

## VIEWPOINT

# Advancing local food systems despite deep federal budget cuts: An example from Silicon Valley, California, USA

Susan Chen <sup>a\*</sup>  
San Jose State University

Lucy Diekmann <sup>d</sup>  
University of California Cooperative Extension

Laura Vollmer <sup>b</sup>  
University of California Cooperative Extension

Christopher M. Bacon <sup>e</sup>  
Santa Clara University

Garry Sotnik <sup>c</sup>  
Valley Verde

Submitted October 14, 2025 / Revised November 21, 2025 / Published online December 31, 2025

*Citation:* Chen, S., Vollmer, L., Sotnik, G., Diekmann, L., & Bacon, C. M. (2025). Advancing local food systems despite deep federal budget cuts: An example from Silicon Valley, California, USA [Viewpoint]. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 15(1), 103–108. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2025.151.023>

Copyright © 2025 by the Authors. Published by the Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems. Open access under CC BY license.

## Summary

Abrupt federal budget cuts and the elimination of select federal programs that support agroecology and value chain coordination have disrupted small-scale food producers and community stakeholders throughout the United States. In April 2025, regional food systems stakeholders in California's Silicon Valley convened to discuss ways to sustain agroecology and food justice programming in the

face of federal funding cuts. Two themes emerged: (1) Regional governments can continue to support entities through local food systems plans; and/or (2) Food system organizations can be equipped with skills to organize for local policy changes. In the long term, sustainable and localized initiatives are warranted.

## Keywords

agroecology, federal programs, food system, policy, United States

<sup>a\*</sup> *Corresponding author:* Susan Chen, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Nutrition, Food Science, and Packaging, San Jose State University; 1 Washington Square; San Jose, CA 95129-0058 USA; +1-408-924-3106; [susan.chen@sjsu.edu](mailto:susan.chen@sjsu.edu);  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3309-750X>

<sup>b</sup> Laura Vollmer, MPH, Community Nutrition and Health Advisor, University of California Cooperative Extension; 1500 Purisima Creek Road; Half Moon Bay, CA 94019 USA;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0119-6554>

<sup>c</sup> Garry Sotnik, PhD, Strategic Partnership Manager, Valley Verde; 691 West San Carlos Street; San Jose, CA 95126 USA;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2422-1110>

<sup>d</sup> Lucy Diekmann, PhD, Urban Agriculture and Food Systems Advisor, University of California Cooperative Extension; 1553 Berger Drive; San Jose, CA 95112 USA;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2323-5457>

<sup>e</sup> Christopher M. Bacon, PhD, Professor, Department of Environmental Studies and Sciences, Santa Clara University; 500 El Camino Real; Santa Clara, CA 95050 USA;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2534-6900>

*See disclosures on next page*

## The Current Political Landscape

Silicon Valley has a deep agricultural legacy that continues to shape the region. Situated along the southern edge of the San Francisco Bay, it encompasses parts of Santa Clara, San Mateo, Alameda, and Santa Cruz counties (Joint Venture Silicon Valley, 2024). In 2022, Santa Clara County alone had 825 farms, 80% of which were small to midsized operations (U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service [USDA NASS], n.d.). Most sales came from vegetable production, and 32.4% of producers were new and beginning farmers (USDA NASS, n.d.). Concurrently, the technology sector has come to dominate the regional economy, exacerbating economic disparities. This inequity has disproportionately burdened marginalized populations, contributing to heightened food insecurity, chronic disease, and housing unaffordability (Buckner-Capone & Myers-Lipton, 2024).

Federal programs that support agroecological production training and value chain coordination have recently been cancelled or had their funding suspended because they are misaligned with current administration priorities (Brown, 2025; Held, 2025a). These include The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities Program, Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program, Regional Food Business Centers, and the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program. Support programs for beginner farmers and ranchers have also been halted (Held, 2025b). Given the long

histories of exclusion and discrimination embedded within U.S. agricultural policies (Graddy-Lovelace, 2017) and recent federal cuts to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives aimed at assisting disadvantaged farmers, having federal support continued seems increasingly uncertain (Held, 2025c; The White House, 2025).

In response to these cuts, supporters of local food system initiatives are scrambling to fill the gaps left by the federal changes (Held, 2025c). This viewpoint describes how food systems professionals who attended the 2025 Urban Agroecology and Cooperative Food Systems Change Conference in Santa Clara, California, plan to use agroecology and value chain coordination to advocate for local food systems during a time of deep federal budget cuts.

## The Urban Agroecology and Cooperative Food Systems Change Conference

Members of the South Bay Food Justice Collaborative (SBFJC) formed a steering committee and began conference planning in January 2025 (Santa Clara University, n.d.). The SBFJC is a regional food systems network with stakeholders representing academic institutions, community organizations, and government agencies. The collaborative initially emerged to support collective action responses to hunger and injustice during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The three-day (April 10-12, 2025) conference's objectives were to:

- Share food justice action and research initiatives guided by efforts to advance food security, food sovereignty, and resilience in Silicon Valley and beyond.
- Analyze potential disruptions and develop scenarios, such as 20% to 30% funding cuts to food systems work, that participants could anticipate over the next 3–6 months.
- Develop strategies, such as mutual aid, skill-sharing, and collective action plans that use agroecology and community organizing to secure the human right to food for all and accelerate the transition toward more sustainable food systems.

Over 125 participants representing 14 community organizations, 19 small businesses, seven higher education institutions, six farmers, four net-

---

### Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

### Funding Disclosure

Chris Bacon is thankful for funding support from the County of Santa Clara Food Systems Resiliency Grant. This material is also partially based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under award number 2023-38640-39571 through the Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program under project number SA23-6745-02. USDA is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

works, three higher education institutions, and three government agencies attended. Two salient opportunities that arose through the conference sessions are described below.

### Regional Government Responses

As of April 2025, local government responses to the changing political and funding climate were still emerging, but the conference offered an opportunity to learn from the County of Santa Clara’s efforts to increase food system resilience in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recipients of the County of Santa Clara’s Food System Resiliency Grants shared their projects that had the goals of advancing food security, food sovereignty, and resilience in alignment with the county’s Food System Workplan’s goals (Gazula et al., 2021). Their key takeaways were:

- Investment in a values-based regional food economy—through institutional purchasing, developing food hubs, and incubating cooperatives—has benefited small-scale farmers, food entrepreneurs, and local consumers. Sustaining these supply chain networks will further regional food infrastructure, farmer livelihoods, and food security.
- Resilience begins locally and grows through

investment in community education and leadership. As the leader of an urban garden network explained, “By equipping community members with knowledge about nutrition, gardening, and environmental justice, we’re not only increasing immediate access to healthy food but also cultivating local networks of support that can adapt and respond in times of crisis.”

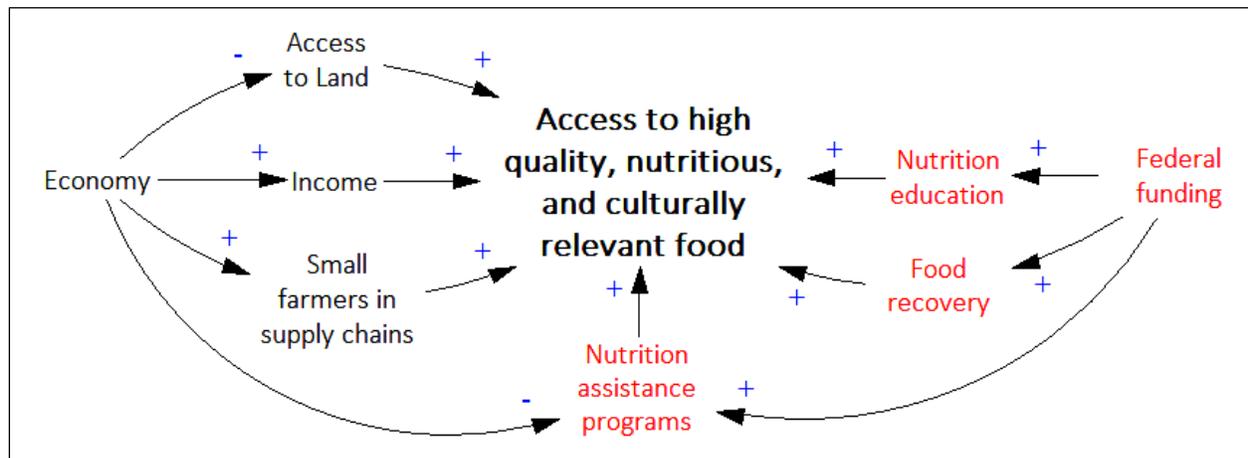
### Planning for Local Food System Change through Policy Advocacy

The scenario analysis and planning workshop explored strategies for continuing to advance food justice and sovereignty in light of anticipated economic challenges. Recognizing that comprehensive scenario analysis requires multiple extended sessions, this 80-minute workshop enabled participants to start exploring the consequences of alternative funding scenarios (Sotnik, 2025a). Participants identified problems of interest and then joined problem-specific groups to explore (a) how their organizations’ theories of change might be affected under alternative funding-cut scenarios, and (b) what they could do to mitigate and adapt.

Participants expressed concern about anticipated reductions in nutrition education, food recovery, and nutrition assistance (Figure 1). They

**Figure 1. A Causal Diagram Depicting the Effects of Economic and Federal Funding Changes on Access to High-Quality, Nutritious, and Culturally Relevant Food in Silicon Valley, California, USA**

Arrows represent causal relations between two variables in the local food system. A positive or negative sign beside an arrow indicates an anticipated positive or negative association between two variables. Variables in red are anticipated to be directly affected by federal funding.



Source: Sotnik, 2025c, p. 3, including description; used with permission.

were especially concerned about the adverse effects of reductions in nutrition assistance during a possible economic downturn. Finally, each group identified a path for continuing to advance food justice in the face of funding cuts (Table 1).

### Conclusion

Conference attendees indicated gains in their understanding of efforts to advance food security, sovereignty, and resilience in Silicon Valley's food system; strategies for promoting equity and community-led work; the use of scenario planning; and the impact of the socio-political climate on food systems. The latter two topics saw the greatest gains in understanding, reflecting their timeliness. Despite the federal allocation cuts, participants expressed strong commitment to continued engagement and collective action for equitable, sustainable food systems. Professional development opportunities, such as this conference, enhance knowledge of agroecology and food systems. Municipalities with effective food systems plans, such as the example provided with Santa Clara County Food Systems Workplan, can help sustain momentum toward agroecological and just food systems amid budget reductions.

Continued funding appears to be volatile for established federal nutrition and agriculture programs. While the current administration has published the newly established Small Family Farms First policy agenda, it is uncertain how these initiatives will affect local producers who have already lost funding and assistance (USDA, 2025). This agenda emphasizes connecting small farmers to federally funded nutrition assistance programs. The sustainability of this approach is questionable, given that funding has been cut since July 2025 to critical programs, such as TEFAP, the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program, and SNAP-Ed. As of mid-September 2025, funding for the Patrick Leahy Farm to-School program was restored (Held, 2025e; USDA Food and Nutrition

Service, 2025), but the eligibility requirements were changed, with the current requirements favoring partnerships with larger farms and limiting the amount of grants awarded (Held, 2025e). Funding for other federal assistance programs could be cut in the future, and the abrupt changes would make it difficult for small, local producers to stay aware of funding opportunities (Held, 2025d).

The sentiments reflected by attendees of this timely conference reflect food systems professionals' resilience in continuing their work around collaborative, community-based approaches to build inclusive food systems that secure the human right to healthy food for all. Discourse about how other regional food systems collaboratives across the U.S. are responding to funding changes should be widely shared as well. Members of these collaboratives should consider sharing their challenges and successes through publications such as these, commentaries in professional journals, and op-ed pieces in regional and national news media. That being said, news these publication outlets should prioritize accepting and publishing these perspectives. Additionally, professionals could consider joining professional associations or interest groups, such as the North American Food Systems Network, to organize virtual spaces to continue this discourse, or advocate for state and national legislation to support food systems professionals. 

### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the participants of the scenario analysis workshop. Special thanks to Claudia Damiani (Veggielution), Jocelyn Dubin (County of Santa Clara), Lucia Garcia (La Mesa Verde), Maria Eugenia Flores Gomez (Santa Clara University), Samiha Hamdi (Fresh Approach), Cayce Hill (County of Santa Clara), Acacia Lynch (Fresh Approach), Lovepreet Kaur (Valley Verde) for assisting with the design and review of the scenario analysis workshop.

*References follow Table 1.*

**Table 1. Workshop Findings Based on the Scenario of Funding for Community-based Programs Drops by 70% and the Economy Plunges**

Scenario Group	Problem	Analysis	Actions
<b>Expand access to quality, nutritious, and culturally relevant food.</b>	Economic pressure leads to money and time constraints, coupled with misinformation and easy access to low-quality foods, which contribute to unhealthy diets that are not culturally aligned.	Worsening economic conditions would: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Extend the aforementioned constraints to a larger portion of the population, while less funding for nonprofits would weaken their ability to offset these trends.</li> <li>● Either place potential restrictions on eligibility guidelines for federal nutrition assistance programs, which could limit access; or lower incomes may lead to increased eligibility for groups with low incomes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Participate in advocacy and legal efforts to support the food safety net.</li> <li>● Identify and cultivate local advocates to help community members access benefits.</li> <li>● Enable people to grow their food and participate in collectives to improve community food security.</li> </ul>
<b>Integrate value-based procurement into the supply chain.</b>	The supply chain is currently inequitable and wasteful, marginalizing smaller producers and limiting food access by those who need it the most.	Worsening economic conditions would: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Make it more difficult for smaller producers to compete with larger ones.</li> <li>● Increase the need for food banks. Meanwhile, a reduction in nonprofit funding would undermine the ability of food banks to meet the increasing demand.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Advocate for policies that introduce equitable and sustainable food purchasing practices and allocate sufficient funding for food recovery.</li> <li>● Support cross-organizational mentoring and knowledge transfer of successful programs.</li> </ul>
<b>Enable people to grow their own food.</b>	High land costs restrict access to land for food production, while rising water prices make growing food unaffordable to many, particularly those who would benefit most.	Worsening economic conditions would: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Reduce the cost of land.</li> <li>● Increase incentives for people to grow their own food.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Approach large landowners for land access, mobilize communities, and advocate for policies that benefit the community.</li> <li>● Take advantage of opportunities to grow food in unlikely places (e.g., vertical gardening in corners of apartment living rooms, transforming lawns into edible foodscapes, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Empower local communities to build autonomy and equity, focusing on structural and policy factors.</b>	The existing economic system limits opportunity and self-sufficiency for disadvantaged communities. Nonprofit organizations are often overextended in their efforts to address multiple community crises at once.	Worsening economic conditions would: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Undermine the self-sufficiency of many households, while a reduction in funding to nonprofits would weaken the safety net they provide for such households.</li> <li>● Cuts to SNAP would reduce the ability of customers to afford fruits, vegetables, and grocery staples.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Build stronger relationships, stay informed, promote democratic decision-making at all levels (including within nonprofits), and prioritize programs that build self-sufficiency.</li> <li>● Share stories of impact and need within communities and across organizations.</li> <li>● Build economic power within communities through cooperatives.</li> <li>● Connect to other sources of funding (e.g., tech companies) to fill resource gaps.</li> </ul>

Source: Sotnik, 2025b; used with permission.

## References

- Brown, M. (2025, March 10). *USDA cancels \$1B in local food purchasing for schools, food banks*. Politico. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/03/10/usda-cancels-local-food-purchasing-for-schools-food-banks-00222796>
- Buckner-Capone, A., & Myers-Lipton, S. (2024). *2024 Silicon Valley Pain Index*. Human Rights Institute, San Jose State University. [https://www.sjsu.edu/hri/docs/2024%20SVPI\\_Final.pdf](https://www.sjsu.edu/hri/docs/2024%20SVPI_Final.pdf)
- Gazula, A., Smith, C., Vollmer, L., Diekmann, L., Barry, S., Brinkley, C., Fuchs-Chesney, J., Cortez, S., Seavey-Hultquist, J., Dubin, J., Ellsworth, S., & Ho., S. (2021). *County of Santa Clara Food System Workplan*. County of Santa Clara. <https://files.santaclaracounty.gov/migrated/Food%20Systems%20Workplan.pdf>
- Graddy-Lovelace, G. (2017). The coloniality of US agricultural policy: Articulating agrarian (in)justice. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44(1), 78–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1192133>
- Held, L. (2025a, March 11). *USDA continues to roll out deeper cuts to farm grants: A list*. Food Policy Tracker, Civil Eats. <https://civileats.com/2025/03/11/usda-continues-to-roll-out-deeper-cuts-to-farm-grants-a-list/>
- Held, L. (2025b, March 13). *USDA publicizes canceling a grant to an organization that trains young farmers*. Food Policy Tracker, Civil Eats. <https://civileats.com/2025/03/13/usda-publicizes-canceling-a-grant-to-an-organization-that-trains-young-farmers/>
- Held, L. (2025c, March 19). *Will local food survive Trump's USDA?* Civil Eats. <https://civileats.com/2025/03/19/the-end-of-federal-support-for-local-food/>
- Held, L. (2025d, July 1). *Senate passes tax bill with SNAP cuts intact*. Food Policy Tracker, Civil Eats. <https://civileats.com/2025/07/01/senate-passes-tax-bill-with-snap-cuts-intact/>
- Held, L. (2025e, September 12). *USDA releases farm-to-school funding after earlier cancellation*. Food Policy Tracker, Civil Eats. <https://civileats.com/2025/09/12/usda-releases-farm-to-school-funding-after-earlier-cancellation/>
- Joint Venture Silicon Valley. (2024). *2024 Silicon Valley Index*. <https://jointventure.org/images/stories/pdf/index2024.pdf>
- Santa Clara University. (n.d.). *Agroecology & Cooperative Food Systems Change Conference*. Retrieved August 29, 2025, from <https://www.scu.edu/ej/programs-/food-and-climate-justice/food--justice-events/agroecology---food-conference/>
- Sotnik, G. (2025a). *Facilitating scenario analysis & planning*. Complexity Group. (An electronic version is in the possession of the lead author.)
- Sotnik, G. (2025b). *Scenario Analysis Workshop summary*. Agroecology & Cooperative Food Systems Change Conference internal document (unpublished; an electronic version is in the possession of the lead author).
- Sotnik, G. (2025c). *Summary of the Agroecology & Cooperative Food Systems Change Conference's Scenario Analysis Workshop*. Santa Clara County Food System Alliance.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA]. *Farmers First*. <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/farmers-first-small-family-farms-policy-agenda.pdf>
- USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (2025, November 14). *Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/grant>
- USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service [USDA NASS]. (n.d.). *2022 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Santa Clara County, California*. [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Online\\_Resources/County\\_Profiles/California/cp06085.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/California/cp06085.pdf)
- White House, The. (2025, January 20). *Ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs and preferencing* [Presidential actions]. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/>