

# Population Health Initiative

## Project idea: Plant-Based Diets for Health and Environment

### Concept

**Human Health:** The Western diet is the number one risk factor for disease and disability in the western world, and an ever increasing proportion of the developing world, as they adopt western eating habits. A substantial number of high quality medical studies, published in major medical journals, now demonstrate that a healthy vegetarian diet, composed of vegetables, legumes, whole grains, fruit plus nuts and seeds, is very effective preventative medicine for most cases of the common diseases affecting people throughout the world, such as coronary artery disease, essential hypertension, certain forms of cancer such as prostate cancer, obesity, and type II diabetes, as well as several less common diseases. It also is often the safest and most efficacious treatment for most cases of those diseases.

In addition to the benefit to individuals' health, there would be significant benefits to public health and to society at large if the population moved to a healthy vegetarian diet. In particular, the majority of antibiotics are used in animal agriculture, causing the emergence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria affecting humans. This would be much reduced if there were less animal agriculture. In addition, viruses such as influenza are propagated where animals are kept in close confinement, so the potential for such viruses to emerge would be much reduced.

**Environmental Resiliency:** According to the Worldwatch Institute, raising livestock is globally the biggest source of greenhouse gases, the largest cause of soil erosion, water pollution, desertification and deforestation, and thus a major cause of ecological destruction. Reducing the demand for animal products would dramatically cut back on the damage to the environment caused by animal agriculture, and if it could be done quickly enough, it could potentially save us from a climate catastrophe.

Most of the world's oceans are being overfished, and are therefore not sustainable. Reducing the demand for fish would reduce the destruction of ocean ecology due to overfishing, and the pollution and disease caused by intensive fish farming.

**Social and Economic Equity:** A global shift to a plant-based diet would dramatically reduce the demands on the already overburdened medical infrastructure across the world, as a result of a less disease-burdened population, thus cutting costs, reducing suffering and saving many more lives.

Farm animals are food factories in reverse, producing as beef, for example, only 10% of the calories and 4% of the protein that the cattle consume. With 90% of the calories and 96% of the protein grown in plants being currently wasted by feeding it to farm animals, valuable land and water resources could be freed up by cutting back on animal agriculture across the world, leading to greater availability of land and water for an increasing population, and for growing much needed plant-based food resources, potentially at significantly reduced cost.

By increasing the demand for, and thus the availability of, plant-based foods, disadvantaged people would obtain better access to first class nutrition. By reducing their need for healthcare,

the impact of their lack of economic resources is reduced. It also has the potential to dramatically reduce infant mortality caused by malnutrition.

## Implementation

**Education and Capacity Building:** To shift the global population to a plant-based diet will take a major education effort, since this information is not currently being taught in most schools or colleges:

1. Education of medical professionals to learn about the opportunities for treating and preventing disease with a plant-based diet. We have already started this work on a small scale with our blog - [www.vegetarianprescription.org](http://www.vegetarianprescription.org)
2. Education of non-governmental organizations and hunger relief agencies of the importance of promoting plant-based diets and agriculture, to maximize food availability.
3. Education of policy makers, to ensure that policies and subsidies support and encourage the move to a plant-based diet.
4. Education and support of farmers in changing from animal agriculture to growing appropriate fruits, vegetables, grains and/or legumes depending on the suitability of their land and climate.
5. Education of teachers at all levels, to incorporate into their lesson plans the benefits of plant-based eating for the health of individuals and the planet.
6. Education of the general public as to the benefits of a plant-based diet, how to construct a healthy plant-based diet, what to buy, what to cook etc. Our book [“In Pursuit of Great Food: A Plant-Based Shopping Guide”](#) is our contribution to this.

## Conclusion

The potential for improving health and saving human lives by encouraging the world to shift to a plant-based diet is enormous. The costs of this project are small, in comparison to the potential huge global savings in healthcare costs, not to mention the potential for saving the planet from climate change and many other environmental crises, and freeing up vast quantities of land and water for an ever-increasing population.

When the benefits of a plant-based diet are clearly explained, people come to recognize and support the improvements in health and regional sustainability that result. This change of diet has been well-received, where it has been proposed and explained, even in traditional meat-eating cultures such as rural Appalachia.

The Population Health Initiative is uniquely qualified to implement this project. As the state’s vegetarian society, with 16 years of experience, we’d be glad to offer any necessary assistance in the implementation of this program.

Respectfully submitted by:

Amanda Strombom (President) and Stewart Rose (Vice President),  
Vegetarians of Washington

For more information, please email [contact@vegofwa.org](mailto:contact@vegofwa.org)