

Support for SB 364: Free School Meals for All Act 2021



April 30, 2021

Senator Nancy Skinner

Via email: senator.skinner@senate.ca.gov

Re: Senate Bill 364: Free School Meals for All Act of 2021

Dear Senator Skinner,

The 19 undersigned environmental justice organizations and community groups in agricultural regions across California write to express support for Senate Bill 364, the Free School Meals for All Act of 2021.

We strongly support SB 364's strategy to address childhood hunger through universal access to school food. No family should have to choose between food and rent. We also see significant overlap in California between children who are food-insecure and those who are exposed to the

highest levels of toxic pesticides. Both of these intersecting health crises are rooted in an inequitable food system and demand urgent attention.

Although SB 364 aims to bring healthier food to students by supporting “California Grown” products, unfortunately “California Grown” is a marketing label with no substantive production practice requirements. Our organizations believe that the intent of your bill will be better served by instead directing these public resources toward foods produced with agricultural practices that are known to reduce pesticide exposures. This will bring truly healthier food to the plates of school children, and support the health of impacted communities across California at the same time.

The Intersection of Hunger and Environment Health

California’s farmworkers and the communities they live in are chronically at risk from agricultural pesticide exposure and food insecurity. Studies in Salinas¹ and Fresno² by the California Institute for Rural Studies showed that in the United States’ most productive agricultural regions, well over a third of farmworker respondents were food insecure. Children living in farmworker communities also face significant risk of developing cancer, asthma, autism, ADHD and other developmental and reproductive harms stemming from exposure to toxic pesticides that move from fields into the places where they live and learn. The very farmworkers that do back-breaking work to put food on our tables are often least able to access healthy food for themselves and their families, and also struggle to protect their children from an environment that threatens their health and potential.

According to the California Department of Public Health report *Agricultural Pesticide Use Near Public Schools in California*³, half a million students in the 15 counties with highest pesticide use attend schools located within ¼ mile of agricultural pesticide applications. Latinx students are 91% more likely to attend schools with the highest pesticide use compared to their white peers. An internal analysis of these data conducted by Californians for Pesticide Reform shows that the eleven California counties with a majority Latinx population use nearly 900% more pesticides per square mile than the 24 counties with fewer than 24% Latinx residents. This is the very definition of systemic racism.

Shifting agricultural practices that reduce harmful exposures for our most vulnerable populations is as necessary as alleviating hunger to achieve health equity for all California children. Leveraging the significant purchasing power of California’s public institutions will support healthy eating in the lunchroom and healthier lives for farmworkers and their families.

¹ Kresge, L. and Eastman, C., 2010. Increasing food security among agricultural workers in California’s Salinas Valley. Davis: California Institute for Rural Studies

² Wirth, C., Ron, S., and Christy, G., 2007. Hunger in the fields: food insecurity among farmworkers in Fresno county. Davis: California Institute for Rural Studies

³ *Agricultural Pesticide Use Near Public Schools in California*, California Environmental Health Tracking Program, April 2014; California Department of Public Health, California Environmental Health Tracking Program, and Public Health Institute; <http://www.phi.org/wp-content/uploads/migration/uploads/application/files/m0lvrkqvtqh6897fl65fyegso0p8qqqudkrto9v13d6uiocq0r.pdf>

Proposed Addition to Sec. 4., Section 49501.6

We therefore respectfully request the following friendly amendment to the bill's procurement provisions to ensure that they protect public health and increase healthy food access in schools. These amendments also ensure that SB 364 aligns with our state's new Farm to School program⁴, housed at the California Department of Food and Agriculture. It will send schools throughout California a clear and consistent message about our state's health equity priorities:

(h) Local education agencies are encouraged to purchase from producers that have demonstrated and documented the use of climate smart agricultural management practices that improve the health of communities and soil, protect water and air quality, increase biodiversity, and help store carbon in the soil. These include, but are not limited to, strategies like organic or transitioning to organic, certified 100% grass-fed, or reduced or no use of synthetic (fossil-fuel derived) pesticides and fertilizers.

SB 364 has the potential to reduce hunger and foster healthier communities in California. Thank you for considering our amendment, aimed at addressing the nexus between hunger, pollution and poverty.

Sincerely,

Anne Katten, Director of Pesticide and Worker Safety Program, **California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation**

Sarah Aird and Jane Sellen, Co-Directors, **Californians for Pesticide Reform**

Ann Lopez, Director, **Center for Farmworker Families**

Caroline Farrell, Executive Director, **Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment**

Nayamin Martinez, Executive Director, **Central California Environmental Justice Network**

Maricela Morales, Executive Director, **Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy**

Sarait Martinez, Executive Director, **Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO)**

Maria Reyes, Committee President, **Coalition Advocating for Pesticide Safety – Tulare County**

Jose Mireles, President, **Comité Progresos de Lamont**

Estela Escoto, President, **Committee for a Better Arvin**

Anabel Marquez, President, **Committee for a Better Shafter**

Lendri Purcell, President, **Families Advocating for Chemical and Toxics Safety**

Lourdes Herrera, Executive Director, **Madera Coalition for Community Justice**

Samuel Molina, California State Director, **Mi Familia Vota**

Cesar Lara, Executive Director, **Monterey Bay Central Labor Council**

Margaret Reeves, Senior Scientist, **Pesticide Action Network**

Héctor Calderón, Community Organizer, **Safe Ag Safe Schools**

⁴ https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/grants/pdf/2021_Farm_to_School_Incubator_RFA.pdf

Nichole Warwick, Co-Founder/Co-Director, **Sonoma Safe Agriculture Safe Schools**
Bianca Lopez, Co-Founder, **Valley Improvement Projects**

CC:

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