



Formerly called the Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International



Environmental benefits of serving more plant-based meals

The demand for sustainable foods

Consumers are increasingly making food choices based on environmental impact. Surveys show growing interest in sustainability, with younger consumers leading the way. By offering more plant-based menu items, institutions can align with these values and meet a rapidly expanding demand.

- 31% of Americans say environmental sustainability is a “very impactful” factor when deciding what to buy.
- In one national survey, nearly half of respondents believed plant-based alternatives are better for the environment than their animal-based counterparts.
- 87% of consumers say they are concerned about sustainably-produced food.

Serve more plants for the planet

Worldwide, close to **80 billion** farm animals are raised every year for meat, eggs and dairy. Food systems are responsible for roughly one-third of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, with animal-based foods accounting for about twice the emissions of plant-based foods. This makes dietary changes a powerful climate tool alongside clean energy and waste reduction.

Because animal-based foods produce about twice the GHG emissions of plant-based foods, replacing animal proteins with plant proteins could reduce diet-related GHG emissions by up to 50%.

Greenhouse gases

Greenhouse gases (GHGs) are naturally occurring gases that trap heat in the atmosphere.

In natural concentrations, they help regulate the planet’s temperature, but human activities—especially the burning of fossil fuels and certain agricultural practices—have greatly increased their levels.

In the U.S., most meat, dairy and eggs are produced in concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), which are significant sources of GHGs, particularly methane and nitrous oxide.

Over a century, methane traps about 27–30 times more heat than CO₂. According to the EPA’s 2025 GHG Inventory, agriculture is the largest sectoral source of methane emissions in the U.S., with livestock digestion as the top single contributor. Additional emissions come from producing and transporting animal feed, processing products, deforestation and land degradation.

What about local food?

While local food is important—especially for air-freighted goods—the type of food you serve has a far greater impact on emissions. Recent studies show that transport accounts for roughly 19% of food system emissions, but shifting from beef to beans can cut emissions by far more.

Crunching the numbers

Beef is one of the most resource-intensive foods we eat. Producing 100 grams of protein from beef generates about 35 kg of CO₂e, while tofu produces just 2 kg, and peas only 0.4 kg. That's up to 90 times less climate impact. Beef also requires about 9 times more freshwater when producing it than plant proteins.

Plant-based foods protect our resources

The effects of growing food for animals, not humans

Land is an important and shrinking natural resource on our planet. **Animals raised for food use around 80% of agricultural land worldwide**, while supplying just 17% of calories and 38% of protein. This means the land footprint for animals raised for food is more than triple that of all crops grown directly for human consumption. Serving more plant-based foods therefore helps protect forests, grasslands and the entire ecosystems living within them.

In the U.S., grassland pasture and range for animal agriculture cover nearly **29%** of all land—that's more than any other category.

Producing 100g of protein from beef requires about **9 times** more freshwater than producing the same amount from beans or lentils. It's worth noting that beans and beef have similar protein content per serving.



Your institution can make a difference

By working in the food service industry, **you have a powerful opportunity to make a measurable and lasting impact on the environment**, plate by plate.

Large studies show that shifting menus toward plant-based proteins can:

- Cut diet-related greenhouse gas emissions by 30–50%
- Reduce agricultural land use by up to 75%
- Lower freshwater use by over 50%

For an institution serving thousands of meals each week, these savings quickly translate into tangible resource wins: **less land, less water use and a smaller climate footprint**—all while meeting growing customer demand for sustainable choices.

If your dining operation shifted just a portion of its menu toward plant-based proteins, you could save the equivalent of thousands of gallons of water and hundreds of pounds of grain every single day. Those savings scale exponentially when multiplied by the number of meals you serve over a semester, a school year or a corporate contract.

Institutions across the nation are aligning with public demand and pledging to build a better world for tomorrow by incorporating plant-based dishes onto their menus.