



ALT PROTEIN FOR GOOD

Plant-Based Alternative
Protein in the United States

Summary Report

| Introduction

As replacements for the products of industrial animal agriculture, plant-based alternative proteins have the potential to contribute to a holistic transformation of the US food system to create a more just and sustainable food system for all. However, the alt protein industry and the broader food system transformation movement have not always communicated effectively regarding the potential role of alternative proteins in food system transformation. This report places the unfiltered viewpoints of thirty-two people representing various alt protein stakeholder groups into direct conversation to identify challenges limiting alt proteins' alignment with the goals of inclusive food systems transformation and to illuminate opportunities for enhancing common-good benefits and building greater allyship.

**38%**Movement
Experts**30%**

Investors

**16%**Analysts /
Academics**16%**Entrepreneurs
/ Trade
Association

Benefits and Points of Tension with the Common Good

Substituting animal products with plant products brings default benefits, including improved public health and reduced farmed-animal suffering and food-related greenhouse gas production. If prioritized by future alt protein industry development, alt proteins may also generate co-benefits including improved well-being of food chain workers, economic benefits for farming communities, and reduced use of synthetic agrichemicals. Significant areas of tension between alt proteins and the common good include reliance on extractive, input-intensive industrial agriculture, risk of deepening corporate concentration and consolidation in the food system, and potential continuation of historical injustices and inequities in food and agriculture.

Visions of a Food System that Benefits the Common Good

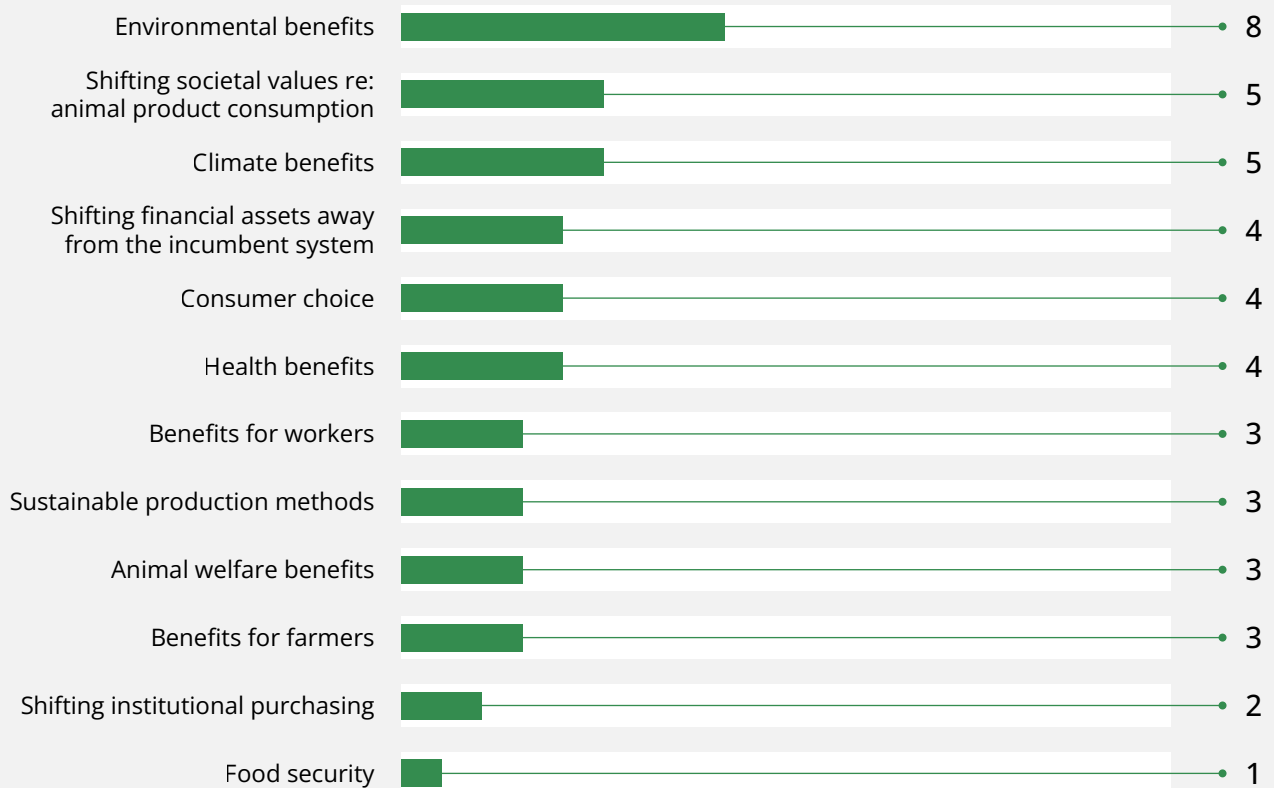
In initial interviews, food system transformation experts articulated their visions of a food system that benefits the common good. While individual responses varied, descriptions emphasized a plant-forward food system, based on restorative rather than extractive agriculture, with a core focus on correcting injustice and inequity, and a unified approach to ensuring human, animal, and environmental well-being.



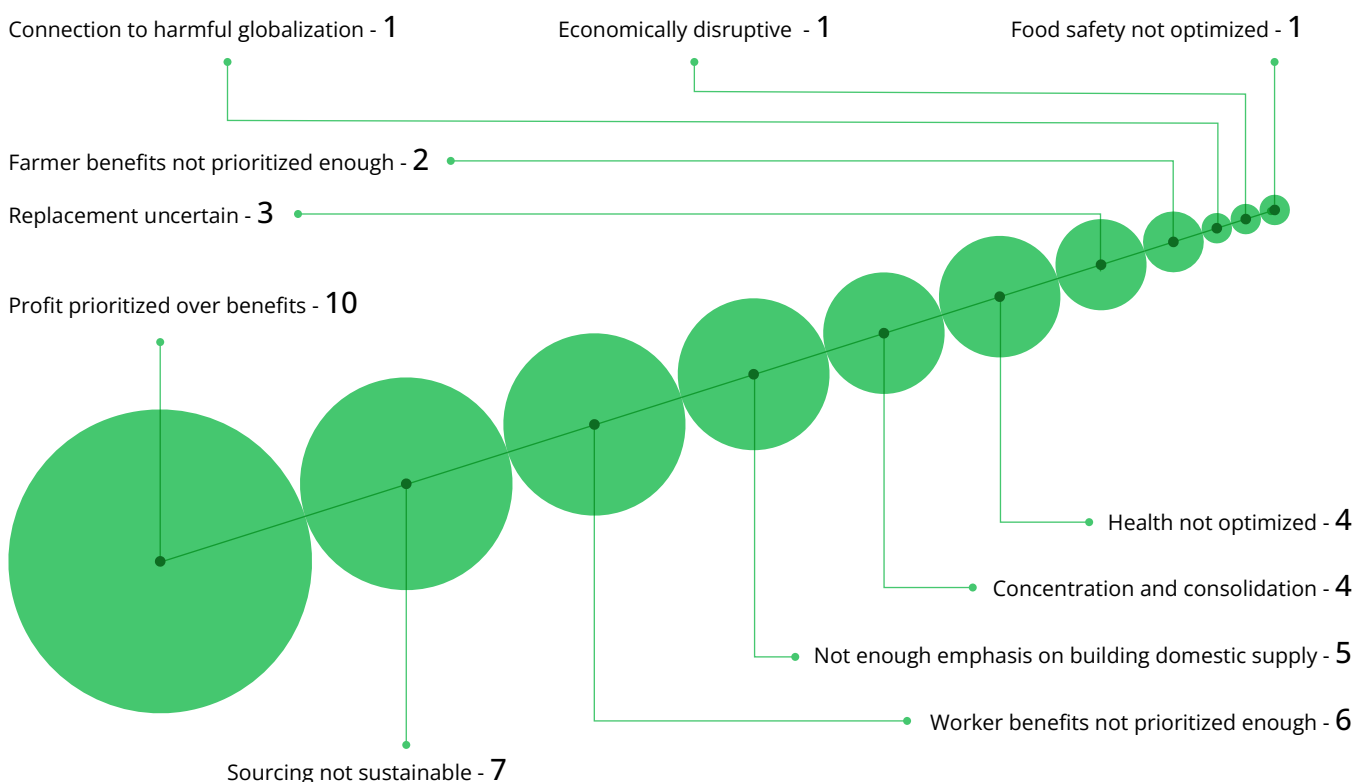
Synthesis: A Vision of a Food System that Supports the Common Good

- **For the benefit of animals**
Few (if any) animals raised for food, and no animals raised industrially. Remaining animals raised with highest possible animal welfare standards.
- **For the benefit of people**
Jobs that are dignified, safe, and provide a living wage at all stages of food system work. Safe, nutritious, affordable food widely accessible. Wage gaps between CEOs and farmers, farm owners, and farmworkers closed.
- **For the benefit of the environment**
Crops raised primarily to feed people rather than animals. Input-heavy monocultures deemphasized to favor carbon-negative food production with ecologically protective and restorative agricultural methods and transportation.

The alt protein industry is most aligned with the common good on these attributes (N = 19)



The alt protein industry is least well aligned with the common good on these attributes (N = 19)



Challenges and Decision Points

Alt protein exceptionalism polarizes discourse.

We observed a duality of highly positive and highly negative narratives regarding plant-based alternative proteins that ineffectively polarizes discourse about the industry, which we believe clouds understanding of alternative proteins' true benefits and areas for improvement.

Are alt proteins part of the solution for inclusive food system transformation?

■ Yes

■ No



Analysts / Academic (N = 5)



Investor (N = 10)



Entrepreneurs / Trade
Association (N = 5)



Movement Expert (N = 12)

Alt proteins are caught between being food and being tech.

As products of a technology-driven industry, alternative proteins benefit from venture capital (VC) investment. However, as agri-food businesses, they raise additional cultural and economic considerations that fit less well with VC funding.

Venture capital's impacts are mixed on catalyzing common-good benefits.

Despite the many opportunities and benefits of mission-driven VC, its funding expectations can limit the alt protein sector's realization of common-good benefits. Ownership of intellectual property presents a particularly nuanced challenge.

Benefits to the common good are uncertain, unmeasured, and difficult to assess.

There is no practice norm for gathering impact data, and impact data are given less weight in VC diligence than standard indicators of start-up growth potential. Impact assessment is expensive and fraught with uncertainty. Social and economic impacts of alt proteins are less well understood than environmental and animal welfare impacts.

Price parity is a contentious and incomplete goal.

The thesis that alternative proteins must first achieve price parity to realize positive impacts for stakeholder groups prioritizes economic competitiveness. However, the complex evidence basis of the familiar “taste, price, convenience” theory of change oversimplifies both the sociology of food and the distortions caused by public subsidization of industrial animal agriculture.

Meat industry investment and acquisition offers benefits and concerns.

Most food system transformation movement experts regard meat industry investment in alt proteins as problematic due to the profit motives and exploitative practices of conventional meat companies. However, investors, entrepreneurs, and analysts highlight benefits from meat industry investment, including access to critical infrastructure, capital, and knowledge regarding processing, scaling, distribution, and more.

Is investment by the meat industry in alt proteins positive, mixed, or negative?

■ Positive ■ Mixed ■ Negative



Analysts / Academic (N = 5)



Investor (N = 10)



Entrepreneurs / Trade Association (N = 5)



Movement Expert (N = 12)

Alt proteins' health profile is a point of conflict within the industry.

Some food system transformation proponents who support reducing meat production and consumption oppose alternative protein innovation due to perceived health shortcomings, holding plant-based alternatives to an unreasonably high standard.



Solutions: How Plant-Based Alt Protein Can Generate Co-benefits

Alt Protein Industry



Infrastructure: Ways of enhancing common-good benefits include prioritizing worker well-being through improved processing and manufacturing facilities and equipment; converting existing animal agriculture facilities for alt protein usage; siting facilities in rural areas; and creating multi-use and shared facilities.



Sourcing and supply chain coordination: Wherever possible, alt protein producers can increase benefits by sourcing from environmentally friendly and socially just forms of agriculture, reducing the length of supply chains, and favoring domestic and regional sourcing. Digital supply chain management tools could contribute to better food system resilience, lower waste, and greater product attribute transparency.



Business philosophy and growth: Companies and investors can build transformative values into their organizational ethos by ensuring accountability to producer and consumer communities. Alt protein companies can consider pursuing certifications that reflect commitments to social and environmental benefits. Companies can also seek investment partners that operate on longer growth timelines, are mission-aligned, and recognize the unique circumstances of agrifood businesses.



Communication: Alt protein companies can cultivate trust by being transparent in consumer messaging about ingredients, product additives, and nutrition and by communicating proactively with producer communities and workers. Companies may also have an impact by engaging in lobbying efforts related to alt protein production.



Community accountability and social impact: Many respondents called for the alt protein industry to allow for greater workforce unionization and to promote cooperative ownership models. Companies can also recruit from educational pipelines that currently serve the animal agriculture industry and support additional pipelines to broaden access to alt-protein-related career training.

Government



Supportive policy: Government policy could support alt protein production by strengthening land conservation incentives, realigning subsidies, and improving public support for improved value chain coordination.



Funding collaboration between alt protein and government: Expanded public-private partnerships and additional government-funded research and collective marketing efforts would enhance the alt protein industry's common-good benefits, as could government backing of impact assessment metrics and product standards. Government loan guarantee programs could enable and de-risk large investments in building or transitioning commercial facilities to alternative protein production.

Investors



Vision and leadership: A critical mass of investors asking companies common-good-related questions and assisting with the cost of impact assessment could improve and expedite impact data gathering across the industry. Investors can consider funding areas of plant-based supply chain inefficiency and empty spaces that prevent alternative supply chains from competing with conventional animal agriculture. Investors can use their position to encourage behaviors that support balancing profit with common-good impacts.



Collaboration and coordination: Investors can explore opportunities to invest through and alongside integrated capital models, extend funding timelines, and consider providing or connecting companies to nondilutive funding. Investors can engage with government policy regarding alternative proteins, particularly through trade associations, and consider influencing meat industry investment decisions. Crucially, during market contraction, investors could help rescue and preserve intellectual property held by companies facing insolvency.

Advocates and Educational Institutions



Improving allyship to further the common good: Advocates can support deeper common-good awareness in the alt protein industry by showing strong food system awareness, recognizing alignment and allyship with the alt protein industry wherever possible, and present criticism without playing into the harmful narratives of the meat industry. Nonprofits can amplify positive impact by connecting with sustainability leads at food corporations that have acquired plant-based companies to help preserve values alignment and impact and to support educational institutions in building career opportunities connected to the alt protein industry. Educational institutions can contribute to expanding common good benefits by increasing offerings related to alt protein careers and focusing on inclusivity in educational settings.

Conclusion

Decentering animal agriculture in US food production is an enormous challenge with profound and extensive systemic implications; alternative proteins represent one of many paths to success. Assisting the alt protein industry to scale up its critical animal replacement potential while deepening and broadening its transformational benefits will require improved mutual understanding and complementary efforts by all stakeholders and interest groups. The plant-based alternative protein industry alone cannot be expected to bring about the necessary changes for an inclusive food system transformation, but it can bring us closer to a food system that drives broader and more inclusive benefits to the common good.

