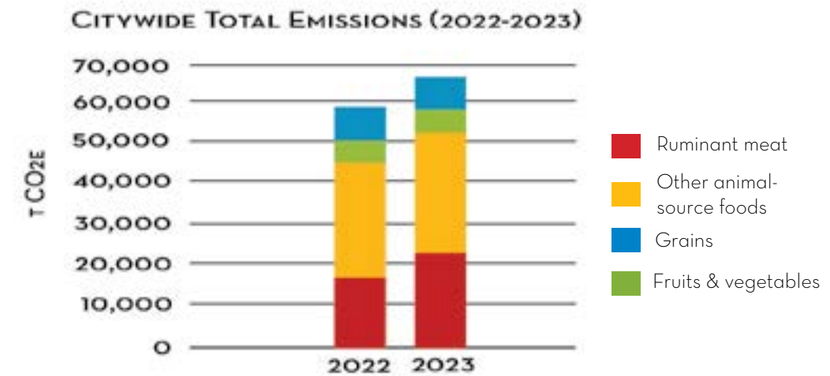
In 2023, DOEE developed guidelines to reduce food-related emissions from Covered Agency meal programs and incorporated the guidelines into contract language for inclusion in future contracts with food vendors (see Appendix A).

1. Data obtained from the Office of the Chief Financial Officer

2022 Baseline Shift

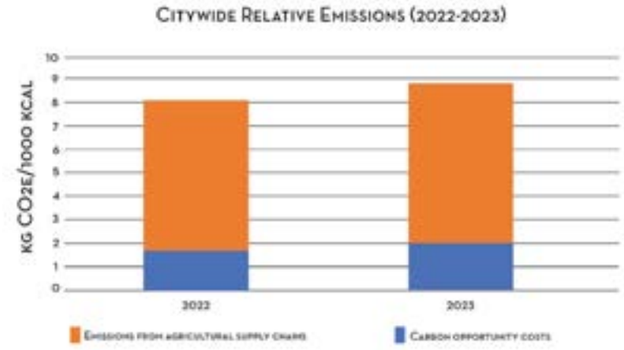
The District has adopted a 2022 baseline from which to track progress towards the GFPAA emissions reduction targets, based on WRI's recommendation. While the first Green Food report used data from Calendar Year (CY) 2021, analysis of CY2022 data demonstrated a significant increase in both food purchases (112%) and emissions (88%). It is likely that these increases are due to a combination of more complete data collection and COVID-19 recovery. DOEE has therefore concluded that the 2022 data is a better representation of the District's actual food purchases and food-related emissions and is a more accurate baseline year.

2023 Data



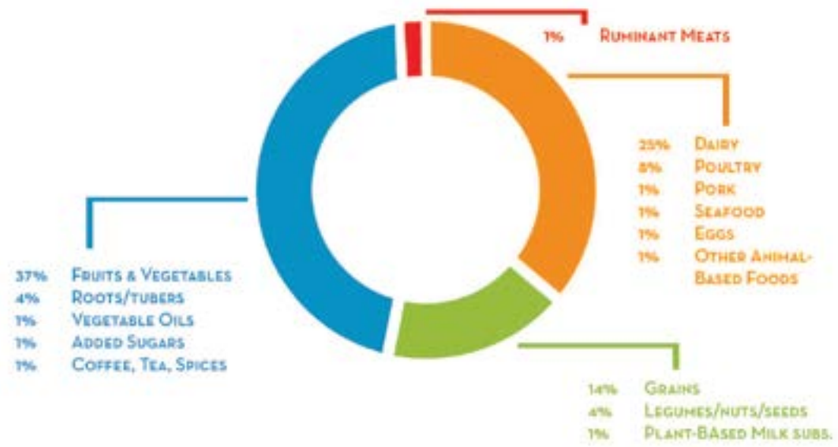
Above: Fig a: Total District government food-related carbon costs, metric tons carbon dioxide equivalent (CO2e).

Below: Fig b: relative emissions (kilograms CO2e/1000 kilocalories, 2022-2023). Agricultural supply chain emissions refer to the cradle-to-point-of-purchase emissions that are directly caused by the production, processing, and transport of food. Carbon opportunity costs refer to the emissions resulting from the land use change (e.g., deforestation and cropland conversion) required for food production.



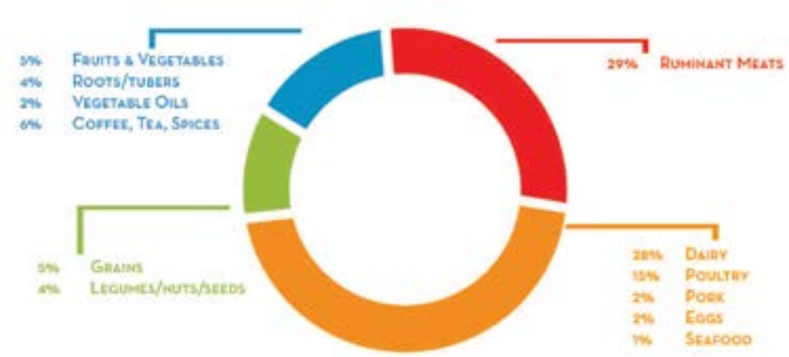
In 2023, total food-related GHG emissions increased by 12% from 2022 (fig a). This was largely due to an increase in ruminant meat purchasing across the District, from 1% of total food purchases in 2022 to 2% in 2023. Purchasing of other animal-source foods also increased, from 36% to 38% of total food purchases. Plant-based food purchases decreased from 62% to 61%[2] . The District's relative emissions (i.e., kilograms CO2e per 1,000 kilocalories) also increased by 10% (fig b). While the increase in emissions demonstrates that the District is not yet making progress toward the 25% reduction target, this is a much smaller increase than the 88% increase in emissions from 2021 to 2022, suggesting that the 2022 baseline is a more accurate measure of the District's actual emissions.

2022 (Baseline)



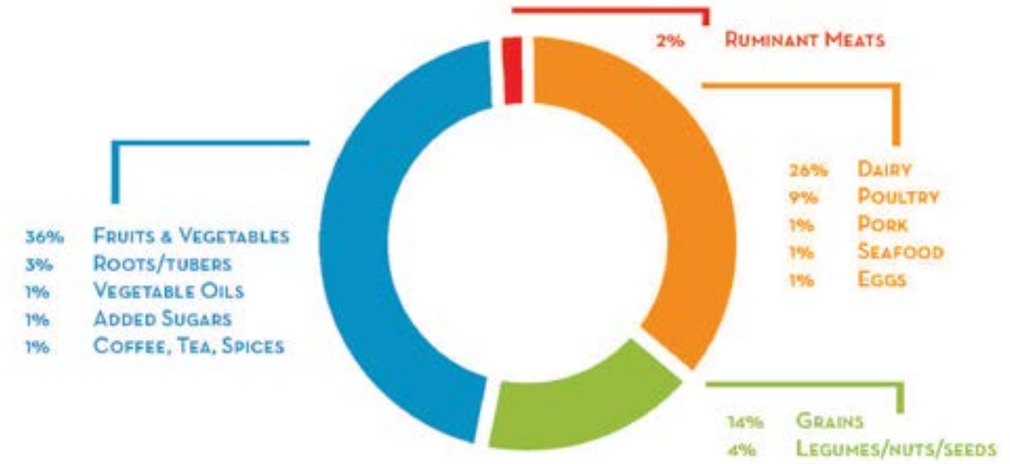
Above: Fig c: 2022 food purchases by category (100% = 5,657,198 kilograms);

Below: Fig d: 2022 food-related emissions by category (100% = 58,989 metric tons CO2e)



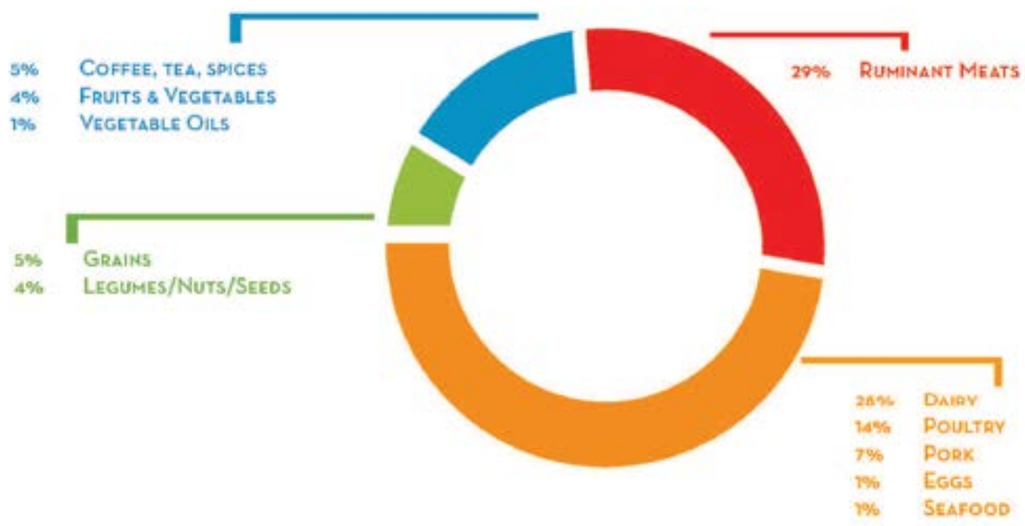
2023

2. Please note that these percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.



Above: Fig e: 2023 food purchases by category (100% = 5,626,551 kilograms);

Below: Fig f: 2023 food-related emissions by category (100% = 66,254.95 metric tons CO2e)



As in 2022, ruminant meats were the single highest-emitting category of food purchases in 2023, accounting for over a third of the District's total food-related emissions. Other animal-source foods, such as poultry, pork, and dairy, accounted for another 45% (fig f). While plant-based foods made up over 60% of total food purchases (fig e), they made up only 19% of emissions.

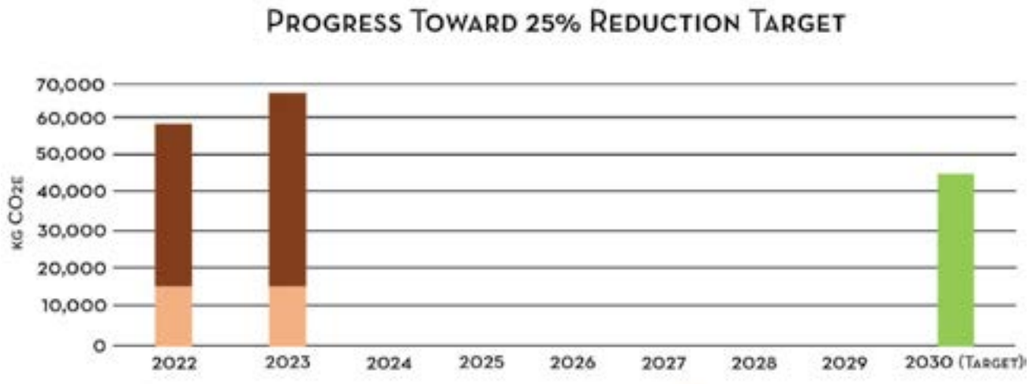


Fig g: progress towards 25% emissions reduction target

Because the 25% by FY30 emissions reduction target is based on a 2022 baseline, and emissions increased in 2023, the District will have to reduce emissions by 33% from 2023 levels – a total reduction of 22,000 metric tons CO2e (fig g).

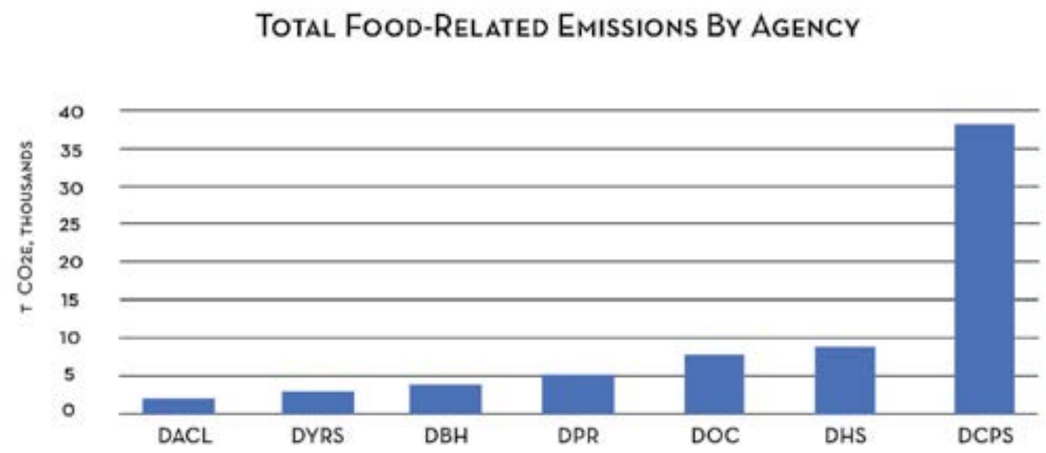


Fig h: total food-related emissions by agency;

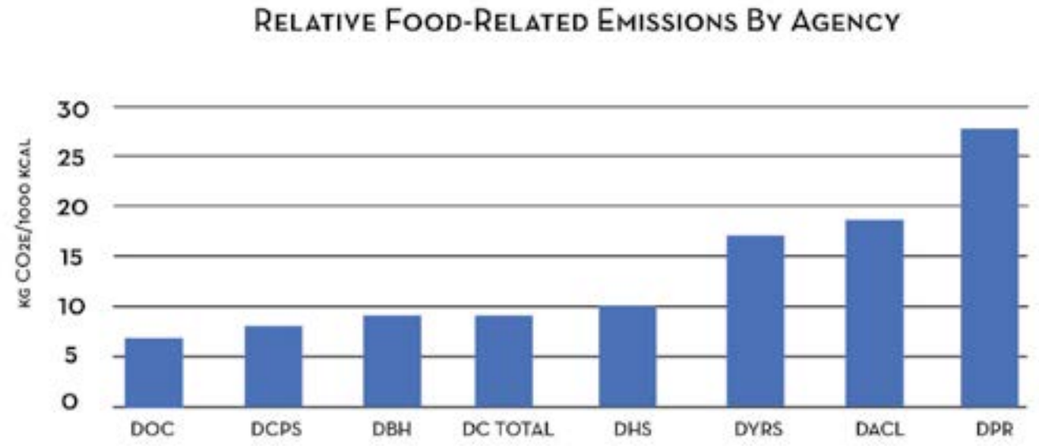


Fig i: relative food-related emissions by agency (relative to number of annual meals served)

Comparing individual agencies' total emissions in 2023, the three highest-emitting agencies are DCPS, DHS, and DOC (fig h). However, when comparing agencies' relative emissions, DCPS and DOC are the two lowest-emitting agencies (fig i), meaning that the food they purchase has a much smaller carbon footprint relative to the number of meals they serve annually. DHS has both high relative and absolute emissions, suggesting that this may be an optimal area of focus for reducing emissions.

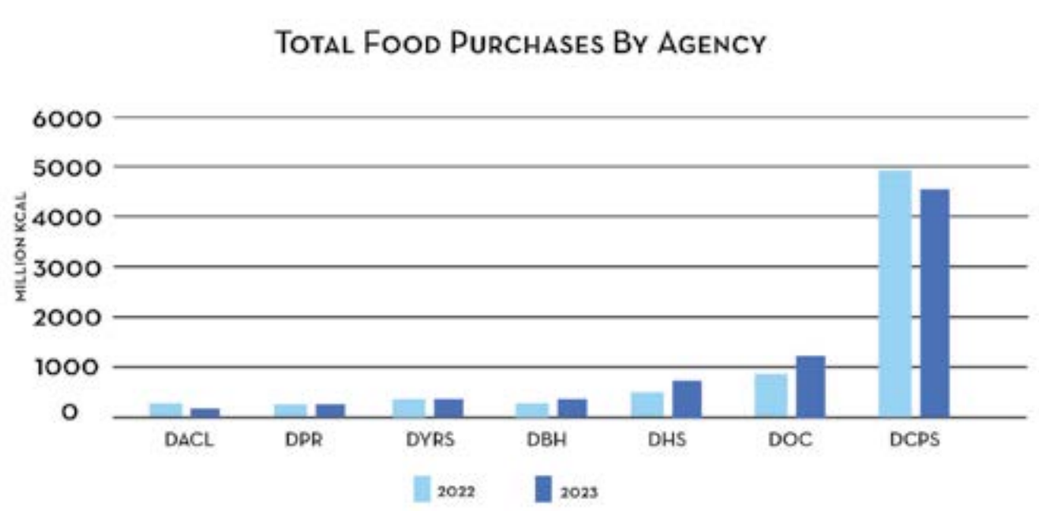


Fig j: total food purchases by agency, 2022-2023

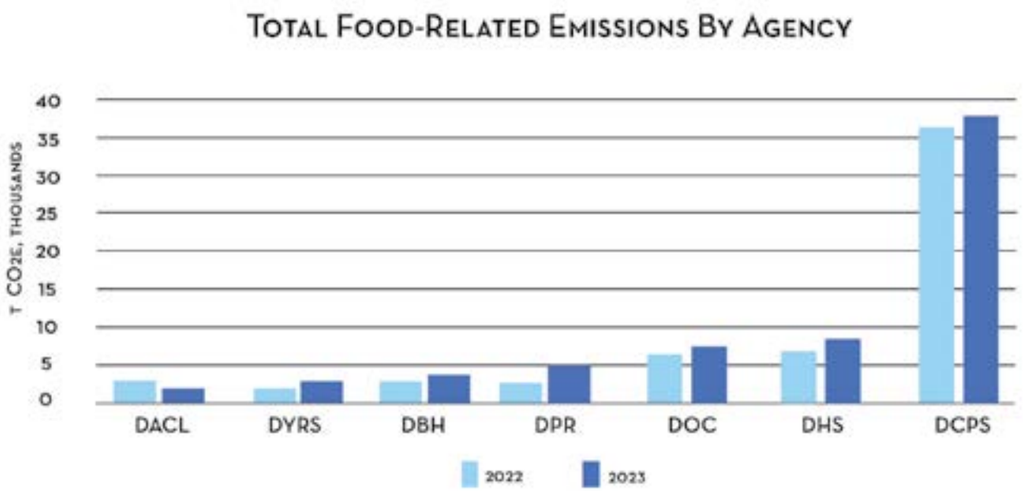


fig k: total emissions by agency, 2022-2023

Figures j and k compare agencies' total food purchases and total emissions from 2022 and 2023. The data suggests that optimal targets for future emissions reduction would be agencies that bought less food than in 2022, but still saw emissions increase in 2023; this includes DCPS and DPR. Lower food purchases may suggest that these agencies' program areas shrank or that the population that they served decreased.

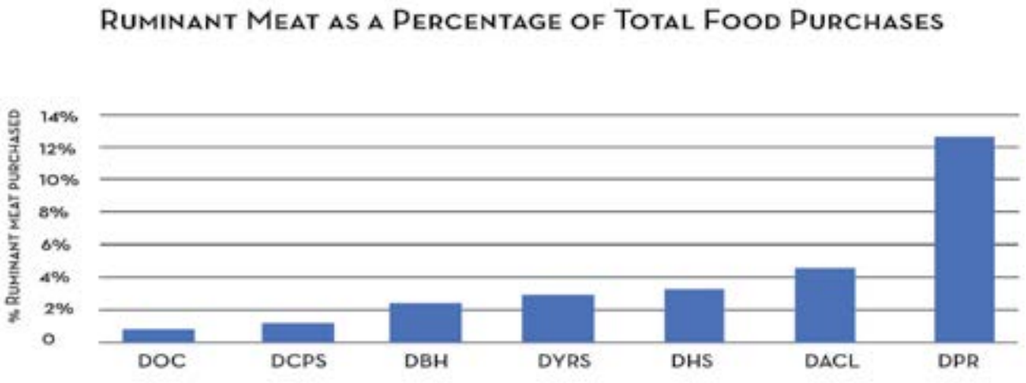


Fig l: ruminant meat as a percentage of total food purchased, by weight

Another useful metric is ruminant meat as percentage of total purchase weight. If this percentage is relatively high, this suggests that the agency is purchasing a disproportionately large amount of ruminant meat and may be able to replace some of these purchases with lower-emitting protein foods. The agencies with the highest percentages of ruminant meat purchases were DPR, DACL, and DHS (fig l).

Discussion

In 2023, DOEE received complete procurement data for DHS shelter sites for the first time. This may account for some of the increase in total emissions for this agency and for the District overall, although this increase may be partially offset by DHS's food contracts for emergency COVID shelters ending in 2022. DHS purchased a disproportionately large amount of beef: it was the second-largest purchaser of ruminant meat after DCPS. However, DHS's relative emissions decreased in 2023, suggesting that this agency is making progress toward purchasing less carbon-intensive foods after accounting for the number of meals served. One challenge in implementing practices to reduce food-related emissions at DHS is that all food served at shelter sites is purchased by a subcontractor – i.e., the nonprofit organization that operates each shelter site, such as Friendship Place or Community of Hope – from a third-party caterer or vendor, such as Henry's Soul Cafe or DC Central Kitchen. DOEE can work with DHS to insert Green Food contract language into Human Care Agreement contracts with subcontractors but must work directly with each individual subcontractor to implement best practices.

DPR's emissions also increased significantly in 2023. Ruminant meat purchases as a percentage of total weight of food purchased increased from 3% in 2022 to 21% in 2023. The majority of these purchases are due to hamburgers and hot dogs purchased for DPR's youth summer camps and event days, such as the End of School Fun Day on June 12, 2023. DOEE will continue to work with DPR to replace some of these high-emitting products with lower-emitting alternatives, such as turkey or plant-based burgers.

The second-highest emitting food category after ruminant meat is dairy, which in 2023 accounted for 27% of total emissions. DCPS purchased the vast majority of dairy products in the District at 1.3 million kg, accounting for 87% of the District's total dairy purchases and 23% of total emissions. The majority of dairy purchases at DCPS (83%) were cow's milk, which alone accounted for 9,000 tons CO2e, or 14% of total District emissions. DCPS is required to serve milk to every student at every lunch to qualify for federal school lunch program reimbursement from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

One opportunity for DCPS to reduce its emissions from dairy is to switch from individual milk cartons to bulk milk dispensers in school cafeteria facilities. Bulk milk allows schools to continue offering milk to every student but provides students the flexibility to choose how much milk they take, reducing waste and costs. Schools could also expand offerings of non-dairy alternatives such as soy milk.

Program updates

Expansion of plant-based meals

In December 2024, DOC piloted two plant-based meals: curry potatoes and chickpeas, and creamy rotini pasta with vegetables. Food service staff distributed a survey to gather feedback on the meals from residents at the facility, which received 28 responses. While some residents gave high ratings to the meals, the overall consensus was that they preferred meals with meat. In the future, DOC plans to pilot more plant-based recipes, although taste tests are currently on hold as the DC jail kitchen facility undergoes renovations.

To meet its Green Food and other values-aligned procurement goals, DCPS has taken several steps to reduce red and processed meat and increase procurement of plant-based foods. Self-operated DCPS facilities have limited red meat to two servings a week, in alignment with the Green Food guidelines, and have incorporated one weekly non-meat day in elementary schools. DCPS vendors have also held taste tests to introduce students to new plant-based menu items and products. In August 2024, DCPS gave a presentation on plant-based meals to all cafeteria staff and held a smaller training on plant-based cooking to a small group of school chefs, focusing on the health, environmental, and equity reasons for incorporating plant-based foods. DCPS is planning to continue and build out the training in future years.

Collaborations and partnerships

In 2024, the DC Good Food Purchasing Coalition was convened by the DC Food Policy Council with the goal of expanding the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP) District-wide. GFPP, which was first adopted by DCPS in 2018, aims to align an institution's food procurement with five core values: Local Economies, Nutrition, Valued Workforce, Environmental Sustainability, and Animal Welfare. The Coalition is currently exploring strategies to adopt GFPP across all food-procuring agencies.

In collaboration with the Office of Food Policy, DOEE has created a community of practice of agency staff overseeing food procurement. The first convening of the community of practice was held on February 10, 2025, and staff across multiple District agencies attended. Several topics for future convenings were discussed, including best practices for shifting to plant-based menus, menu taste-tests, composting, shifting from disposable to reusable food service ware, and food rescue and food donation.

Staff from several District agencies including DOEE, the Department of Public Works (DPW), Department of General Services (DGS), and Office of Planning (OP) have been invited to attend monthly meetings of a Food Procurement and Waste Working Group organized by C40 Cities. The working group, which consists of members from seven U.S. cities, aims to share updates, activities and best practices among members in order to reduce food waste and increase low-carbon food procurement. On March 18, 2025, staff from DOEE, OP, and DCPS presented to the working group on the District's approaches to reducing carbon emissions from food procurement. Presenters discussed the Green Food Purchasing Program as well as DCPS' Good Food Purchasing Program.

In December 2024, the Green Food team conducted a series of interagency meetings to consider benefits and impacts of the program. Final recommendations included implementing a formal method of collecting feedback about meal programs from residents and ensuring that all forthcoming communications and publications about the Green Food program use accessible language. DOEE will be responsible for overseeing implementation of these practices at covered agencies.

Personnel updates

In April 2025, OCP hired a staff member to work on the Environmentally Preferable Products and Services (EPPS) and Green Food programs. The staff member will be responsible for collaborating with DOEE, reaching out to contracting staff to make them aware of the Green Food guidelines, and ensuring that the guidelines are included in food service requests for proposals (RFPs) and final food service contracts throughout the procurement process.

Challenges and Limitations

Data limitations

Since 2021, it has been a challenge for DOEE to receive a complete picture of District meal programs and associated food procurement data. This is partially due to variations in the way agencies procure food. For example, some agencies purchase groceries directly from a vendor, others contract with a food service management company (FSMC) to provide vended meals, and others, such as DHS, have Human Care Agreements with one or more organizations that subcontract food services. While agencies that directly purchase groceries are generally able to provide DOEE invoices quantifying the exact amount of each food item purchased, those that contract with FSMCs or subcontract with third-party vendors typically only provide monthly menus and invoices for the number of meals served. As mentioned, in 2023, DOEE was able for the first time to obtain food procurement data from organizations that subcontract with DHS to provide food to shelter sites. While this allows for a more complete picture of the District's food purchases and emissions, organizations were only able to provide monthly menus and total meal counts rather than exact quantities of food items. Therefore, DOEE was not able to track food quantities with absolute accuracy.

DOEE has also thus far been unable to obtain food procurement data from charter schools. While charter schools receive funding from the District for their food service programs, they operate outside the jurisdiction of OCP. Each Local Education Agency (LEA) operates its own independent procurement program, and DOEE will need to request purchasing data from each individual LEA's food service team. The lack of charter school data means that the District's total food-related emissions are significantly underestimated, and inclusion of this data when it becomes available will impact progress towards reduction targets, given that nearly half of District students are educated and fed in charter schools.[3] This is a significant gap in the data that DOEE will work to address in the coming year.

Contracting and procurement processes

The complex procurement landscape in the District remains a challenge to implementing the Green Food program. A 2025 report from the George Washington University's Milken Institute School of Public Health revealed that the procurement process is not optimized to prioritize values-based procurement goals.[4] Food service contract awards are often determined by the lowest bid price, without regard to sustainability or other non-monetary values. Therefore, RFP scopes of work do not typically incorporate language related to the Green Food Purchasing Program, and the vendor's ability or willingness to reduce food-related emissions is not evaluated.

While the creation of the Green Food guidelines and contract language in 2022 is a significant step

3. OSSE Audited Enrollment, SY13-14 to SY24-25. Retrieved from **https://edscape.dc.gov/page/number-leas-and-schools**
4. Sumner M. Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness, 2025. "Food Procurement in the District of Columbia: A Weak Link in the Value Chain." Retrieved from **https://redstone.publichealth.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5276/files/2025-02/Values-Based%20Procurement%20Report-Jan%202025.pdf**

toward changing agencies' procurement practices to reduce food-related emissions, the effectiveness of these guidelines varies depending on food service program structure. For example, for agencies that contract with FSMCs, inserting the Green Food guidelines into RFPs may be helpful, but for agencies that are self-operated, incorporating the guidelines into food contracts is not effective. Since the vendors for these agencies only provide food items rather than prepared meals, contract language limiting the number of meals containing red or processed red meat would not be relevant to the vendor. One possible solution is for the District to adopt citywide food standards, which would universally apply to all meals served by District agencies. If the Green Food guidelines were included in these standards, they would not need to be added to individual food contracts.

Food service restrictions

Although agencies have in the past two years expanded offerings of plant-forward meals and trained food service staff on plant-forward cooking, the incompatibility of plant-based foods with other food service requirements and preferences remains a barrier. For example, USDA school lunch program nutrition standards require schools to serve one to two ounces of meat or meat alternates per day, and limitations on red meat may make it more challenging for DCPS staff to develop menus that meet these requirements. Additionally, food service staff have reported difficulties in offering plant-rich meals that are culturally appropriate and satisfying to residents. For example, DOC found that residents of the DC jail generally prefer meals with meat and may not eat plant-based meals when they are offered. Security concerns also limit the types of foods that may be prepared in this facility. Knives are not permitted in the DC jail kitchen, so all produce must be purchased pre-cut. DOEE and agency staff must work to develop menu options compatible with Green Food guidelines that are satisfying, responsive to feedback from residents, and in compliance with all other food service requirements.

Next steps

The Green Food team at DOEE will continue to collect food procurement data from agencies and track associated GHG emissions, and to oversee the addition of the Green Food guidelines to food service RFPs and contracts. The team will also work with the DC Food Policy Council to implement recommendations from George Washington University's Values-Based Procurement Report. These recommendations include continuing to convene the community of practice, increasing transparency of food contract performance and outcomes, and delivering trainings for vendors.

The Green Food team is also working with DOEE's EPPS team to include Green Food in the EPPS certification pilot. Under the EPPS program, as mandated by the Procurement Practices Reform Act, agencies are required to procure EPPS products to the maximum extent practicable. In Q4 of FY25, DOEE aims to pilot a certification program that will require all applicable procurements to either obtain an EPPS certification or waiver, based on eligibility. Procurements that are deemed eligible for EPPS must be certified and include green language in their contract statements of work. Those that are eligible for Green Food will be required to include the Green Food guidelines. The Green Food team will develop a Green Food specification similar to the existing EPPS specifications, as well as training materials to be included in EPPS trainings for agency staff.

Conclusions

While the Green Food Purchasing Program has experienced challenges in the past year, and although the District saw its food-related emissions increase in 2023, recent successes and future plans demonstrate that the program is making incremental progress and is still on track to meet the 25% emissions reduction target by 2030. DOEE is hopeful that in the coming year, stricter food contract requirements and improved attitudes towards plant-forward, climate-friendly dietary patterns throughout the District will open doors to new sustainable procurement practices that positively impact public health and the planet.