On January 13, 2021, USDA hosted the first U.S. National Food Systems Dialogues. This Dialogue, the first of the three-stage National Dialogues, focused on identifying challenges to building more socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable food systems in the United States. This summary of the first Dialogue includes four sections:

Dialogue structure and focus

This first Dialogue focused on identifying challenges to building more socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable food systems in the United States. The discussions were broken into five main challenge areas aligned with the UN Food Systems Summit five "action tracks":

1. *Safe and nutritious food for all:* What are the challenges in ending hunger and all forms of malnutrition and reducing the incidence of non-communicable disease, enabling all people to be nourished and healthy?
2. *Increased consumer demand for healthy diets that are sustainably produced:* What are the challenges in increasing consumer demand for healthy diets and foods that are sustainably produced? What are the challenges in reducing consumer food waste?
3. *Environmentally sustainable production:* What are the challenges in optimizing environmental resource use in food production, processing, and distribution, to reduce biodiversity loss, pollution, water use, soil degradation, and greenhouse gas emissions?
4. *Equitable livelihoods across the food system:* What are the challenges in promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all actors along the food value chain and enabling entrepreneurship and addressing the inequitable access to resources and distribution of value?
5. *Resilient food systems:* What are the challenges in ensuring the continued functionality of sustainable food systems in case of natural disasters, pandemics, economic shocks, conflicts, and other sources of instability?

To encourage a systematic assessment of challenges, each breakout discussion considered four general questions:

1. What are the major challenges to advancing sustainable food systems in the United States related to your major challenge area?
2. What are the primary drivers/causes of the major challenges?
3. What are the tradeoffs among social, economic, and environmental sustainability objectives? What are the distributional characteristics of the major challenges? If the group discusses potential solutions that target one dimension of sustainability (for example, social sustainability), what are the potential impacts on the other dimensions of sustainability?
4. What are the evidence gaps? What kind of evidence would be needed to motivate and support action to address these challenges, drivers and tradeoffs? Does the evidence exist or are there knowledge and evidence gaps?

Participants

Seventy-six diverse stakeholder groups participated in the first National Dialogue, including 28 U.S. producers and agricultural organizations, 14 food industry members, 12 research and academic institutions, 21 civil society groups and NGOs, and 1 state government organization, as below.

U.S. producers and agricultural organizations: 28
American Feed Industry Association, American Seed Trade Association, American Soybean Association, American Sugarbeet Growers Association on behalf of the American Sugar Alliance, Animal Health Institute, AGree Economic and Environmental Risk Coalition, Dairy Management Inc./National Dairy Council, Elanco Animal Health, Florida Fruit& Vegetable Association, Inari Agriculture, Indigo Agriculture, Iowa Select Farms/President Elect, National Pork Producers Council, IR-4 Project, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, National Chicken Council, National Corn Growers Association, National Farmers Union, North American Meat Institute, Northwest Horticultural Council, Orange County Produce, LLC, Organic Trade Association, The Fertilizer Institute, United Egg Producers, United Farm Workers, United Fresh Produce Association, USA Rice Federation, U.S. Dairy Export Council, Zoetis

Food industry: 14
Archer Daniels Midland Company (ADM), American Frozen Food Institute, Association of Equipment Manufacturers, Bayer, Biotechnology Innovation Organization (BIO), Cargill, Inc, Consumer Brands Association, CropLife America, Food Machinery and Chemical Corporation (FMC), FMI Food Industry Association, Kroger, PepsiCo, Syngenta, Walmart

Research and academic institutions: 12
Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, Arizona State University, Colorado State University and Agricultural & Applied Economics Association, Duke University World Food Policy Center, Harvard Law School, Food Law and Policy Clinic, Michigan State University, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine Board on Agriculture and Natural Resources, School Nutrition Association, Tufts University, Texas A&M AgriLife, University of California at Davis, University of Arkansas

Civil society groups and NGOs: 21
AgriCorps, Agriculture Future of America (AFA), American Farmland Trust, Farm Foundation, Feeding America, Field to Market: The Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture, First Nations Development Institute, Food Tank, Global Farmer Network, Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS), National 4-H Council, National Future Farmers of America Organization (FFA), North America Climate Smart Agriculture Alliance, Savanna Institute, Society of American Foresters, Solutions from the Land, The Rockefeller Foundation, U.S. Farmers and Ranchers in Action, World Food Program USA, World Resources Institute, World Wildlife Foundation (WWF)

State government: 1
National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA)

The second and third stages of the Dialogues will expand the number of participants to a maximum of about 120, while retaining the participation of those who participated in the first Dialogue.

Reporting integrity

Neutral U.S. government experts and researchers were trained to facilitate the Dialogue's small group discussions and emphasized respect and building trust. The Chatham House Rule of non-attribution encouraged participants to engage in frank discussion and a collaborative approach. Readout reports went through multiple levels of review and validation. Two notetakers sent their anonymized notes from the breakout rooms to facilitators. Facilitators then developed their anonymized reports, which

were then shared with breakout session participants for their validation before incorporation into this summary and the official feedback form for posting on the UN Dialogues Gateway.

Findings

These findings represent the views of Dialogue participants, not those of the United States Department of Agriculture or the United States Government.

The focus of the first-stage U.S. National Food Systems Dialogue was to identify challenges to improving the sustainability of food systems. While the discussion topics were organized around the five UN Food Systems Summit Action Tracks outlined above, the discussions did not fall neatly into these silos. Instead, participants broadened the discussions to holistically consider challenges and tradeoffs across food systems and goals related to sustainability and resilience. Three overarching challenges emerged: 1) information gaps about healthy diets and sustainability produced food, 2) inequalities, and 3) environmental degradation and climate change. Challenges related to building more resilient food systems were highlighted in the discussions of inequality and environmental sustainability.

- ***Overall Challenge #1: Information gaps about healthy diets and sustainably produced food***
  Dialogue participants identified divergent and confusing information about healthy diets and sustainably produced foods as a major challenge. Some participants expressed concern that information gaps hinder uptake of healthier diets and the promotion and adoption of more sustainable agricultural production practices.

- ***Overall Challenge #2: Inequalities***
  Dialogue participants identified inequalities in food systems as an overarching challenge. Some participants identified inequality as a primary driver of disparate access and uptake of healthy diets. Some participants identified inequality as a root challenge in improving livelihoods of farm and food-systems workers and in expanding business opportunities in agriculture and food supply chains. Some participants expressed the view that underlying, long-standing inequalities have had a negative impact on food systems' resilience, as evidenced with COVID19.

- ***Overall Challenge #3: Environmental degradation and climate change***
  Dialogue participants identified environmental degradation and climate change as overarching challenges. Some participants emphasized that variability in growing conditions due to climate change poses challenges for farmers and resilience. Some participants expressed concerns about challenges to farmers and producers related to clear guidance on environmentally sustainable practices and barriers to international trade based on environmental sustainability standards that are not based on science. Some participants highlighted challenges associated with how the costs of more environmentally sustainable production practices will be distributed across the food system, raising concerns that farmers and low-income consumers could bear the brunt of potential cost increases.

In all the discussion groups, some participants discussed where they thought more research or scientific evidence is needed to better characterize challenges and possible solutions. On the topic of healthy diets for all, some participants expressed the view that more information is needed on what types of consumer education programs work best. Some participants noted related evidence gaps, including on the effectiveness of food assistance and behavior change interventions and how to use public dollars most efficiently. Some participants noted a lack of national data on the needs of food banks and a need for a comprehensive analysis of food access to identify gaps and overlaps in food assistance. Some

participants noted the need for an analysis of the costs and benefits of investing in health promotion and disease prevention through healthy diets versus treatment of diet-related health conditions.

Some participants also identified the need for more research on the best approaches to improve environmental sustainability. Some participants noted evidence gaps related to the environmental and carbon footprints of food and the scientific links between environmentally sustainable practices and productivity. Some participants thought there should be expanded modeling of the impacts of dietary shifts considering international trade and shifting demand elsewhere in the world. At the same time, some participants highlighted that impact analyses should incorporate a wider array of approaches, such as citizen science and traditional cultural practices, to inform policy and programs and engage actors across the food system. Some participants noted the issue of data gaps to accelerate the rate of adoption of conservation and environmentally sustainable practices, as well as data to assess downstream effects of increased production and processing costs.

In each discussion group, participants discussed the types of tradeoffs that might arise in building more sustainable food systems – and the challenges related to managing these tradeoffs. The types of tradeoffs discussed are encapsulated in the discussion of food prices. Some participants pointed to the high cost of nutritious foods (perceived or actual) as a challenge to achieving healthy diets for all. On the other hand, some participants noted high rates of food waste and hypothesized that the low cost of food (food is like a "free good") leads to people throwing it away. When discussing environmental sustainability, some participants hypothesized that food is too inexpensive, and the price does not factor in the true cost of environmental inputs or negative environmental externalities. Some noted that because environmental costs are not priced into agricultural production there are few immediate financial benefits to producers to change their practices. Others noted that while low-cost food is important for affordability and access, it can create economic and social complications for low wage earners if wages are kept low to keep food prices low.