



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Fiscal Years 2021-2023
**USDA Report to Congress on
Reducing Barriers to Food Access**

**Food Access Liaison
Food and Nutrition Service
Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services Mission Area
United States Department of Agriculture**

 **Food and Nutrition Service**
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

October 2024

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INTRODUCTION

This Report to Congress from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) responds to a requirement established by Section 12614 of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill; Public Law 115-334). The Act amended Subtitle A of the Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994, as amended, to include the following directive for the Department.

“The Secretary shall establish the position of Food Access Liaison to coordinate Department programs to reduce barriers to food access and monitor and evaluate the progress of such programs in accordance with this section. The Food Access Liaison shall:

- (1) coordinate the efforts of the Department, including regional offices, to experiment and consider programs and policies aimed at reducing barriers to food access for consumers, including but not limited to participants in nutrition assistance programs;*
- (2) provide outreach to entities engaged in activities to reduce barriers to food access in accordance with the statutory authorization for each program;*
- (3) provide outreach to entities engaged in activities to reduce barriers to food access, including retailers, markets, producers, and others involved in food production and distribution, with respect to the availability of, and eligibility for, Department programs;*
- (4) raise awareness of food access issues in interactions with employees of the Department;*
- (5) make recommendations to the Secretary with respect to efforts to reduce barriers to food access; and*
- (6) submit to Congress an annual report with respect to the efforts of the Department to reduce barriers to food access.*

The Secretary shall provide technical assistance to entities that are participants, or seek to participate, in Department of Agriculture programs related to reduction of barriers to food access.”

The United States has one of the most robust and abundant food systems in the world, thanks to the productivity of its farmers, producers, and resilient markets. Access to nutritious food is an important contribution to the health and well-being of all communities and in recent years USDA has examined existing policies, programs, practices, and relationships to create a more equitable, accessible, and affordable food supply. The Coronavirus public health emergency, State disaster or emergency declarations, USDA priorities, and emerging

innovations have resulted in an expanded set of strategies and tools to support the Department's efforts to improve food access as outlined in the USDA Strategic Plan and reflected in USDA agency contributions described in this report.

The current responsibilities of the Food Access Liaison are assigned to the USDA Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services Mission Area (FNCS) and within the Mission Area to the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). FNS works in coordination with other USDA mission areas to ensure equitable food access for communities affected by climate change, natural and public health emergencies, such as COVID-19, and social and economic disparities. This multi-year report describes activities that occurred from October 2020 through September 2023 to reduce barriers to food access. Key themes highlighted in this report include:

- Ensure opportunities for a resilient, equitable, and prosperous food system.
- Increase food security through nutrition assistance programs.
- Encourage a safe and sustainable food supply, from farm to table.
- Conduct research and evaluation to assess program outreach and outcomes.

BACKGROUND

USDA adapts to numerous population and economic conditions to ensure food access, food safety, conservation of natural resources, and support for agricultural markets. During the performance period described in this report, the United States continued to address a national public health emergency due to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and contend with individual State disaster responses that compounded population demands as emergency disaster declarations were approved in numerous States. Consumers were also impacted by an infant formula shortage that resulted in historic out-of-stock rates among retailers and unprecedented adaptations in the food, health care, and public health sectors.

In response, legislative action was taken to curtail extensive impacts on food access and food insecurity. USDA implemented several interim programs and numerous policy changes based on key legislation. Some of the legislation allowed for temporary policy flexibilities while others resulted in permanent changes or enhancements to existing programs and statutes.

Despite the overwhelming public health events, USDA identified approaches to extend resources to entities in underserved communities and provide support for various contributors in the food supply chain. These strategies increased access to healthy foods, offered new market opportunities for farmers and ranchers, stabilized small and independent retailers, and created quality jobs and economic opportunities in underserved communities. Much of the work to overcome extensive challenges encountered during this historical period can be attributed to committed communities, a national resolve to push forward, and steadfast USDA staff and partners.

USDA also listened to various sectors from across the country that were significantly impacted by barriers to food access and incorporated the feedback provided into policies, guidance, and resources. Listening engagements took place throughout the country and with diverse groups who provided greater insights about structural vulnerabilities that affect regional and local food systems, disparities that have impacted health and economic mobility, policies and priorities impacting equitable access to services and programs, and the need for grants and funding to strengthen and rebuild both urban and rural communities. USDA engaged with an array of individuals who are integral to the food system throughout the United States including nutrition assistance program providers and participants, regional and local food producers, academic experts and researchers, and consumers affected by economic uncertainties caused by natural disasters and the Federal public health emergency for the COVID-19 pandemic.

ENSURE OPPORTUNITIES FOR A RESILIENT, EQUITABLE, AND PROSPEROUS FOOD SYSTEM

USDA contributes to a stronger food system through its ability to help the Nation recover quickly from social, environmental, and economic stressors that impact the food system. The range of vulnerabilities that occurred during fiscal years (FYs) 2021 through 2023 provided opportunities to advance agricultural innovations across all components of the food supply chain, including production, distribution, and consumption. Unique challenges offered opportunities for USDA to create more equitable solutions, expand agricultural and retail options using technology, and initiate new approaches to mitigate changes in climate.

Securing a Resilient Food Supply Chain Through Rural Development

USDA Rural Development (RD) programs help to ensure stronger rural economies and quality of life. Agriculture is the sixth largest employer in rural counties and RD programs offer access to capital through loans, grants, and loan guarantees to agricultural producers and businesses that are critical to building strong and resilient food supply chains. In addition, RD supports the foundation and services that undergird the rural economy including housing, equipment, and the infrastructure for water, electricity, and communications.

During FY 2021-2023, USDA RD programs made investments in food supply chain enterprises and independent meat and poultry processors, to create more and better market opportunities for American farmers and ranchers, and help provide access to healthy foods for all consumers. Investments included meat and poultry grant programs: the [Meat and Poultry Processing Expansion Program](#) (MPPEP Phases 1 and 2) and the [Indigenous Animals Harvesting and Meat Processing Grant Program](#) (IAG). Investments also included loan programs for meat and poultry processors, [the Meat and Poultry Intermediary Lending Program](#) (MPILP), and the food supply chain through the [Food Supply Chain Guaranteed Loan Program](#) (FSC GL).

All programs addressed concentration and consolidation in the meat processing industry and were instrumental in building food supply chains and increasing inventory at grocery stores during the COVID-19 pandemic. These programs, funded by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) (Public Law 117-2), provided funding for loans, grants, and other assistance to maintain and improve food and agricultural supply chain resiliency. Grant awards resulted in more than \$208 million to 35 independent meat and poultry processors through the MPPEP program; \$4 million to date through the IAG program; \$275 million to intermediary lenders through MPILP; and \$647 million through the FSC GL program.

Creating Equitable New Markets through Resilient Local and Regional Food Systems

USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) programs are building resiliency within local and regional food systems development. The programs ensure local and regional producers have sustained access to new, profitable, and equitable markets. Bolstering the Nation's local and regional food systems provides opportunities to producers, increases access to healthy, fresh foods in rural communities, and builds a more resilient system.

The AMS [Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program \(LFPA\)](#), [LFPA Plus](#), and [Local Food for Schools \(LFS\)](#) programs have invested over \$1 billion into food purchase programs. Through the LFPA programs, USDA has provided \$900 million in funding to 50 states, the District of Columbia, four territories and 84 tribal governments, sourcing foods from more than 8,000 local producers, with more than 5,000 identified as underserved. This wholesome food has gone to 7,900 food banks, pantries, and communities across America. Additionally, LFS awarded \$200 million for states and territories to purchase domestic, local foods for use in their National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. These collaborations between the states, school systems, and local producers have helped establish many new supply-chain partnerships, and enabled states to re-envision the school meal and what it can do for both students and local, small, and underserved farmers. Together the LFPA and LFS programs have strengthened school food systems, helped build a fair, competitive and resilient local food chain, and expanded local and regional markets.

The [Bison Purchase Pilot](#) is an interagency collaboration to offer more localized ground bison for tribal communities through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). The pilot assesses how USDA could adapt purchasing to better support buying meat from local, small and mid-sized herd managers and delivering it directly to local tribal communities. These local purchases can reduce the time and distance the meat travels to the consumer, increase economic development market opportunities for tribal and local bison operations, and provide high quality, nutritious foods for nutrition assistance programs.

The [USDA Regional Food Business Centers](#), administered by AMS, are a cornerstone of USDA's work to support resilient, equitable and prosperous food systems. The centers connect small and mid-sized farmers and food businesses and the many resources available from USDA and other federal agencies. Their staff are helping farmers and businesses navigate the processes to obtain USDA loans, grants, and other program support. The Centers provide locally specific technical assistance and financial awards to producers that helps them increase revenue and access new markets. AMS also awarded a total of \$53.2 million to 270 meat and poultry processing facilities across the United States under the [Meat and Poultry Inspection Readiness Grant \(MPIRG\)](#) program to improve their facilities and be authorized to sell their products across state lines. This program builds strength in the food supply chain by increasing processing capacity and providing more processing choices for local ranchers. The [Local Meat Capacity](#) grant program awarded more than \$35 million to projects that expand meat and poultry processing capacity. By building resilience in the meat and poultry sector, USDA is helping to promote more competition in the sector, ultimately providing producers with more local processing options, and strengthening their market potential.

Fostering an Abundant and Affordable Food Supply by Supporting Urban Agriculture and Innovation

USDA has increased access to healthy foods in urban areas through the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (OUAIP). Established by the 2018 Farm Bill, the mission of OUAIP is to encourage and promote urban, indoor, and other emerging agricultural production practices that may directly impact a community's ability to improve food access. The grants available through OUAIP build food system capacity for urban agriculture, provide opportunities for innovative production, and improve access to healthy food for underserved communities.

Through the OUAIP, the Department has awarded \$49.9 million to 188 Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (UAIP) grant recipients through FY 2023. The UAIP grants include planning and implementation activities to support assessing community needs within the local food system. These activities can include researching how food is grown, distributed, or marketed. Activities include recommending safe growing practices such as soil tests and environmental assessments, and evaluating how urban agriculture and innovative production can address issues of food access, conservation, and economic development.

OUAIP provided \$5.8 million to 34 Flagship People's Gardens as of FY 2023. The People's Garden Initiative supports local flagship gardens to build community, grow local and nutritious food, nurture greenspace, and inspire people through the experience of growing food from seed to plant. The People's Garden movement also includes 1,600 registered gardens across the country and provides an opportunity for gardeners to showcase how they are making a positive impact in their communities.

Strengthening Food Access in Communities

The American food supply is one of the most affordable of anywhere in the world. However, many urban neighborhoods and rural towns lack access to grocery stores offering affordable and nutritious food. The [Healthy Food Financing Initiative \(HFFI\)](#) addresses this issue by offering grants, loans, and technical assistance to food retailers and food enterprises that provide healthy, fresh, and affordable food for underserved communities. The HFFI is administered on RD's behalf by the Reinvestment Fund (RF), a national community development financial institution (CDFI).

HFFI received a \$155 million appropriation as a part of ARPA. In addition to the 2018 Farm Bill statutory provisions, Section 1001(b)(4) of ARPA authorizes funds to be used "to make loans and grants and provide other assistance to maintain and improve food and agricultural supply chain resiliency." By providing grants, loans, and technical assistance directly to eligible food retailers, food enterprises, and partners, USDA assists in building capacity and credit enhancement for food retailers and enterprises in underserved areas. The \$155 million

award supported greater diversity of the agricultural and food supply chains and more options for both consumers and agricultural producers. An initial obligation supported [HFFI's Targeted Small Grants](#) cycle in FY 2022. USDA announced \$22.6 million in [grants](#) to 134 independent grocery stores, and food enterprises in 47 States. At the end of FY 2022, the remaining \$135 million was obligated for the development and implementation of expanded HFFI programming.

USDA's Summer Meal Programs provide children with critical access to free, nutritious meals during the months of the year when school is out of session. Section 502 of Division HH of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (Public Law 117-328) amended Section 13 of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, 42 U.S.C. 1761, to include the authorization of a rural non-congregate meal service through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Seamless Summer Option (SSO). For the first time ever, these summer meal programs gained a permanent, nationwide option to provide "grab 'n' go" and home-delivered meals to children in rural communities where traditional group meal sites are not available and where barriers to food access are more prevalent. The new non-congregate option was successfully implemented through policy guidance released by FNS in FY 2023 and will be made available through future regulations.

In FY 2022 and FY 2023, the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) continued to operate the USDA Farmers Market in Washington, DC. The market operates between June and October each year and serves as the Department's own "living laboratory" for community-based farmers market operations across the country. The USDA Farmers Market provides more than 30 farmers, ranchers, and small food businesses with the opportunity to sell their products directly to those who work, live, and visit the Nation's capital. The market promotes healthy fresh produce and other commodity products through a unique educational program, *VegU*. The commodity-centered education program partners with USDA Research and Promotion Boards to market and promote the consumption of board commodities through short educational outreach and in-market recipe demonstrations. The USDA Farmers Market supports the local economy, increases marketing opportunities for farmers and small businesses, provides access to an assortment of local and regional sourced products, and increases access to healthy, affordable fresh food to communities in and surrounding Washington, DC.

INCREASED FOOD SECURITY THROUGH NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Federal nutrition assistance programs are available to eligible consumers and communities throughout all 50 States, five U.S. territories, and numerous Tribal communities. The range of available programs helps to limit the rates of food insecurity during disasters and economic downturns. The unprecedented need for nutrition assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic continued in FY 2021-2023 and USDA utilized administrative flexibilities provided through key pieces of legislation to support communities experiencing increased economic uncertainties and social disruptions created by the Federal public health emergency. Due to the legislative authorities provided by Congress and extensive policy support from USDA, the reported rates of food insecurity remained relatively stable during FY 2021-2023, with food insecurity affecting approximately 1 in 10 households. Each of the Federal nutrition assistance programs played a critical role in reaching populations at every stage of life.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Makes Food Accessible

The [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) is the cornerstone of the Nation's nutrition assistance safety net, having touched the lives of more than 40 million Americans each month during FY 2021-2023, the majority of whom were children, older adults, or people with disabilities. SNAP provides a monthly allotment of benefits on an electronic card to eligible participants which is used at authorized retail stores to purchase healthy food.

During the pandemic, USDA rapidly expanded SNAP Online Purchasing to provide more SNAP recipients with access to online grocery shopping while staying safe and socially distanced. Today, all 50 States plus the District of Columbia offer online purchasing for SNAP clients. More than 300 retailer chains promote SNAP online purchasing, representing thousands of actual stores. In FY 2023, close to four million SNAP households consistently shopped online each month. Shopping for food online can help some households overcome barriers to transportation and distance from a SNAP-authorized “brick and mortar” retailer. Additionally, households can use online shopping to stay within their budgets and compare healthy products for their families.

To increase technical support for SNAP online purchasing, FNS entered into a cooperative grant project with the National Grocers Association Foundation in FY 2023 to establish the SNAP EBT Modernization Technical Assistance Center (SEMTAC). The purpose of the agreement is to provide information, resources, and technical assistance to retailers who are interested or currently in the process of offering online purchasing to SNAP customers. FNS launched SEMTAC in FY 2024.

A key barrier to healthy eating is limited income or money to buy nutritious food. In 2021, USDA released a reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan based on current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance. Thrifty Food Plan, 2021

includes Market Baskets that contain a variety of commonly consumed foods and beverages that are lower in price and of higher in nutrients to support healthy meals and snacks at home on a limited budget. By law, the Market Basket costs indicated in the Thrifty Food Plan for a reference family of four serve as the basis for the SNAP maximum benefit allotments.

SNAP healthy incentives empower Americans to eat more fruits and vegetables. To implement a nutrition incentive program, SNAP-authorized retailers (or non-profit organizations or governmental entities that partner with SNAP-authorized retailers) must first obtain a waiver based on the SNAP equal treatment regulations (7 CFR 274.7(f) and 7 CFR 278.2(b)), which require that SNAP recipients receive treatment equal to any other customer at stores authorized to participate in SNAP, with the exception that sales tax may not be charged on eligible foods purchased with SNAP benefits.

In FY 2022, FNS instituted a streamlined online form for retailers to request an incentive waiver, and made available a list of allowable incentive foods and other helpful information about healthy incentives. Each retailer approved to implement a nutrition incentive project under SNAP must provide a final report to FNS at the end of the waiver approval period. Currently, FNS maintains 11 active equal treatment waivers that allow for the operation of incentive programming in more than 600 firms across 14 States. To date, three of these waivers allow for online integration of their respective incentive program.

Throughout FY 2021-2023, FNS encouraged access to healthy foods, extended SNAP incentive programs, expanded SNAP access among local markets and farmers, conducted extensive outreach, and monitored integrity. Examples of this work include.

- Working in collaboration with external partners such as State agriculture agencies, 1890 land grant institutions (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) and cooperative extensions, FNS significantly increased farmers market outreach activities to local farmer organizations. By enhancing outreach to minority and underserved communities, FNS increased SNAP-authorized farmers markets by 15.08 percent; and increased independent farmers authorized to sell directly to SNAP recipients by 38.29 percent.
- FNS participated in 26 outreach events nationwide among various agricultural sectors including organic growers as well as urban, micro, small, and Veteran farmers to increase SNAP recipients' access to healthy foods. A total of 6,699 farmers' markets and independent farmers were authorized to participate in SNAP during this period.

Providing Children with Consistent Access to Nutritious Foods

Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) ensure access to safe, healthy foods at schools, childcare facilities, and other settings. FNS administers these CNPs in partnership with State agencies,

territories, Tribes, community organizations, and other external partners. The [National School Lunch Program \(NSLP\)](#) and the [School Breakfast Program \(SBP\)](#) are the largest CNPs. Additional programs that support child nutrition include the [Child and Adult Care Food Program \(CACFP\)](#), Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, and the recently re-branded SUN Programs: USDA's [Summer Nutrition Programs](#). These programs are essential in feeding children throughout the year and were instrumental during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the public health emergency as the Nation transitioned away from temporary pandemic policies.

USDA made nationwide waivers available during FY 2021-2023 under the 2020 Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) to assist States and CNP operators in maintaining children's access to meal services during the COVID-19 pandemic with appropriate safety measures in place. Nationwide waivers were issued to help minimize exposure to the virus, support social distancing, streamline access to meals at no cost, and provide flexible meal service options, such as parent pick-up options and the distribution of multiple days' worth of meals.

Before FY 2021, FNS had issued 58 nationwide waiver flexibilities. In October 2020, USDA announced the extension of most [nationwide waivers](#) through June 2021, or during the 2020-2021 school year. The extended flexibilities allowed CNP operators to utilize various strategies to ensure that meals were available to children, year-round. In March 2021, FNS released a set of waivers specific to summer 2021 operations, allowing Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and NSLP Seamless Summer Option (SSO) meals to be served in all areas without the need to establish area eligibility or collect income applications. Meals could be served outside of the mealtime requirements, and parents and guardians were able to pick up meals on behalf of their children. FNS authorized similar flexibilities again in April 2021 to continue supporting CNP operators' efforts in maintaining safe meal services while managing the impacts of COVID-19 throughout the 2021-2022 school year or through June 30, 2022. During the 2021-2022 school year, additional waivers and flexibilities were issued to ensure children's safety as schools began reopening.

Throughout FY 2021-2023, USDA worked with States and the U.S. territories to distribute food assistance to preschool and school-age children whose access to meals at school or in child care was compromised by the COVID-19 pandemic. As initially authorized by the FFCRA, [Pandemic EBT](#) (or P-EBT) authorized States to issue benefits on EBT cards that were redeemable for food. EBT cards were issued to households with children impacted by COVID-19 restrictions who would have received free or reduced-price school meals.

As amended throughout the pandemic, FFCRA expanded P-EBT to cover preschool children in child care, and both preschool and school-age children during the summer months. USDA worked with the child nutrition, education, and SNAP agencies in each of the participating

States and territories to develop P-EBT guidance as well as annual operational and administrative cost plans for each of the program's school, child care, and summer components. At its peak, P-EBT served more than 30 million children. The program distributed more than \$71 billion to eligible children from its inception in March 2020 through the end of FY 2023.

FNS offered a suite of flexibilities for Summer 2022 and during the 2022-2023 school year, to assist State agencies and Program operators as they transitioned from operations under COVID-19 nationwide waivers to operations designed under their own unique circumstances. These waivers were authorized under Section 12(l) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (NSLA), 42 U.S.C. 1760(l), which provides USDA with the authority to waive requirements for State agencies or eligible service providers under certain circumstances.

To accommodate the volume of requests and facilitate a prompt response, [FNS provided a checklist](#) that included 26 potential waiver flexibilities offered to State agencies. These waivers allowed operators to provide program meals outside of a group setting, provided parents and guardians with the option to pick up meals, provided school sites with the ability to offer summer program meals during unanticipated school closures and other operational and administrative flexibilities. Statewide waivers for summer operations also allowed SFSP sponsors, with the approval of their State agencies, to claim reimbursement for summer meals consumed offsite on days when an outdoor site was unable to safely administer a congregate meal to children because of excessive heat, air quality concerns, or extenuating circumstances. The FNS website offers a full description of the [Child Nutrition Flexibilities for Summer 2022 and School Year 2022-2023](#).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, USDA worked diligently to ensure that school food service operations had the resources needed to remain financially viable during a time of supply chain challenges and food cost increases. Over the last three fiscal years, USDA has provided nearly \$3.8 billion in [Supply Chain Assistance funds](#). These funds were used by School Food Authorities for the purchase of minimally and non-processed domestic foods ensuring schools were able to provide nutritious foods to children during a time of tremendous uncertainty.

Supporting Schools and American Agriculture through USDA Foods

USDA strengthens CNPs and supports American agriculture by purchasing and providing high-quality, 100-percent American-grown USDA Foods to schools, child care facilities, and institutions that participate in the NSLP, SBP, CACFP, and SFSP. USDA offers more than 200 different USDA Foods products to support child nutrition programs. These foods are low in added sugar, sodium, and fat, and support meal pattern requirements and diverse cultural eating patterns with several kosher and halal-certified options available.

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed how school meals were provided as many schools served “grab n’ go” items instead of cooked entrees. FNS worked closely with State distributing agencies and schools to ensure sufficient access to USDA Foods in School Years [2022](#) and [2023](#) by increasing the effective per meal rate for all State agencies and providing funds to State agencies to maintain funding at the previous School Year 2021-2022 levels. In response to widespread supply chain and food price challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, USDA provided \$300 million in Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) funds to facilitate additional USDA Foods purchases in 2022 and support school meal operators. Orders were placed in the spring of 2022 and delivered from April through September 2022.

FNS and the Department of Defense (DoD) work together to enable school districts to obtain fresh produce through the [USDA DoD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program](#). Under this partnership, schools can use USDA Foods entitlement dollars to buy fresh produce through DoD’s contracting and distribution network. DoD uses its large-scale buying power to help meet the demand for consistent, weekly deliveries of a wide variety of fresh produce to participating schools and Tribal organizations. This program has grown steadily since its initial pilot project in the 1996 school year. FNS and DoD continue to encourage vendors to provide local produce items when in season.

- In FY 2021, 48 States, Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands participated in the USDA DoD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, spending more than \$564 million in USDA Foods entitlement funds on fresh fruits and vegetables.
- In FY 2022 and FY 2023, 49 States, Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, and Guam, participated in USDA DoD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, spending more than \$552 million each year in USDA Foods entitlement funds on fresh fruits and vegetables.
- From FY 2021 - 2023, approximately 27-29 States used their SFSP funds to order fresh fruits and vegetables through the program.

In FY 2022, FNS released the [USDA Foods Database](#), a resource that provides external parties with vendor-specific nutrition, allergen, and ingredient information for USDA Foods for CNPs. Through this database USDA provides technical assistance to State agencies, school districts, and industry to ensure effective use of USDA Foods and support best practices. Additional technical assistance is offered during national conferences, local meetings, webinars, and through the quarterly USDA Foods e-letter for school foodservice professionals. To offer accessible training and resources for remote learners in 2022, FNS provided timely USDA Foods information through virtual platforms.

Connecting Eligible Mothers, Infants, and Children to WIC

The [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#) provides nutritious supplemental foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding promotion and support, and health care referrals at no cost to low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to their fifth birthday who are determined by health professionals to be at nutritional risk. WIC offers tailored food packages designed to meet the specific needs of pregnant individuals, support the growth and development of young children, and encourage healthy dietary habits during pregnancy, infancy, and early childhood. Pregnant individuals and parents of young children are often referred to WIC by a health care provider when they apply for Medicaid, SNAP, and other social services, or by contacting one of WIC's [10,000 local clinics](#) located in community health centers, Indian Health Service clinics, hospitals, and local health departments.

To align the WIC food packages with the latest nutritional science, FNS proposed changes to the WIC food packages in a November 2022 rulemaking: "[Special Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\) Revisions in the WIC Food Packages](#)" (87 FR 71090). The proposed changes reflect [recommendations from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#) (NASEM) and align with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020 – 2025*. FNS received and analyzed approximately 17,000 public comments in response to the proposed rule. These comments were used to develop the final rule, "[Revisions in the WIC Food Packages \(2024\)](#)," which FNS published in the *Federal Register* on April 18, 2024 (89 FR 28488).

The WIC cash-value voucher/benefit (CVV/B) is a fixed-dollar amount that participants can use to purchase fruits and vegetables as part of their food package. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ARPA authorized FNS to temporarily increase the CVV/B (see [WIC Policy Memorandum #2021-3](#)). Under this authority, FNS provided \$490 million in funding to the 87 State agencies that opted to increase CVV/B amounts to \$35 per month for a period of four consecutive months. After the ARPA CVV/B increase ended, Congress authorized additional temporary increases in the CVV/B to levels recommended by NASEM, adjusted for inflation, for FY 2022-2024 (see [WIC Policy Memorandum #2022-8](#)). FNS codified the increased CVV/B amounts in the final rule, noted above.

Outreach, innovation, and modernization have been critical to improving WIC participant experiences, increasing participation, and improving redemption of WIC benefits in recent years. Beginning in November 2021, WIC State agencies had the option to request waivers to support innovative online ordering and transaction projects under ARPA authority, and FNS set forth a process for requesting such waivers. In 2022, FNS developed an investment strategy built on extensive input from interested parties, targeted research, and FNS program experience and subject matter expertise. The investment strategy aligns with four priority areas:

1. [Prioritize Outreach;](#)
2. [Modernize Technology and Service Delivery;](#)
3. [Improve the Shopping Experience; and](#)
4. [Invest in and Diversify the Workforce.](#)

Grants were awarded by FNS in FY 2022 and address priority areas two, three, and four. In FY 2023, FNS launched a streamlined ARPA waiver request process and offered additional waivers for State agencies to modernize WIC through building or enhancing remote services, which proved to be an effective and efficient way to provide WIC services during the COVID-19 pandemic. As of October 2023, FNS had granted more than 267 ARPA waivers to WIC and WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) State agencies and obligated about \$387 million in ARPA funds. Approximately \$218 million of the funds were provided directly to WIC and WIC FMNP State agencies to invest in their modernization priorities. FNS plans to obligate the remaining funds to support WIC FMNP e-Solution grants in FY 2024.

FNS supported WIC State agencies in their efforts to implement EBT statewide for WIC by October 1, 2020, or to seek an extension from the statutory timeframe required for such implementation by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 ([Public Law 111-296](#)). As of FY 2023, 87 of 89 WIC State agencies are delivering benefits to 99 percent of WIC participants via EBT, promoting participant access. In FY 2023, FNS published a proposed rule titled, [*“WIC: Online Ordering and Transactions and Food Delivery Revisions to Meet the Needs of a Modern, Data-Driven Program”*](#) (88 FR 11516). This proposed rule addresses key regulatory barriers to online ordering in the WIC Program by proposing changes to provisions that prevent online transactions and types of online capable stores from participating in WIC. This proposed rule also proposes changes to modernize WIC vendor regulations to reflect current technology. FNS anticipates publishing a final rule in FY 2025.

WIC maintains a long-standing collaboration with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, specifically with the Maternal and Child Health Bureau within the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and with the Office of Head Start within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). This long-standing partnership continued in FY 2023 to improve program coordination and service delivery for families with young children with a focus on increasing WIC participation among children one through four years of age. Additional partnerships with other Federal agencies and programs that serve young children including Head Start and Early Head Start, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Maternal Infant and Early Child Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) and the Tribal MIECHV Program, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, continue in FY 2024.

In response to the voluntarily recall of certain powder formulas in February 2022 by Abbott Nutrition that resulted in widespread infant formula shortages, FNS granted WIC State agencies flexibilities under Section 501(b) of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act). The [Access to Baby Formula Act of 2022](#) (ABFA; Public Law 117-129), enacted in May 2022, provided USDA with additional authority to address infant formula shortages and recalls in the WIC Program. FNS immediately used this authority to provide WIC State agencies with waivers authorizing flexibilities for the purchase of infant formula under the United States Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) enforcement discretion during the nationwide shortage. In FY 2022, FNS issued approximately 500 waivers to address the unique circumstances of each State agency, which allowed WIC families to purchase any formula on the store shelf regardless of brand or size, including formula imported to the United States [with special permission from the FDA](#). In addition, funding flexibilities provided further support to WIC State agencies. These actions were instrumental in ensuring millions of WIC babies had access to safe infant formula.

In FY 2023, FNS implemented a [phased approach to expiring waivers for infant formula](#). FNS notified and provided technical assistance to WIC State agencies during the return to normal operations when all active WIC infant formula waivers expired in June 2023. FNS also created a [dedicated webpage for State bid solicitations](#) for infant formula, to ensure all manufacturers have the information they need to compete for State agency contracts and to support any qualified companies that are new to the market.

Taking Steps to Strengthen Food Access in Tribal Communities

The [Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations](#) (FDPIR) is an alternative nutrition assistance program to SNAP for income-eligible households residing on Indian reservations or Indian tribal households in designated service areas near reservations or in Oklahoma. Each month, FDPIR-participating households receive a food package to help them maintain a nutritionally balanced diet. FDPIR participants may select from more than 100 USDA Foods including a wide selection of fresh produce as well as offerings of traditional foods. Since FY 2015, FNS and its procurement partner, AMS, have awarded contracts to deliver through FDPIR a selection of [traditional foods](#) such as blue cornmeal, ground bison, frozen wild salmon, and traditionally harvested wild rice.

In recent years, FNS has taken steps to modernize FDPIR in partnership with Tribal communities. To improve the FDPIR food package, the [FDPIR Food Package Work Group](#) — which consists of National Association of Food Distribution Programs on Indian Reservations (NAFDPIR)-appointed representatives and USDA staff — worked to enhance the food package by exploring ways to increase the variety, flexibility, and acceptability of products offered. In FY 2021, based on FDPIR Food Package Work Group feedback, FNS implemented a Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act Food Package

for participants. FNS also implemented a new cloud-based inventory system: the Integrated Food Management System (IFMS). This system provides real-time inventory maintenance at FDPIR program facilities, conducts household food issuances, and allows users to complete the certification process. In FY 2023, FNS finalized a mobile application for FDPIR operators to facilitate food distribution at sites with limited Internet or cellular access.

In FY 2020, FNS began implementation of the [FDPIR Self Determination Demonstration Project](#) authorized by the 2018 Farm Bill (Section 4003(b) of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, Public Law 115-334). The demonstration project, with \$12 million in combined appropriations from FY 2020 through FY 2023 (\$3 million each fiscal year), maintains self-determination contracts with Tribes to purchase food for distribution to FDPIR participants instead of USDA purchases. FNS also entered into a formal agreement with the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to support and manage the demonstration project contract. BIA has longstanding experience and expertise in self-determination and, through the partnership, assisted FNS in drafting, negotiating, managing, and executing self-determination contracts for the selected Tribal organizations. Participating Tribal organizations purchase a variety of products including meats, fish, grains, and fresh produce. During FY 2023, appropriations were applied to a demonstration project expansion to include a total of 16 participating Tribal organizations. All contracts awarded through the demonstration project are three years in duration, with newly awarded contracts running through FY 2026.

Food access was further strengthened among Tribal organizations through USDA's RD Rural Business-Cooperative Service (RBCS). RD administers the [Indigenous Animals Harvesting and Meat Processing Grant Program](#) (IAG) that supports Tribal Nations' interests in processing indigenous animals through culturally appropriate methods. Informed through multiple Tribal engagements and fully funded by ARPA, the IAG helps to create and expand existing local Tribal government processing infrastructure and directly supports Tribal food sovereignty interests.

The IAG made approximately \$50 million in ARPA funding available in FY 2023, which was open to Tribal governments as defined by the [Federally Recognized Indian Tribe List Act of 1994](#) (Public Law 103-454). USDA received applications from Tribes located in 10 of the 12 Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) regions, totaling \$291 million in requested funding. Four [IAG awardees](#) were publicly announced in December 2023. RBCS administers this program with AMS and in consultation with the USDA Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) and in partnership with the [Oweesta Corporation](#), a Native community development financial institution.

Ensuring Nutrition and Food Security for Older Adults

While food insecurity remained stable for most of the population, the prevalence of [food insecurity in households with adults aged 65 and older](#) increased from 6.9 percent in 2020 to

9.1 percent in 2022, a significant increase over the past three years. For older adults, numerous factors such as an increased presence of chronic disease, reduced earned income, disability, and limited mobility or access to transportation create severe barriers to food access. USDA’s nutrition assistance programs provided greater access to healthy foods for eligible older adults, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The [Commodity Supplemental Food Program \(CSFP\)](#) provides supplemental USDA Foods to low-income individuals ages 60 and over. The program is administered in parts of all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and through 8 Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs). CSFP participants receive monthly food packages that include USDA Foods representing all food groups. FNS also provides administrative grants to CSFP-administering State agencies from appropriated funds. Average monthly caseloads from FY 2021–2023 include the following:

- For FY 2021, total program participation averaged 662,064 monthly. ARPA authorized FNS to expand the CSFP in 2021 to serve more eligible older adults during the pandemic.
- For FY 2022, total program participation averaged 658,960 monthly.
- For FY 2023, total program participation averaged approximately 691,542 monthly.

Under the [Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program \(SFMNP\)](#), FNS awards grants to States, U.S. Territories, and federally recognized ITOs to provide low-income older adults with benefits that can be used to access fresh produce from farmers, farmers’ markets, roadside stands, and community-supported agriculture programs (CSAs). The 2018 Farm Bill (Section 4201 of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, Public Law 115-334) reauthorized SFMNP through FY 2023 at a level of \$20.6 million per year.

- In FY 2022, [FNS issued guidance](#) to support SFMNP State agencies in search of alternative models to paper coupons, including support for State agencies to modernize benefit access by implementing electronic benefit systems (“eSolutions”).
- In FY 2023, FNS funded 57 State agencies, including nine ITOs, to administer SFMNP, under which benefits were provided to 812,057 low-income older adults.
- In FY 2023, [FNS awarded](#) \$50 million in ARPA grants to improve the resilience of local food supply chains, which the pandemic demonstrated are essential to providing nutrition in local communities. These grants allowed SFMNP State agencies to implement program initiatives to sustain, improve, and expand their operations and services to strengthen farmers’ markets and CSAs, and provide more support for local farmers.

Providing Food Access During Disasters and Emergencies

In addition to the COVID-19 response, USDA provided disaster response for natural disasters throughout FY 2021-2023 that involved exceptional cooperation among multiple levels of government to support communities and individuals when they are most vulnerable to food insecurity. [The Emergency Food Assistance Program \(TEFAP\)](#) supplements the diets of individuals in need. Through TEFAP, USDA purchases a variety of nutritious, high-quality USDA Foods, and makes those foods available to State agencies. State agencies provide the food to local agencies, usually food banks, which in turn distribute the food to local organizations such as food pantries that directly serve the public. Local organizations distribute USDA Foods to eligible recipients for household consumption or use them to prepare and serve meals in congregate settings.

FNS published a proposed rule in FY2023 to [improve access and parity within USDA Foods programs](#), including TEFAP, as well as for CSFP, FDPIR, and the USDA Foods disaster response. FNS sought public comment on the proposed rule and is using comments received to inform a final rulemaking that is expected to be published before the end of FY 2024.

- In FY 2021, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021 (Public Law 116-260), provided more than \$400 million in additional food funding for TEFAP, supporting the purchase of additional USDA Foods for emergency feeding.
- In FY 2022, almost \$475 million was appropriated for TEFAP administrative and food funds, with \$7.54 million for Farm to Food Bank Projects which support the gleaning of leftover produce and diversion of unused agricultural products for donation by State agencies. In addition, \$500 million in supplemental funding for TEFAP was provided under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, Division B (Public Law 116-136) as part of USDA's Food Systems Transformation Initiative. Projects included similar activities as reported in FY 2021.
- In FY 2022, FNS established TEFAP Reach and Resiliency Grants with [\\$100 million in funds](#) provided through ARPA to expand TEFAP's reach into remote, rural, Tribal, and/or low-income areas. [FNS awarded more than \\$39.4 million in TEFAP Reach and Resiliency](#) round one grants for 38 TEFAP State-specific projects.
- In FY 2022, FNS published resources to highlight USDA Foods with commercial kosher or halal certifications, and other foods that may be kosher or halal acceptable without certification, available through TEFAP and the [TEFAP Fresh Produce Box](#).

- In FY 2023, more than \$537 million was appropriated for TEFAP administrative and food funds. Under the statutory authority of the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) Charter Act, USDA provided approximately \$943 million in USDA Foods and operational support for TEFAP. In total, TEFAP State agencies accepted approximately \$28 million in operational funding with the remaining \$915 million available for USDA Foods purchases. FNS awarded \$58.5 million in TEFAP Reach and Resiliency round two grants to 40 TEFAP State agencies in FY 2023 to continue or expand TEFAP work into underserved areas in FY 2024 and FY 2025.

Additional [USDA Foods Disaster Assistance](#) was provided through the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Public Law 93-288) and by Executive Order 12673, including with Section 32 funds. These authorities allowed for the purchase of USDA Foods for assistance in major disasters or emergencies when other food supplies were not readily available.

In FY 2021-2023, USDA provided Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) benefits and approved a range of program flexibilities, such as replacement benefits, supplements, and the use of SNAP benefits for the purchase of hot foods by affected households following disasters.

[AMS](#) collaborates with FNS each year to purchase 100-percent domestically produced and processed agricultural products for distribution to schools, food banks, tribal organizations, and international food aid operations. These purchases made by AMS support American agriculture by encouraging the consumption of domestic foods. AMS also purchases and delivers food aid commodities produced by the United States to foreign countries, assisting vulnerable populations around the world. AMS delivered purchases valued at a total of \$2.2 billion between FY 2021 and FY 2023 to food banks, soup kitchens, older adults, and Tribal organizations, supporting between 26 and 34 agricultural markets each year.

To streamline the new vendor process and increase vendor participation, in December 2022, AMS removed the need for vendors to provide audited or reviewed financial statements. Instead, to determine financial capability, AMS obtains a Contractor Responsibility Assessment Report from FedDataCheck, which provides information on potential awardees' performance and integrity. Due to the cost and time involved, the requirement to provide certified financial statements had long been a barrier keeping both small and large businesses from participating with USDA as approved vendors. Enabling more market opportunities for American producers improved the availability of healthy and high-quality foods for consumers. Additional activities led by AMS include:

- Awarding over \$800 million to State, territory, and Tribal governments through

the [Local Food Purchase Assistance Program](#) to procure and distribute local and regional foods and beverages that are healthy and unique to their geographic area to food banks, schools, and organizations that reach underserved communities.

- Awarding \$178 million to States through the [Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program](#) for food assistance purchases of domestic local foods for distribution to schools. The program aims to expand local and regional markets with an emphasis on purchasing from historically underserved producers and processors.
- Awarding a total of \$64.5 million through the [Farmers Market Promotion Program](#) between FY 2021 and FY 2023 to support the development, coordination, and expansion of direct producer-to-consumer markets to increase access to and availability of locally and regionally produced agricultural products.
- Awarding a total of \$83.6 million through the [Local Food Promotion Program](#) between FY 2021 and FY 2023 to fund projects that develop, coordinate, and expand local and regional food business enterprises that engage as intermediaries in indirect producer-to-consumer marketing to help increase access to and availability of locally and regionally produced agricultural products.
- Awarding \$17.3 million through the [Micro-Grants for Food Security Program](#) between FY 2021 and FY 2023 to agricultural agencies or departments in eligible States and territories to increase the quantity and quality of locally grown food through small-scale gardening, herding, and livestock operations in food insecure communities in Alaska, Hawaii, and U.S. territories.

ENCOURAGE A SUSTAINABLE AND SAFE FOOD SUPPLY FROM FARM TO FORK

The COVID-19 pandemic and related supply chain disruptions revealed vulnerabilities due to limited capacity in specific geographic areas and network challenges within the food system. Local production and market opportunities provide additional capacity to gather, process, move and store food in different geographic areas of the country. Increasingly, USDA is building policies and strategies to mitigate climate change and achieve sustainable food options in local communities. Community food systems are an important contributor to strengthening food access and managing natural resources. USDA is frequently re-examining the food safety systems that support our food supply to ensure communities have the capacity to address contamination and reduce food waste.

USDA Climate Strategies Support Agricultural Producers and Communities

[The Action Plan for Climate Adaptation and Resilience](#), initially released in October 2021, and [updated in 2024](#), describes how USDA is integrating climate adaptation into its mission, programs, and operations. The Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) support research on adaptation strategies, including adapted cultivars and crops, enhanced water and input-use efficiency, optimal production efficiency, and improved resistance to diseases and pests. The updated plan also outlines activities that FNS plans to undertake to prepare for the impacts of climate change, including revising the USDA Foods disaster response regulations (7 CFR 250.69 and 250.70) to better support the response to Presidentially declared disasters and emergencies without impeding regular operations. FNS is also identifying opportunities through their Childhood Nutrition programs to minimize exposure to extreme heat during summertime and continue to ensure that children have access to food in spite of extreme weather events. USDA provides relevant information, tools, and resources to its stakeholders, target programs, and constituencies to increase resilience to climate impacts. USDA prioritizes equity and offers targeted approaches to address climate mitigation, conservation, and sustainability.

The USDA Climate Hubs play a pivotal role in responding to national and regional needs. The Climate Hubs have helped USDA make climate-informed decisions and are strategically located throughout the United States. Originally, 10 regional locations were established across the United States. In May 2023, an International Climate Hub was added to share best practices and collaborate with international partners to improve global strategies to adapt to climate. Hubs are hosted by the [Agricultural Research Service](#) and [Forest Service](#) with contributions from many agencies including the [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#), [Farm Service Agency](#), [Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service](#), and the [Risk Management Agency](#). Among key concerns are agricultural vulnerabilities caused by frequent and extended drought, degradation of soil and water resources, and decreased livestock health, all of which have significant impact on food access and distribution.

The Climate Hubs are an important piece of USDA’s work to address climate change, complementing the broader work of USDA, including investments of \$19.5 billion provided through the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (Public Law 117-169) to help agricultural producers adopt climate-smart practices, \$1 billion to the Urban and Community Forestry Program to combat extreme heat and climate change, and \$3.1 billion to expand markets for climate-smart commodities through the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities.

The USDA RD RBCS Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) supported projects to lower input costs for farmers and rural food supply chain businesses and grocers. Between FY 2021 and FY 2024, RBCS invested, through REAP, over \$2.3 billion in more than 7,923 projects, including projects on farms, with food supply chain businesses, and with rural grocery stores. These clean energy and energy efficiency investments reduced energy costs thereby supporting ongoing business viability, and helped to ensure that consumers can continue to access fresh and healthy foods in our most rural areas.

A Strong Commitment to Farm to School

Schools across the Nation have embraced Farm to School efforts to bring local foods into the CNPs and to teach children about how food is grown and processed. A variety of activities conducted by CNP operators connect children with the source of their food, encourage healthy nutrition behaviors, promote equity in the food system, and inspire youth to consider careers in agriculture. In FY 2021-2023, FNS awarded more than \$91 million in [Farm to School Grants](#) to support planning and implementing farm to school programs as well as increase capacity of participating institutions to procure and use local food in program meals. The latest estimates from the [Farm to School Census](#) indicate that more than two-thirds of School Food Authorities use local foods in school meals.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, [farmers’ markets and USDA partners](#) worked intensely to provide safe and accessible outlets for healthy food, as well as a vital marketing outlet for small and mid-sized farmers. Farmers’ markets put rigorous safety plans in place and the [Ecology Center](#) fought to ensure that farmers’ markets were classified as essential businesses while sharing best practices around pandemic response with the broader farmers market community.

Reducing Food Waste to Increase Food Availability

The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act (Public Law 104-210), 42 U.S.C. 1791, encourages donation of wholesome food to hunger-fighting non-profit organizations or directly to needy individuals by establishing Federal liability protections for donating entities. The USDA Office of the Chief Economist has raised awareness about this law through various forms of outreach including numerous presentations and updated information on the [USDA Food Loss and Waste \(FLW\) website](#) following the new amendments to the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan

Food Donation Act enacted in January 2023 (Public Law 117-362). USDA coordinates the U.S. Food Loss and Waste 2030 Champions, a joint effort between the USDA and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), to engage American businesses in the national goal of reducing food loss and waste by 50 percent by 2030. The 2030 Champions include representatives from industry that have made the public commitment to reduce FLW in their own U.S. operations. A common strategy implemented by the 2030 Champions is to donate excess or surplus wholesome food into the charitable food system.

The [Draft National Strategy for Reducing Food Loss and Waste and Recycling Organics](#) identifies concrete steps and complementary USDA, EPA, and FDA actions that will accelerate the prevention of food loss and waste across the entire food supply chain. Through several programs, USDA expanded the food donation infrastructure and supported research, education, and extension projects that improve and innovate food donation channels. For example, USDA's REAP loan and grant programs can help fund cold storage infrastructure that helps extend shelf life for donated food.

OUAIP maintains composting and Food Waste Reduction cooperative agreements to assist local and municipal governments to develop projects and testing strategies for planning and implementing municipal compost plans and food waste reduction plans. Implementation activities increase access to compost for agricultural producers and support municipal food waste plans and urban agriculture by developing and testing strategies for food recovery and building infrastructure for the prevention of food loss and waste. In FY 2021-2023, Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Grants provided \$23.4 million for 119 award recipients.

Food Safety is Critical to Food Access

During the COVID-19 public health emergency, the Department ensured the safety and timely delivery of the U.S. food supply to consumers. Through the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), USDA utilized authorities and all administrative flexibilities to meet the challenges associated with the pandemic and fulfill its mission of ensuring the safety of the U.S. food supply and protecting agricultural health.

The mission of FSIS is to protect the public's health by ensuring the safety of meat, poultry, and processed egg products. USDA works with processing facilities to affirm their abilities to operate in accordance with guidance issued by CDC and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to help ensure employee safety, and to reopen plants impacted by the pandemic and to continue to operate those still open. During the COVID-19 outbreak, FSIS supported the reopening of critical infrastructure meatpacking facilities across the United States. In FY 2021-2023, FSIS ensured public health requirements were met in establishments under USDA jurisdiction. FSIS activities can be found in the FSIS Congressional Justifications for [FY 2021](#), [FY 2022](#), and [FY 2023](#).

APHIS also monitors disease situations domestically and throughout the world and uses this information to set effective agricultural import policies to prevent the introduction of foreign animal and plant pests and diseases. APHIS and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security cooperate to ensure that these policies are enforced at U.S. ports of entry. Abundant food production requires safeguards against the damage and loss that result from plant and animal disease and predation. A summary of APHIS accomplishments in these areas, including performance metrics and outcomes and by fiscal year, can be found in the APHIS Congressional Justifications for [FY 2021](#), [FY 2022](#), and [FY 2023](#).

USDA RESEARCH AND EVALUATION TO SUPPORT FOOD ACCESS

Understanding linkages between food, nutrition, nutrition assistance, food safety, and food security is critical to understanding the impacts of food access including outcomes related to the COVID-19 pandemic, social determinants that affect food access and health, strategies that improve food security among underserved populations, and food system innovations and challenges. Various areas of USDA are responsible for conducting evaluation and research, and the investment in evaluation and research at USDA is framed by several key initiatives.

Food and Nutrition Service

FNS conducts research and evaluation projects to enhance program participants' ability to embrace healthy dietary habits; ensure equitable and consistent access to its programs for eligible populations; improve customer service through a culture of innovation, process analysis, and improvement; and ensure partner accountability through integrity, transparency, monitoring, and reporting. Each fiscal year, the Agency prepares a list of research and evaluation projects in the [FNS Research and Evaluation Plans](#) and submits this list to Congress. These projects are designed to provide ongoing program implementation information and the evidence needed to support important policy decisions.

In FY 2022, USDA developed the [Food and Nutrition Service Evaluation Policy](#) as a direct result of Title I of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-435) and subsequent USDA Evaluation Policy ([Departmental Regulation 1230-001](#)). This policy highlights a commitment to scientific integrity and rigor in conducting research and evaluation projects within USDA. In addition, FNS published its first [Learning Agenda](#) which identifies priority learning questions for the Agency and associated research projects.

USDA Science and Research

In FY 2023, the Department published the [USDA Science and Research Strategy, 2023-2026](#) which provides a foundation for focused leadership and direction in advancing USDA's scientific mission. The strategy conveys how science and innovation can successfully support sustainable and resilient food access through five key science priority areas. The strategy represents the work of the Research, Education, and Economics (REE) Mission Area, led by the Office of the Chief Scientist, and four agencies with research designations: Agricultural Research Service (ARS), the Economic Research Service (ERS), National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), and the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). The REE Mission Area is dedicated to creating a safe, sustainable, competitive U.S. food and fiber system, as well as building strong communities, families, and youth through integrated research, analysis, and education.

Economic Research Service

ERS examines food access issues, food insecurity, and nutrition assistance programs in annual and ad hoc research reports to support policymakers, external researchers, and the public. ERS also tracks the affordability of healthy food, provides food price data and analyses, and publishes reports about food access, system data, and research related to the pandemic.

- The annual [Household Food Security in the United States](#) reports are available for FY 2021-2022 and monitor the prevalence, trends, and severity of food insecurity among U.S. households and across sociodemographic groups.
- The [data products and reports available from ERS](#) include indicators of individual, household, and market-level food consumption including proprietary data, fruit and vegetable prices, and the food expenditures.
- The [Food Access Research Atlas](#) provides consistent food access indicators for the United States and the [Food Environment Atlas](#) combines food access indicators with other information to describe community food environments.

National Institute of Agriculture (NIFA)

NIFA plays a critical role in building the evidence base and translating the evidence into action to ensure access to safe, nutritious, and affordable foods for all Americans and farmers, ranchers and producers have equitable access to markets. NIFA invested \$482 million in projects aimed at reducing barriers to food access for FY 2021 to FY 2023 and examples are represented in the following programs.

- [Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program \(CFPCGP\)](#) is intended to bring together stakeholders from distinct parts of the food system and to foster an understanding of national food security trends and how they might improve local food systems.
- [Food and Agriculture Service Learning Program \(FASLP\)](#) brings together stakeholders from the distinct parts of the food system to increase the capacity for food, garden, and nutrition education within host organizations or entities, such as school cafeterias and classrooms, and fosters community engagement between farms and school systems.
- [ASCEND for Better Health Pilot Nutrition Hub](#) coordinates the collective work of REE agencies to improve food and nutrition security and reduce the burden of diet-related chronic diseases, especially in underserved communities.
- [Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program](#) (GusNIP) brings together stakeholders from various parts of the food and healthcare systems, to conduct and evaluate projects providing incentives to increase the consumption fruits and vegetables by income-eligible consumers. The GusNIP [Year 3 Impact Findings](#).

[Executive Summary](#) highlights the impact of these programs.

- [Agriculture and Food Research Initiative \(AFRI\)](#): The AFRI research, education, and extension grants ensure food safety and security and enhance human nutrition among other USDA priorities.

CONCLUSION

USDA continues to leverage the strength of all agencies within the Department to advance important cross-cutting goals that promote food access for all Americans. The Department develops and maintains partnerships focused on solving challenges, particularly among underserved communities, across the country. USDA strives to provide States, territories, and Tribal organizations with resources, tools, funding, and research to ensure a robust and sustainable food system.

The past several years included historic public health, climate, social, and economic challenges. In the aftermath, USDA continues to work with all interested and affected parties to rebuild, strengthen, and recover. USDA's response efforts give vital support to help protect the food supply from farm to fork and provide broad access to safe and nutritious food.