

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

**DC OFFICE OF PLANNING**



Public Hearing

on

Climate Resilience Planning in the District and  
B24-410, the Flood Resilience Amendment Act of 2021

Testimony of

Ona Balkus, Food Policy Director

Before the Committees on  
Transportation & the Environment  
Judiciary & Public Safety  
Business & Economic Development

Virtual Platform

December 17, 2021

9:00AM

## **Introduction**

Good afternoon, Chairperson Cheh, Chairperson McDuffie, Chairperson Allen, members, and staff of the Committees. In my role as the DC Food Policy Director, housed within the DC Office of Planning (OP), I lead the DC Food Policy Council (FPC), a coalition of 13 Mayoral-appointed public members and 10 ex officio members from District agencies who bring together diverse perspectives and expertise to enhance equity, health, and environmental sustainability within the District's food system.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. It is crucial to consider our local food system when planning for climate resiliency. The way the District produces, distributes, sells and consumes food affects not only our carbon footprint, but also how prepared and resilient we are in the face of climate-related emergencies. As with other climate threats, the food-related impacts of climate change disproportionately affect low-income residents and communities of color, and thus building a resilient local food system is also key to our city's racial equity goals.

## **The Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration**

This hearing is particularly timely as Mayor Bowser just signed the Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration<sup>1</sup> in October 2021. This Declaration, signed by local governments around the world, builds on the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and the C40 to integrate food policy into government strategies to tackle the climate emergency. The Declaration describes how the COVID-19 public health emergency has “exposed the fragility of our food systems... and the critical need for preparedness and resilience in the face of shocks.” The Declaration also states

---

<sup>1</sup> Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration, <https://www.glasgowdeclaration.org/> (last visited Dec. 2, 2021).

that “cities are leading the way” in developing food policies to “reduce their environmental footprint... and ensure greater resilience to shocks.”

The Declaration outlines several commitments for signatory cities, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions from food systems and building sustainable food systems that can deliver safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, and sustainable diets for all. My team, along with the Office for Federal and Regional Affairs and the Department of Energy and the Environment, will work collaboratively to ensure the District is meeting its commitments under the Declaration and sharing best practices with our fellow signatory cities.

**I will now take the opportunity to describe how DC’s food system affects our climate resiliency.** The term “food system” refers to how food is produced, processed, distributed, sold, and consumed, and each of these steps is vulnerable to the short- and long-term effects of climate change. For example, severe weather events can disrupt national food supply chains; power outages can lead to waste of perishable food; and compromised public transportation and extreme weather make it more difficult for residents to access grocery stores.

The COVID-19 public health emergency exposed vulnerabilities in the District’s current food system, including limited public transportation to grocery stores, particularly East of the River; increased food insecurity; limited storage and kitchen space, particularly for emergency nonprofits and small food businesses; and increased food waste. Together, these disruptions disproportionately affected Black and Latinx residents. Our 2020 report, *Food Access & Food Security in the District of Columbia: Responding to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency*, found that in May 2020, Black households in the District were 13.5 times more likely to report food insufficiency than white households, and Latinx households were 6.5 times more likely to

report food insufficiency than white households. These disproportionate effects have continued as the city starts to recover, as seen in our follow-up research in April 2021.

However, COVID-19 also led to innovation and collaboration that show the District's capacity to build a truly resilient food system in the face of crisis. We have witnessed that resiliency in the District's food system depends on four key issues: (1) Diversifying food supply chains; (2) Community wealth building; (3) Food security and food access; and (4) the District's food-related GHG footprint.

**The District has taken ambitious steps towards building resiliency in each of these areas. I will speak to each of them in turn.**

### **Diversifying Food Supply Chains**

Diversifying the District's food supply chains is an important step towards climate resiliency because it decreases our reliance on national supply chains and helps smaller, regional food producers build their capacity to distribute food in the case of an emergency. The District has taken major strides towards diversifying our food supply chains, by supporting urban agriculture, contracting with local businesses, and increasing access to farmers markets for all residents.

The District has taken steps to support urban agriculture in the District through the establishment of an Office of Urban Agriculture within DOEE, the creation of resources like the Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Fund, and the Sustainable DC 2.0 goal to add 20 additional acres of land for urban agriculture use by 2032.

At the onset of COVID-19, the District's Emergency Operations Center contracted with local food distributors for the city's emergency feeding programs. This both kept more dollars in

the local economy during the economic downturn and ensured that the District could provide healthy food to residents even if there were disruptions to the national supply chain.

Lastly, the District supports our robust network of farmers markets in all eight Wards, which provide decentralized points of food access. Farmers markets are nimble and can meet residents where they are, particularly when public transportation options are limited. OP worked closely with farmers markets during COVID-19 to ensure that 40 markets across the District were able to operate safely in 2020 and 2021. A suite of local grant programs administered by DC Health ensures that farmers markets are financially accessible to all residents—this includes Produce Plus and the Senior and WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Programs.

### **Community Wealth Building**

A primary reason that climate emergencies disproportionately affect communities of color is the racial wealth gap. Communities with low wealth have higher rates of adverse health conditions, less resources to control temperature and air quality in their homes, and are less likely to own a car, leading to more reliance on public transportation. The food economy is a crucial entry point to the workforce, entrepreneurship, and wealth building for many residents, and the city has invested in the local food economy in several ways. The Fiscal Year 2022 Budget includes \$58 million over three years for a new Food Access Fund to provide capital investments to small, medium, and large grocery stores and restaurants, with a focus on Wards 7 and 8. It also includes \$5 million for the Nourish DC Collaborative, which specifically supports small food businesses in underserved neighborhoods.

The District is also supporting local food entrepreneurs through connecting them with affordable shared commercial kitchen space to start and grow their businesses. The Department of Small and Local Business Development (DSLBD) and the FPC have conducted public

surveys and matchmaking events to support entrepreneurs in finding commercial kitchen space in the District. DMPED's Local Equity, Access, and Preservation Funds, announced in May 2021, provided funding to several shared kitchen facilities like the new DC Central Kitchen headquarters and the Marshall Heights Community Development Organization Community Culinary Kitchen.

Lastly, OP's 2021 report, an *Assessment of a Central Food Processing Facility for Washington, DC*, is a comprehensive assessment of how the District could best use a centralized kitchen facility to improve the nutritional quality of meals served in public institutions (such as schools, senior centers, and correctional facilities), support local food businesses, create culinary career pathways, and strengthen the District's food resiliency in case of future emergencies.

### **Food Security and Food Access**

For the District's food system to be climate resilient, every resident must have access to healthy, affordable food. Our current U.S. food system drives down the cost of unhealthy, processed foods and externalizes the true costs of producing that food on health and climate. Fresh, healthy food is more expensive, and thus many low-income residents need financial assistance to eat a healthy diet. The District has taken several significant steps to address food insecurity in recent years, most notably by increasing access to federal and local nutrition assistance programs.

Nutrition assistance programs are effective tools to address food insecurity and improve health. Research shows that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps lift more than 3.6 million people across the country out of poverty each year and reduces food insecurity. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

(WIC) reduces the risk of premature births and reduces the likelihood of low-weight infants. SNAP reduces hospitalization and healthcare costs and improves mental and physical health.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) has increased access to SNAP benefits in recent years. SNAP customers are now able to purchase groceries online, a significant change that expands access to fresh food for residents who live far from a grocery store or have mobility challenges. DHS has also introduced an online application for SNAP, which decreases trips to DHS offices to submit paperwork. Online SNAP and the online application are both crucial tools to prepare for climate-related emergencies when it would be unsafe to walk long distances or wait at a bus stop.

DC Health is modernizing the WIC program by transitioning from paper checks to Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT), allowing participants to redeem benefits over multiple visits rather than in a single transaction. In accordance with the WIC Expansion Act of 2018, DC Health is also expanding the number of stores eligible to accept WIC benefits. In 2021, DC Health authorized 8 healthy corner stores as WIC vendors, ensuring that more WIC customers can shop for healthy foods in their neighborhoods.

Lastly, the District implemented several emergency feeding programs during COVID-19 that could serve as models during future climate-related emergencies. The District's Get Help Hotline delivered nearly 12,000 boxes with seven days' worth of shelf stable food items to residents from April 2020-June 2021. From April to October 2020, the District distributed nearly 90,000 bags of fresh groceries at 13 DC public schools in partnership with several local nonprofits. Other agencies, such as DCPS and DAFL, adapted their meal services for children and seniors to ensure continued access even when congregate dining became impossible. Taken

together, these emergency programs prevented many District residents from becoming food insecure during the public health emergency, and can be used as models in future emergencies.

### **District's Food-Related GHG Footprint**

Most of my remarks today have focused on resiliency, but I would like to mention the powerful role the food system can play in addressing the causes of climate change. Globally, food systems currently account for 21-37% of total GHG emissions. This is mostly due to industrial farming, distribution, and waste. Urban areas like the District can reduce our food-related GHG footprint in two primary ways: (1) by adjusting food procurement to include more environmentally sustainable items and (2) by decreasing food waste in businesses, institutions, and homes.

As DOEE described in their testimony, implementation of the Green Food Purchasing Act of 2021 will be a significant step in starting to understand the impact of the District's food procurement on climate. DOEE will be measuring and reporting on the GHG impacts of the food currently being purchased by public institutions in the District and working with agencies to reduce our GHG footprint related to food procurement.

The District is also taking ambitious steps to reduce food waste. When food unnecessarily goes to waste, it hurts the economy, environment, and society. The District estimates that the total amount of organic waste produced in the District – including food and yard waste – is between 167,000 and 235,000 tons, or 480 pounds per District resident.

The District offers several free options for residents to compost their food scraps, including DPW's Food Waste Drop Off program at farmers markets and DPR's Community Compost Cooperative Network. For businesses that want to compost their food scraps, DSLBD

will soon launch Food Waste Innovation Grants to support local food businesses and commercial corridors like Main Streets and BIDs to minimize their food waste going to landfill. And, pursuant to the Zero Waste Omnibus Amendment Act, certain commercial businesses will be required to compost their food waste beginning in January 2023.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to testify on the connection between our local food system and the city's climate impact and resilience. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.