



County of Santa Cruz

COMMISSION ON THE ENVIRONMENT

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December 8, 2020

Board of Supervisors
701 Ocean Street, Room 500
Santa Cruz, CA 95066

Dear Members of the Board,

We wish you and the community well in these challenging times and thank you for your leadership and efforts to create a safe, healthy and sustainable community.

As you are aware, the Board declared “an existential climate emergency” at your January 29, 2019, Board meeting that committed the County to numerous specific actions (see Board letter and adopted resolution attached). In addition, the Commission has followed with interest as the County’s Strategic Plan 2018-2024 was adopted on June 26, 2018, and as the Operational Plan 2019- 2021 was adopted on June 25, 2019. These Plans identified goals, strategies and objectives to address this climate emergency. The Commission acknowledges that these actions will represent significant steps forward and we appreciate the demonstrable commitment to tangible action from both the Board and the executive staff.

In light of budget cuts and immediate priorities balanced with the deep greenhouse gas emission reductions needed to meet a carbon neutral California target of 2045, we respectfully suggest that the Board consider measures to encourage plant-strong and plant-based diets in our County. Plant-strong diets encourage mostly plant-based foods and minimize consumption of animal-based foods. The Board has already indicated support for this concept. In 2013, Santa Cruz County adopted a Meatless Monday proclamation. Building on that very positive step, we are writing to offer concrete, low cost to cost saving recommendations to encourage a shift toward healthy, plant-strong and plant-based diets in our community. We are appreciative to local nonprofit Eat for the Earth for highlighting this issue and providing resources for the County to consider.

“Food production is among the leading sources of the greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming. Food production generates up to 30% of total global emissions and is also a significant contributor to biodiversity loss, deforestation, freshwater use, and land use change. The production of livestock generates the highest levels of greenhouse gas emissions, whereas the production of fruit and vegetables generates the lowest levels. Globally, changes to food production and consumption,

including reducing food waste and shifting to a more plant-based diet, are critical to reducing global warming and other environmental impacts.”¹

Second generation Climate Action Plans almost universally address this topic and jurisdictions are beginning to adopt policies and deploy encouragement programs to bring awareness and take action on this issue. With the dire need to offset GHG emissions related to California’s wildfires in addition to reaching overall carbon neutrality by California’s target year of 2045, the emissions and costs savings related to adoption of plant-strong and plant-based diets are significant and worthy of consideration.

Furthermore, by reducing animal-based food intake, humans generally improve their health status, reducing comorbidities for diseases like Covid-19². There is also evidence linking animal-based food production as a potential future disease vector. These are two of many examples of the nexus between climate and health solutions. Also, as a County dominated economically by plant-based agriculture, we can leverage our access to plant-based foods and mobilize our agricultural community to support these climate- and health-supportive dietary changes. As we are experiencing this Covid-19 pandemic and wildfires, it is ever more clear that building individual and community resilience are vital.

In light of the funding challenges presented by the Covid-19 crisis, we respectfully urge the Board to consider the following modest actions:

1. Explore how plant-strong and plant-based healthy diet encouragement programs as a cross cutting concept aligns with the Health Services Agency’s and other departments’ missions as well as inclusion in future discussions of the Health in All Policies framework, Whole Person Care – Cruz to Health program, workplans and other public engagement activities as appropriate.
2. Direct staff to integrate analysis of plant-strong and plant-based diets strategies, procurement and policies as well as consideration of transitioning to a consumption based inventory that accounts for these emissions into the next update of the County’s Climate Action Strategy.
3. Direct staff to explore inclusion of plant-strong and plant-based diets and menu choices as a measure in the County’s Green Business Program.

We further urge Supervisors to demonstrate leadership and set a strong example for the community on the impact of animal-based food production on environmental sustainability and health. For example, Board members might participate in a “feed the Board and community lunch” event with Eat for the Earth once Covid-19 restrictions are lifted, consider formalizing a Green Meal Day (whether it is Monday or not), and support AB 479 Healthy and Sustainable Lunch Act and similar legislation that promotes plant-strong and plant-based diets.

¹ Leiserowitz, A., Ballew, M., Rosenthal S., & Semaan, J. (2020). Climate change and the American diet. Yale University and Earth Day Network. New Haven, CT: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

² Belanger, M., Hill, M., Angelidi, A., Dalamaga, M., Sowers, J., & Mantzoros, C. (2020). Covid-19 and Disparities in Nutrition and Obesity. The New England Journal of Medicine. Massachusetts Medical Society.

As always, we are open to dialogue and stand ready to assist with these and other climate efforts. Commissioners will be reaching out to you in the next several weeks to discuss the recommendations as well as any questions and thoughts you have on the topic of plant-strong and plant-based diets and their impact on climate and health. Thank you for your continued support to address climate change and for your time and consideration regarding the Commission's recommendations.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tiffany Wise-West".

Dr. Tiffany Wise-West, PE, LEED AP
Chair, Commission of the Environment

Cc:

Marcus Pimentel, Santa Cruz Count Assistant Director of Health Services Agency
Ana-Maria Rebelo, Santa Cruz County Green Business Program
Sean Orgel-Olson, California Green Business Network
Beth Love, Eat for the Earth

Attachments:

January 29, 2019 Board Letter and Adopted Resolution
2019 Climate Action Strategy annual report