

Testimony before the House Health and Government Operations Committee
January 21, 2021
In **SUPPORT** of H.B. 317: Food Procurement – GHG Emissions
Presented by Richard Waite, World Resources Institute

Dear Honorable Chairman Pendergrass and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the World Resources Institute, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of H.B. 317 to establish a target of reducing Maryland’s greenhouse gas emissions from food purchases by 25% by 2030. This would be accomplished by reducing food waste and shifting to more climate-friendly menus in our public institutions.

I work for the World Resources Institute, a global research organization with a mission to move human society towards sustainability. Our Food Program advances solutions to feed 10 billion people by 2050 while halting deforestation and stabilizing the climate—including improvements to agricultural production as well as more sustainable consumption patterns. I’ve worked at WRI for 13 years, have a master’s degree in International Development from George Washington University, and am also a proud Maryland resident.

This bill would require that Maryland estimate and track the greenhouse gas emissions associated with the food purchases made by state agencies. But is this type of tracking feasible? Our experience suggests that it is feasible. I’m testifying in my current role as the Data Lead for an initiative WRI is spearheading called the Cool Food Pledge. Cool Food is a global initiative that helps organizations commit to a science-based target to reduce the climate impact of the food they serve—and we have developed a scalable method with an open-source calculator for estimating food-related emissions and tracking progress over time.¹

The target that we’ve defined—a 25% reduction in food-related emissions by 2030—is a level of ambition in line with achieving the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement, so I am very pleased to see this target included in this bill. If enacted into law, Maryland would join nearly 40 organizations—including the University of Maryland, the World Bank, Hilton Hotels, IKEA, a number of U.S. hospitals, and several international cities—who have already committed to the same 2030 target. These organizations collectively serve more than 940 million meals per year.

Our peer-reviewed greenhouse gas calculation method² draws on two recent global life-cycle assessments of food production published in the journals *Science* and *Nature*.³ The method is relatively simple: organizations track their food purchases by weight on an annual basis, and the calculator

¹ The calculator is freely available for download at <https://coolfood.org/pledge/>.

² For more details on the 25% emissions reduction target, the calculation method, and the data sources, see Waite, R. et al. 2019. “Tracking Progress Toward the Cool Food Pledge: Setting Climate Targets, Tracking Metrics, Using the Cool Food Calculator, and Related Guidance for Pledge Signatories.” Technical Note. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute. Available online at: <https://coolfood.org/pledge/>.

³ Poore, J., and T. Nemecek. 2018. “Reducing Food’s Environmental Impacts through Producers and Consumers.” *Science* 360 (6392):987–92. doi:10.1126/science.aag0216; Searchinger, T., et al. 2018. “Assessing the Efficiency of Changes in Land Use for Mitigating Climate Change.” *Nature* 564: 249–53. doi:10.1038/s41586-018-0757-z.

multiplies the weights of each food type—from beans and bread to chicken and beef—by region-specific emission factors to estimate the food-related emissions each year. Because the majority of our Cool Food members source the majority of their foods through the national distribution channels, the North American average emission factors in our calculator are the most appropriate to use for this purpose.⁴ In short: our method is a viable, off-the-shelf option for state agencies to use to implement the greenhouse gas emissions measurement, if they so choose.

We have heard from Cool Food members that even if collecting the annual food purchase data is a new activity in the first year of participation, it can generally be completed given existing staff resources and capacity. The process illuminates where an organization’s food-related climate hotspots exist, and possible pathways to hitting the emissions reduction target.

In the next three decades, the world is likely to add another 3 billion people to the global middle class. Global meat and dairy demand is on a path to grow even more quickly than population growth as incomes rise across the developing world, making it likely that tropical deforestation will continue as forests are cleared for new pasture and cropland, and making it extremely difficult to keep global warming to acceptable levels even if the world successfully transitions away from fossil fuels.⁵ In countries that consume high amounts of meat, like the United States, moderating our consumption and eating a more plant-rich diet can help reduce these pressures, lower emissions from food production, keep forests standing, and make it easier to sustainably feed everyone by the middle of this century.

We should not fear this change: for example, here in the United States, beef consumption per capita has already dropped by one-third since the 1970s—but overall production levels have remained steady as the U.S. population has grown.⁶ A similar dynamic is now playing out globally, and growing meat demand in emerging markets like China will likely lead to more export opportunities for leading producer countries like the United States, even if U.S. per capita beef consumption continues to fall.

Maryland can be on the cutting edge of transitioning to a more climate-friendly diet, and the methods and data are already in place to help the state estimate its food-related emissions and track them over time. I agree that H.B. 317 is a critical step toward addressing Maryland’s food-related greenhouse gas emissions. Thank you for your consideration, and I respectfully urge a favorable report.

⁴ That said—if an organization is sourcing a specific food type from a specific supplier using lower-emitting agricultural practices—they are welcome to suggest an alternative emission factor to use if data are available and are found to be of equal or higher quality than the default North American average data.

⁵ For more details on business-as-usual projections of food production and consumption to 2050, and potential effects on forests and the climate, see Searchinger, T., et al. 2019. “World Resources Report: Creating a Sustainable Food Future—A Menu of Solutions to Feed Nearly 10 Billion People by 2050 (Final Report).” Washington, DC: World Resources Institute. Available online at www.sustainablefoodfuture.org.

⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2019. “USDA ERS—Livestock & Meat Domestic Data.” Washington, DC. Available online at www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/livestock-meat-domestic-data/.