

The COVID Shuffle

Top Ten Topics: 2020 in Review



We will remember 2020 as a year of extremes and a year that hit food production in the gut. Extreme working conditions and unemployment, extreme food insecurity and extreme disruptions to the food supply chain — these are the topics that set 2020 apart for the leading voices in the food and agriculture industry.

Of course, these extremes stemmed from one all-consuming cause: coronavirus disease (COVID-19). As the pandemic spread across the country, it drove as much as 60% of all conversations between leading voices (see [Coronavirus in 3 Charts](#)) and completely reshaped priorities in food production. Worker well-being overshadowed C-suite shuffles. Feeding hungry families in the United States became more urgent than exporting excess agriculture products. And ensuring a

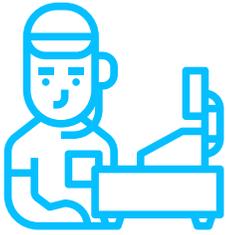
stable food chain overshadowed the development of trendy alternative proteins.

While the pandemic will continue well into 2021, the Trump administration will not. The incoming administration under Joe Biden has promised to shift priorities for food and agriculture production (see [Ag on the Ballot](#) for campaign promises). Between Biden's pledges to raise the minimum wage and mitigate climate change, we expect the top ten topics to reshuffle again this year.

In addition to the Top Ten Topics, this report offers a look at how COVID-19 factored into conversations ([Page 7](#)) and examines how shifting priorities drove corporate sustainability commitments ([Page 8](#)).

1. Workforce

Pay, benefits and safety of workers



In stark contrast to the topic’s absence from the top ten in the past eight years, the pandemic catapulted worker-related issues to the top position in the first quarter and secured a top ranking for 2020. Initially, discussions focused on protections and hazard pay for low-income

farm, restaurant and retail workers — now [reclassified](#) as “essential” and “critical” by the Department of Homeland Security. On March 27, President Trump [signed](#) a \$2 trillion coronavirus stimulus package, providing aid for workers across the production spectrum. Lockdowns forced restaurants to shift operations, lay off employees and temporarily shutter. The National Restaurant Association [estimated](#) on May 9 that employment in foodservice reached its lowest point since 1989, with 6 million jobs lost.

Workers infected with COVID-19 forced many meat processing plants to close and sanitize by mid-April,

heavily stressing the meat supply. Leah Douglas of Food & Environment Reporting Network [mapped](#) the outbreaks. On April 28, President Trump [issued](#) an Executive Order to direct meat and poultry companies to “continue operations uninterrupted to the maximum extent possible.” Later, attention turned to farm fields ([Politico](#)), food processors ([Environmental Working Group](#)) and fishing enterprises ([NPR](#)) — all of which involve people working and living in close proximity.

As COVID-19 vaccines approached final approval, interest groups jockeyed for workers’ positions on the waiting list. The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union [urged](#) the CDC to prioritize food processing and retail workers. After CDC [updated](#) guidelines for vaccine distribution on December 22 — placing food and farm workers in the second wave, behind healthcare workers — North American Meat Institute [implored](#) states to follow CDC’s recommendations.

Looking Ahead:

Attention to wages and worker benefits is likely to persist beyond the pandemic. Florida voters [passed](#) a minimum wage hike in November (The Wall Street Journal), [joining](#) a broader movement to increase the minimum wage at the state and city level (The New York Times). Joe Biden has endorsed a \$15-per-hour minimum wage, so it’s possible that wages will also increase nationally.

2. U.S. Hunger

Food-related welfare policy and food insecurity in the United States



Since the beginning of the pandemic, broken supply chains, economic instability and mass unemployment have increasingly contributed to alarming rates of food insecurity in the United States. Discussions about hunger started before the pandemic

slammed the economy and worsened steadily throughout the year. In response to work requirements proposed late in 2019, 14 states [filed](#) a lawsuit ([Politico](#)) against the Trump administration citing unlawful interference. Once the pandemic’s domestic impact became clear, a federal judge [blocked](#) the work requirement and the rule was officially [struck down](#) in October.

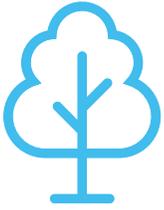
Hunger relief organization Feeding America [updated](#) an interactive map throughout the year, indicating that more than 50 million people (including 17 million children) nationwide experienced food insecurity at some point of 2020. A December 8 edition of PBS Frontline [cited](#) a U.S. Census Bureau poll that [found](#) 12% of adults in America said their household didn’t have enough to eat in the last week.

With food banks straining to meet demand and the supply chain struggling to move food staples, the federal government [attempted](#) to mitigate food insecurity with the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, which set aside \$3 billion to purchase farm products and distribute them to food banks and nonprofits. More than 2,000 organizations [recommended](#) to Congress that increasing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, aka food stamps) benefits would be a more efficient solution. Separately, 48 states allowed SNAP participants to use benefits for online purchases by the end of the year.

To help fill the hunger gap, industry leaders stepped up throughout the year. Global animal health leader Zoetis, Inc. [partnered](#) with food banks to provide needed fresh dairy, meat and poultry products. The National Pork Producers Council (NPPC) [initiated](#) the “Give-a-Ham” challenge, a national social media campaign encouraging hog farmers and those involved in the industry to donate pork to organizations serving the food insecure and challenging others to follow suit. Other leaders, including [Dunkin Brands](#), [American Egg Board](#) and [Kellogg Company](#), donated millions in dollars, time and products.

3. Stewardship

Environmental management of the land, water and air quality on and around farms and ranches



In a year dominated by the human impact of food production, the volume of ongoing conversations proved that on-farm practices remain a core focus for minimizing carbon emissions in food production. Bookending the year, an array of agriculturalist groups [formed](#) Farmers for a Sustainable

Future on February 19 and an overlapping coalition — the Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance (FACA) — on November 17 [issued](#) recommendations for ways that climate policy could reinforce good farm stewardship practices. Notably, these alliances were made possible by cooperation between the American Farm Bureau

Federation, National Farmers Union and National Coalition of Farmer Cooperatives, effectively representing producers of all sizes and political persuasions.

Corporate policies also guided discussions of farming practices in what The Nature Conservancy called a “shift towards a nature-positive future.” [General Mills, Inc.](#), [McDonald’s Corporation](#) and [Cargill, Inc.](#), embraced regenerative agriculture practices. Corteva Agriscience [committed](#) to provide tools that help farmers improve soil health and biodiversity. Burger King [announced](#) an update to cattle feed for its producers to reduce methane emissions. However, the [National Cattlemen’s Beef Association](#) (NCBA) and UC Davis professor [Frank Mitloehner, PhD](#), disputed the veracity of the burger chain’s claims.

Looking Ahead:

Bills such as the Growing Climate Solutions Act, which [earned](#) bipartisan support and endorsements from 50 corporations and interest groups, failed to advance during the Trump administration. This is likely to change under the Biden administration, as Biden [campaigned](#) on agriculture’s role in mitigating climate change and will likely rejoin the Paris Climate Accord.

4. Human Health

Diet-related health conditions, including obesity, diabetes and hypertension



The topic of human health rose to prominence in 2020 largely because of discussion around the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025. This quinquennial recommendation drives important policies for school lunch and food assistance programs like SNAP.

Following the July publication of scientific recommendations for the guidelines, debate centered on the percentage of daily calories that should come from added sugars and the amount of alcohol that can be healthfully consumed. Food Business News [shared](#) the report’s reasoning on sugar reduction: “Added sugars, particularly from SSB (sugar-sweetened beverages), may contribute to unhealthy weight gain and obesity-related health outcomes.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) [published](#) the final guidelines on December 29. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics [praised](#) the guidelines for varying recommendations by age. Upon seeing that reduced alcohol consumption had not been included in the final guidelines,

Tufts University nutrition professor Dariush Mozaffarian [called](#) it “Another unfortunate example of science being trumped by politics.”

Outside of the guidelines, school lunch drew attention. School districts scrambled to provide healthy meals to students learning remotely. In October, USDA [extended](#) access to free school meals through the end of the school year in June 2021. Center for Science in the Public Interest [directed](#) attention to a State of Childhood Obesity piece [featuring](#) six interviews with school lunch professionals and their various creative problem-solving skills to secure kids meals amid the pandemic.



Looking Ahead:

Watch out for a public awareness campaign from the USDA and HHS about the new dietary guidelines called “Make every bite count,” as well as a refreshed [MyPlate.gov](#) website. Additionally, food manufacturing C-suites are increasingly adding a new position: the chief medical officer. [PepsiCo](#), [Tyson Foods](#) and others took the step of adding this office, with PepsiCo aiming to “protect its global workforce, products and communities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

5. International Trade

Imports and exports of food and agricultural products



While still a prominent topic, trade concerns steadily fell in importance in 2020, from the second-most discussed topic pre-pandemic to the topic's lowest volume during the Trump administration. China continued as the leading trade relationship of concern, as it has

been since the Trump administration imposed tariffs in March 2018. On January 15, President Trump [signed](#) the “Phase One” trade agreement, which includes a provision for the country to buy \$36.5 billion of U.S. agricultural exports. Industry groups, such as the [American Soybean Association](#) and [NPPC](#), welcomed the deal. However, the deal quickly

met headwinds as labor shortages tied to COVID-19 [slowed](#) volume at Chinese ports (Bloomberg). After [analyzing](#) reports from the U.S. Trade Representative, American Farm Bureau Federation [warned](#), “China is still not on pace to meet the lofty goals included in the Phase I agreement.”

North American leaders [signed](#) the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) on January 29, with the deal taking effect on July 1. The deal drew wide approval from agriculturalists, including the [American Feed Industry Association](#) and [U.S. Dairy Export Council](#), as Canada and Mexico remain the No. 1 and No. 3 destinations for agricultural goods. Food & Water Watch Executive Director Wenonah Hauser [opposed](#) the deal on the grounds that it will “globalize new precedents of worse food safety protections.”

6. Pesticides

Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and other forms of pest management



A recurring top ten topic, pesticide conversations centered on lawsuits, safety and policy moves. Lawsuits led conversations in the first half of the year. On February 15, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch [reported](#) that a Missouri jury handed down a \$265 million judgment against

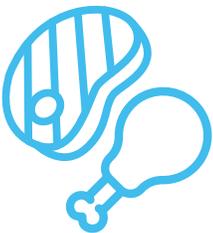
Bayer AG and BASF Corporation in a lawsuit linking off-target dicamba drift to damaged crops on a peach farm. Meanwhile, Bayer worked to [settle](#) lawsuits that link glyphosate use to cancer (The Wall Street Journal). On June 24, Bayer [set aside](#) \$10.9 billion for payouts — with no admission of wrongdoing — but later [renegotiated](#) settlements for 45,000 lawsuits.

A pair of voluntary corporate commitments also shaped discussions: Kellogg Company [announced](#) it would “phase out using glyphosate as a pre-harvest drying agent in our wheat and oat supply chain” by 2025 and Corteva Agriscience [discontinued](#) sales of chlorpyrifos products, citing lower demand for the product (Brownfield Ag News).

On June 3, a federal appeals court [vacated](#) EPA’s conditional approval of dicamba, which prompted EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler to [issue](#) a statement days later clarifying that the herbicide could no longer be sold, but farmers were permitted to use existing supplies until July 31. In October, the EPA’s five-year reapproval of dicamba came with new restrictions to mitigate drift concerns (Reuters).

7. Protein

Protein as a nutrient and its role in human diets



Protein continued its reign as the macronutrient of choice, particularly in light of rising food insecurity. Protein’s prominence in diet plans — from carnivore to ketogenic — was exemplified by University of Texas professor Douglas Paddon-Jones [telling](#)

Heated, “Unless you’re eating really stupid quantities of protein, it’s hard to see any downsides.”

In the first wave of pandemic lockdowns, consumers left meat cases bare as they stockpiled food items. IRI [shared](#) data showing year-over-year increases of roughly 50%

for retail sales of meat products through March and April, with FMI (The Food Industry Association) [reporting](#) that the trend continued through July. While demand for meat products rose, outbreaks of COVID-19 at processing plants [pinched](#) supply (Reuters).

Plant-based proteins saw a similar bump in sales, though the peak did not extend through meat supply shortfalls. Jayson Lusk, head of Purdue University’s agricultural economics department, [analyzed](#) the numbers: “At the time the economic environment was most opportune for consumers to switch from beef and pork to plant-based alternatives, it seems that few made that substitution.”

Looking Ahead:

Ingredient companies and manufacturers continue to pursue alternative proteins that more closely resemble meat — or are grown from actual animal cells. The Good Food Institute [tracked](#) \$1.5 billion invested in the sector in the first nine months of 2020. But startups aren’t the only game in town, major producers from Tyson Foods to Nestlé SA have developed their own products, too. Expect to see more consolidation in the near future.

8. Food Safety

Foodborne illness, related recalls and regulation



Although food safety is constantly on the minds of industry leaders, the topic played a comparatively small role in 2020. And as is common, major food safety initiatives took place under supervision of the federal

governments. To much relief, in March, the CDC [assured](#), “There is no evidence to support transmission of COVID-19 associated with food.” Though the pandemic severely impacted food production in many ways, food safety was not one.

Throughout the growing season in 2020, *E. coli* contamination proved a viable foe to food safety experts. Despite the FDA [declaring](#) an end of an outbreak tied to romaine lettuce from Salinas, California, the issue persisted. In May, the FDA [released](#) a 2020 Leafy

Greens Action Plan “because of the recurrent nature of outbreaks associated with leafy greens.” One cause the report indicated was lettuce patches downhill from “low volume” cattle operations. Food safety attorney Bill Marler [explained](#) the findings in detail and quipped, “People say what about sh*t and hillsides?”

In the third quarter, the FDA [released](#) its “New Era of Smarter Food Safety” blueprint outlining how the agency will use modern processes and technology to keep up with fast-paced changes in the food industry. FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn [stated](#), “Our ultimate goal is to bend the curve of foodborne illness in this country by reducing the number of illnesses.”

For more, please review The Intel Disilery’s midyear focus feature: [Pandemic Pressure on Food Safety](#), a report that captures influential perspectives on food safety.

Looking Ahead: Food Safety News [published](#) a summary of the USDA Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) and what to expect in the coming year. Some ongoing objectives for the agency include modernization of processing inspection systems for beef, pork, poultry and eggs, reducing foodborne illness, and inspecting foods imported from other countries.

9. Weather

Weather conditions and their effect on farming

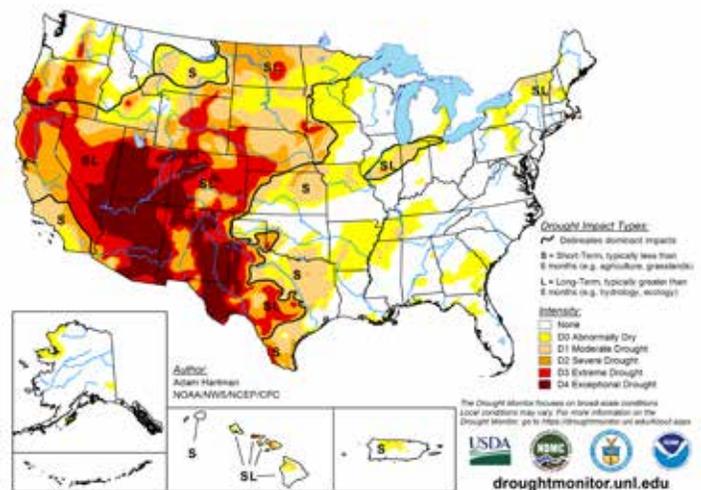


In addition to supply chain and workforce struggles, many agricultural producers had to contend with Mother Nature. Between water management, natural disasters and harvest conditions, weather’s control of conversations in the back half of the year amounted to enough to

land in the top topics for the year as a whole. By the end of the summer, U.S. Drought Monitor [noted](#) that drought had worsened considerably across the western and southwestern United States, with 46% of the lower 48 states [experiencing](#) drought conditions by October 27.

The Washington Post [covered](#) the relationship between drought and wildfires, which became so widespread that Modern Farmer [spotlighted](#) California farmers who faced the task of fighting brushfires with limited aid from overtaxed firefighters. The majority of conversations around wildfires focused on the wine industry, with outlets, such as Eater, [tracking](#) wineries and restaurants damaged by the fires.

Additionally, several storms put a dent in the growing season. Des Moines Register reported that a derecho [flattened](#) as much as one-third of Iowa’s cropland on



August 10. Hurricane Laura [struck](#) Louisiana rice paddies on August 27, but USA Rice Federation noted most had been harvested. And the University of Florida [estimated](#) that Hurricane Sally inflicted \$55 million to \$100 million in losses on pecan and cotton growers.

Looking Ahead: With winter weather unlikely to ease drought conditions, farmers in the West are likely to face challenges in the form of water sourcing, irrigation efficiency and wildfire risk.

10. Niche Food Production

Nonconventional production practices and smaller producers/processors



Niche producers, processors and retail outlets emerged as much-needed alternatives to supply chains taxed by pandemic-restricted logistics. Farmers market traffic and community supported agriculture (CSA) memberships [increased](#)

substantially in the spring (The Counter). The New York Times [highlighted](#) the role of farm stands as an outlet for farmers who typically supply restaurants. To maintain relationships with farms, some restaurants [pivoted](#) to sell produce instead of shutting down entirely (Grub Street).

As COVID-19 infections hit food production facilities hard in the spring, many small-scale processors fared better than their large-scale competitors. In a Forbes piece, animal welfare

expert Temple Grandin [explained](#), “Big suppliers are low cost, efficient and fragile. More numerous local producers are more expensive, but the entire supply is more robust.” Seeking to encourage more small-scale processing, Reps. Chellie Pingree (D-Maine) and Jeff Fortenberry (R-Neb.) [introduced](#) the Strengthening Local Processing Act on September 29.



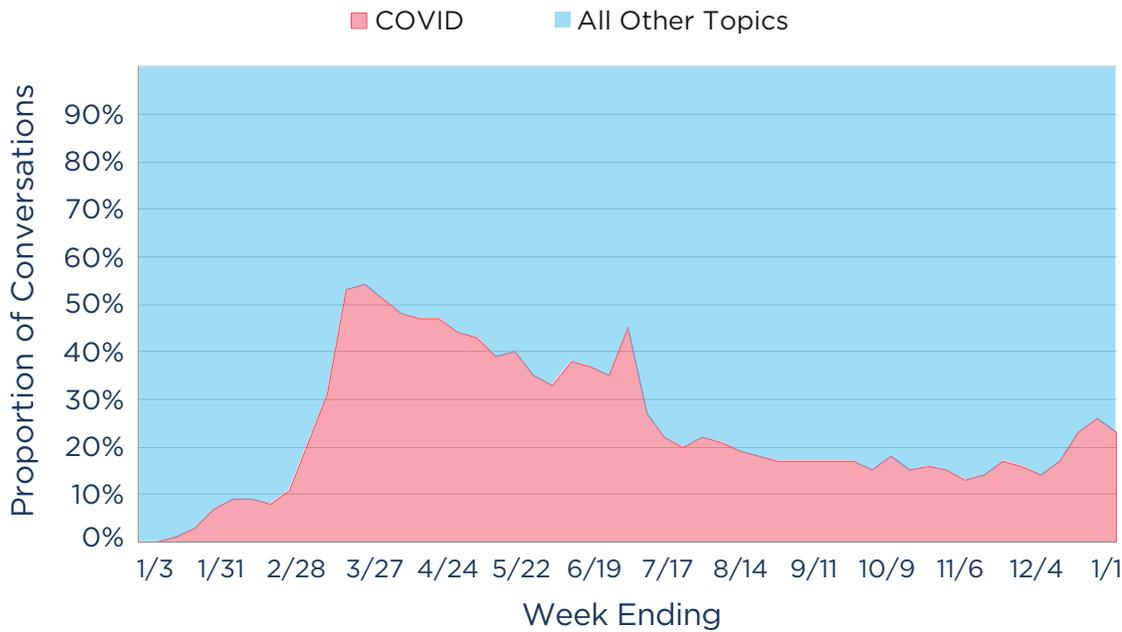
Timeline: Important Events This Quarter

While the Top Ten Topics highlight the biggest concerns in food production, the most salient events do not always fall neatly into a category and often bridge several topics. Here we highlight the events that sparked the most conversations.

Jan 15	Trump signs “Phase One” of the trade agreement with China
Mar 19	Department of Homeland Security declares food and agriculture “essential” and “critical” industries during coronavirus crisis
Apr 17	USDA announces Farmers to Families Food Box Program
May 21	FDA publishes Leafy Greens Action Plan to combat recurring outbreaks of <i>E. coli</i>
Jun 10	Just Eat Takeaway buys Grubhub
July 1	United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) takes effect
July 6	Uber purchases Postmates
July 14	Burger King unveils “Cows Menu” to reduce carbon emissions
Sept 21	Food companies make sustainability commitments as part of Climate Week
Oct 14	Panera Bread partners with World Resources Institute to label menu items with lower carbon footprints
Nov 9	McDonald’s announces McPlant burger
Nov 17	Coalition of agriculturalist groups form Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance
Dec 1	Eat Just becomes first company to receive approval to sell cell-cultured protein
Dec 22	CDC prioritizes food and farm workers for receiving COVID-19 vaccine
Dec 29	USDA and HHS publish final Dietary Guidelines for Americans

COVID-19 Dominating 2020 Conversations

Coronavirus Conversation Update



The leading voices in food production have a wide array of concerns when it comes to getting food to consumers' plates so it's always notable when a topic accounts for more than 10% of those conversations. This year, COVID-19 drove that volume of attention for 10 months straight. The peak volume came with the initial wave of infections and lockdowns in the spring, but even the relative lull seen from

July through November shows that the pandemic drove at least 1 in 6 conversations. The end-of-year surge matches up with a second wave of infections, though it's evident that food producers are better prepared this time around.

Wrapping Up The Year

As we reflect on 2020 and look forward to 2021, we find that the “greatest hits” articles help to highlight important developments in a chaotic year.

	Source	Article
10/20	Innova	Top 10 Food and Beverage Trends to Accelerate Innovation in 2021
12/10	Consumer Brands Association	Why Toilet Paper, Peanut Butter and Alcohol Defined 2020
12/11	National Corn Growers Association	Agriculture Trade: A Reason for Optimism in 2020
12/11	Supermarket News	Food-at-home will continue to drive grocery sales in 2021
12/11	Triple Pundit	Regenerative - The Word Defining Global Food and Ag in 2021
12/21	Sustainable Brands	2020's Top 10 Trends in Purpose — and What They Could Mean for You in 2021
12/21	Nation's Restaurant News	All the restaurant chains that announced mass unit closures in 2020
12/21	Good Food Institute	GFI's Top 20 Moments for Alternative Proteins in 2020
12/29	Food & Wine	The Strangest Food Crimes of 2020
1/4	Meatingplace	2020 year in review: An even bigger year for food safety?

Striving to Do Good Despite Adversity

Food insecurity and labor policies propelled CSR efforts in 2020

The pandemic and growing attention to social inequality presented opportunities to address important corporate social responsibility (CSR) topics, such as a growing hunger crisis and the critical role of food industry workers, in an unprecedented environment. Leaders throughout

food production addressed these issues head-on and shared progress on the steps they have taken. Last year, The Intel Distillery tracked an escalation of purpose-driven efforts, new partnerships and top-down moves that defined how food brands are looking to the future.

Purpose-driven Efforts

In 2020, food brands used their power to translate purpose into action.

- Global animal health leader Zoetis [partnered](#) with food banks across the United States to provide sorely needed fresh dairy, meat and poultry products. In addition, Zoetis provided monetary support and much-needed cold storage units to better equip food pantries.
- Startup snack bar brand Bunch Bar [believed](#) that great tasting food should be available to everyone, especially food-insecure, inner-city youth. With giving back integrated into its sales model, the brand launched in 2020, delivering on its mission with each purchase.
- In October, Chobani [announced](#) plans to increase its starting hourly wage to \$15, which is set to take effect in early 2021. CEO Hamdi Ulukaya told Fortune that the pandemic provided “an opportunity to see things a lot deeper and say, ‘These are fundamentals that need to change.’”
- Seeing equality in education as a game-changer, Hormel Foods Corporation [offered](#) two-year college degree programs to dependents of its employees, beginning in 2021.
- Food companies responded to racial inequality by committing to redesign packaging and branding; [Aunt Jemima](#), [Mrs. Butterworth's](#), [Uncle Ben's](#) and [Cream of Wheat](#) were among the first to announce changes.



New Partnerships

There is power in working together to address common causes. Many brands formed new partnerships to find common ground on the environment and form alliances across a range of supply chain stakeholders.

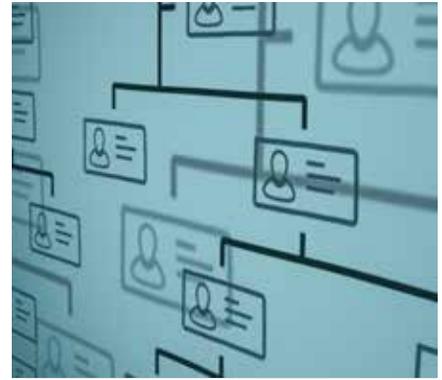
- Chicagoland Food & Beverage Network [launched](#) Bigger Table to connect food industry partners and unlock new charitable initiatives to provide assistance where it is needed most (Food Business News).
- In July, Meat+Poultry [reported](#) that Burger King, Cargill, Inc., and the WWF would reseed and replant 8,000 acres of “marginal cropland” in Montana and South Dakota with ecologically diverse plants for cattle grazing.
- Food Navigator [reported](#) on June 24 that PepsiCo-owned Quaker Oats and pure-play agriculture company Corteva Agriscience partnered to produce the first-ever sequencing of the full oat genome.
- In November, coalition-based Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance (FACA) [issued](#) its first climate policy recommendations, which was possible with the cooperation between the American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers Union and National Coalition of Farmer Cooperatives, effectively representing producers of all sizes and political persuasions.



Corporate Leadership Moves

Events of 2020 challenged food industry executives to reexamine their entire supply chains as well as conventional business practices. Real change happens at the top, and these examples hint at more changes to come.

- In December, Tyson Foods, Inc., [hired](#) Dr. Claudia Coplein as its chief medical officer to lead the “company’s efforts to protect team members during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also working to expand and promote a culture of health, safety and wellness at Tyson.”
- The Kroger Co. [unveiled](#) a “Framework for Action” that promotes diversity and inclusion not only from within its workforce but also among the communities served by its 2,800 stores nationwide (Supermarket News).
- McDonald’s Corporation [expanded](#) a leadership role to be held by Reginald J. Miller, who will serve as vice president and global chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer.
- In the next five years, PepsiCo [said](#), it will increase representation of women and minority employees within its workforce, specifically in management roles (Food Dive).



With all the uncertainty brought on by the pandemic and social unrest in 2020, food companies showed resilience and strived to be a positive force for change. While hunger and labor policies required immediate action, progress on other important sustainability pillars continued. In the months and years ahead, look for leaders to expand the definition of corporate citizenship as companies support their communities and the world at large.

For more food and ag insights, visit TheIntelDistillery.com.

© 2021 Bader Rutter | The Intel Distillery