

The Los Angeles Good Food Purchasing Program: Changing Local Food Systems, One School, Supplier, and Farmer at a Time

Program Summary and Highlights:

- The Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP) was developed in 2012 to encourage public institutions to procure food produced through values-driven purchasing standards.
- Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)'s adoption of GFPP has increased demand for equitably produced products, catalyzing shifts in distributor and producer practices and impacting the larger food system.
- In 2014-15, 81 percent of wheat products purchased by LAUSD were distributed by Gold Star Foods and made with sustainable, California-grown, Shepherd's Grain wheat.¹
- Gold Star Foods gained 65 new jobs and supports the annual purchase of 160,000 annual bushels of wheat from Shepherd's Grain through their bakery and milling partners.²

In 2011-2012, the Los Angeles Food Policy Council developed the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP), an innovative local food procurement policy aimed at building markets for good food to create an equitable food system for all of Los Angeles. Developed through a participatory process that engaged over 100 stakeholders and procurement experts, GFPP commits major government institutions to a set of purchasing guidelines that are unique in their equal emphasis on five food system values. The program progressively certifies participants—meaning that large food purchasers, such as schools and municipal governments receive higher rankings for food purchases that meet tiered, values-driven standards. These standards, which include impacts on local economies, environmental sustainability, food chain workers, animal welfare, and the nutritional content of food served, represent the core tenets of the “Good Food” that GFPP aims to bring to communities served by these institutions. By harnessing public institutions’ buying power, the policy has already led



Image courtesy of Anisha Hingorani.

to tremendous shifts in local purchasing and spurred health and economic benefits to students, food suppliers, growers, entrepreneurs, and distributors alike.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) School Board was the second institutional food purchaser to adopt GFPP in 2012, following the City of Los Angeles. Their ongoing commitment to the policy, which they reaffirmed and strengthened in 2014, signals a commitment by the district to align its food procurement policies with its mission to educate students and create healthy environments where students can succeed. LAUSD plays a tremendous role in the Los Angeles food environment with expenditures nearing \$125 million each year to feed 650,000 K-12 students,³ more than 90 percent of whom are of color⁴ and 76 percent of whom are eligible for the federal free and reduced price meal program.⁵ For many of these students, the district ensures they can access healthy food during the school day. Improving healthy food access can

contribute toward reducing their long-term risk of diabetes, heart diseases, and other conditions that disproportionately impact low-income communities and people of color.⁶ The City of Los Angeles similarly pledged to procure Good Food, and requires that all departments that annually spend more than \$10,000 on food participate in GFPP.

The ripple effects of LAUSD's adoption of GFPP have extended beyond better health and nutrition for students by also impacting local buying practices. The school district works with various food suppliers, who in turn pay farms to raise animals, hire workers, and engage in business practices throughout the supply chain. Prior to adopting GFPP, there was no particular emphasis placed on local food procurement. While districts were already considering factors like low prices and high volume in their contracts, the Good Food Purchasing Program incentivized purchasers to also invest in the local economy, as well as workers and consumers by creating a framework for districts to incorporate these values into their contracts as well. When large players like LAUSD create demand for equitably produced food, producers, processors, and distributors also begin to change their practices, and eventually, institutionalize GFPP values into the contract process. Gold Star Foods, the school district's bread and produce distributor, is an example of an instrumental partner that focused their purchasing practices with the support of GFPP's framework and is catalyzing a larger, regional shift in purchasing practices.

GFPP Policy in Practice: Gold Star Foods

For Gold Star Foods, LAUSD's adoption of GFPP was a chance to take leadership in a growing field, and to use GFPP's metrics to incorporate a values-based approach into their own purchasing. As one of the nation's largest K-12 school food distributors, the company holds significant industry leverage, and its Ontario, California headquarters, located just east of Los Angeles, positioned it well to purchase local food for Southern California schools. Prior to LAUSD's adoption of GFPP, Gold Star recognized values-based food purchasing could serve as an asset for their own business and support a more equitable and sustainable food system, but GFPP provided an incentive and the right tools for Gold Star Foods to make this transition by signaling a shift in the way their clients were thinking about—and assessing—food purchasing. Gold Star Foods CEO, Sean Leer, described the shift in practice supported by these standards, "It wouldn't even have been on our radar screen before. Now, we're not just looking for the most cost-efficient, ripest tomatoes, but also considering who picked them or how they originated...Critical to GFPP is that there are now metrics to gauge the level of commitment an organization has towards this movement. You can now better quantify your and your suppliers' performance."

Taking on this new way of sourcing product has already paid off for Gold Star Foods, which has added about 65 full-time, living wage jobs as a direct result.

Impact Highlights

81%

LAUSD wheat product purchases that contained sustainably grown wheat in 2014-15

65

new FTE jobs at Gold Star Foods with comprehensive benefits

160,000

annual bushels of wheat Gold Star Foods purchases from Shepherd's Grain

44

Food Alliance-certified farms supported by Shepherd's Grain

Building upon Gold Star Food's commitment to their employees, these new positions come with full medical, dental, and vision benefits, as well as eligibility for 401K investment plans with employer match. The company also continues to have a productive working relationship with Teamsters Local 63, who currently represents their drivers, and recently worked together to ratify a long-term contract to ensure living wages and a voice in the workplace for their drivers. Implementing the practice, however, required some creativity. Many farmers and producers in the company's traditional supply chain were uninterested in changing their practices or unable to meet GFPP standards. Leer needed to find mid-sized local farms to get necessary volume and ability to work with a major distributor. He reached out to Shepherd's Grain, a sustainable wheat-farming business based out of Portland, Oregon, that he recalled from his Pacific Northwest roots.

For Gold Star Foods, and for LAUSD and GFPP, Shepherd's Grain is an ideal producer. Since its founding by long-time farmers Karl Kupers and Fred Fleming in 1999, Shepherd's Grain has been committed to a holistic approach to economic and environmental sustainability. By connecting consumers with growers committed to both the philosophy and practice of sustainability, Shepherd's Grain has demonstrated that family farms can utilize healthy farming practices while remaining economically viable. Because all Shepherd's Grain farms are Food Alliance-certified, buying their products also supports practices that protect soil and conserve water, such as not tilling fields between seasons. In 2010, the same year that LAUSD was beginning to explore local sourcing opportunities, Gold Star Foods and members of the California Wheat Commission approached Shepherd's Grain about replicating their model in California. This partnership allowed Shepherd's Grain to expand its existing network of over 40 independent local wheat farms in the Northwest that they already supported into California, setting the stage for Gold Star Foods to be able to adopt GFPP's framework when LAUSD officially signed on the program in 2012. GFPP helped create the pathway through which the three California Central Valley wheat growers that were part of the Shepherd's Grain network could access larger institutional markets such as LAUSD.

Gold Star has also experimented with ways to create market opportunities for small producers who would typically not have enough volume to be a supplier to LAUSD. Gold Star Foods used its size to operate as a purchasing co-op, taking the financial risk of paying local farmers up front and utilizing their existing aggregation and delivery infrastructure to support local, smaller, and mid-sized farmers, including those who are part of the Shepherd's Grain's network. For Gold Star Foods, switching its wheat source from another producer that was based in the Midwest to Shepherd's Grain's in-state network of farms ensured that LAUSD purchases were reinvested in California producers. Gold Star Foods' bakery partner now exclusively uses flour milled using Shepherd's Grain wheat for their proprietary products, which amount to 160,000 annual bushels of wheat and nearly all of Shepherd's Grain's annual California crop, thus providing the high level of stability that comes with working on a large scale. For Shepherd's Grain, the working relationship with Gold Star Foods has enabled them to think more broadly about how to expand their model across diverse regions.

The impact of GFPP on the local Los Angeles food system has been tremendous. Of all of LAUSD's wheat product purchases in the first half of the 2014-15 school year, 81 percent were wheat products distributed by Gold Star Foods made with sustainable, California-grown, Shepherd's Grain wheat. GFPP's impact reaches beyond Los Angeles—Gold Star Foods now distributes 45 million servings of bread products made with Shepherd's Grain wheat each year to another 115 other districts outside of LA. While these 115 districts have not adopted the GFPP values-based standards in their procurement policies, they still reap the benefits. Policy changes and institutional commitment from other districts would continue the increase in both the demand for and supply of more equitably produced food.

By incentivizing Good Food values while keeping school district costs manageable and ensuring a steady stream of volume for mid-sized, responsible farmers, GFPP has brought complementary benefits to distributors, producers, and schools alike. Gold Star's shift to a more local, sustainable, and worker valued product through its partnership with Shepherd's Grain represents the impact of just one player, LAUSD, in school and government food procurement decisions. Moving forward, LAUSD is looking to further GFPP's goals by requiring all bidders for district contracts to share how they will help the district meet its GFPP commitment. The Good Food Purchasing Program is encouraging other institutional purchasers to rethink and renegotiate contracts to reflect a valued, equitable food system.

Notes

- 1 Gold Star Foods.
- 2 Gold Star Foods.
- 3 Teresa Watanabe, "L.A. Unified's Local Food Push Is Healthy for Area Economy Too," *Los Angeles Times*. November 24, 2013. <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/nov/24/local/la-me-laUSD-food-20131124>.
- 4 Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). LAUSD Fingertip Facts 2011-12. http://notebook.lausd.net/pls/ptl/docs/PAGE/CA_LAUSD/LAUSDNET/OFFICES/COMMUNICATIONS/11-12FINGERTIPFACTSREVISED_0.PDF.
- 5 California Department of Education. Student Poverty FRPM Data. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/files/sp.asp>.
- 6 PolicyLink, *The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters*. (2010). <http://www.policylink.org/find-resources/library/the-grocery-gap-who-has-access-to-healthy-food-and-why-it-matters>.

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