

It Has Been A Long Twelve Months

Top Ten Topics: Q1 2021



A whole year later and still vulnerabilities in the food supply chain continue to drive discussions among leaders in food and agriculture. The **workforce** remains a chief concern. Corporations, advocacy groups and the government have all weighed in on what it takes for workers to safely produce, sell and serve food for American consumers. While the groups differ on many points, all agree that vaccines play a key role in the path forward. Additionally, the pandemic's effects on purchasing patterns pushed **protein** to its highest rank to date.

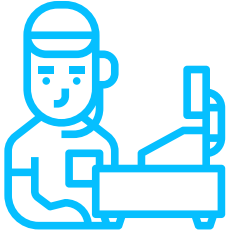
The combination of COVID-related problems and unrest at the U.S. capitol dampened many of the

usual beginning-of-year conversations. Discussions about New Year's diets were replaced by brands and industry groups advocating a peaceful transition of power.

After his inauguration, President Biden reinforced workforce reforms and **hunger relief**, boosting access to food stamps and school meals. The new administration also shifted other policy priorities. **Stewardship** and **climate change** climbed in importance as Biden offered agriculture a starring role in carbon reduction plans.

1. Workforce

Pay, benefits and safety of workers



The workforce emerged as the leading topic of discussion for the third time since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and for good reason. Workers in the food supply chain serve essential functions and have faced substantial risks as a result. The rollout of vaccines

hit full stride in the first quarter and promised to ease these risks, but some obstacles remained. Santa Cruz Sentinel [noted](#) that California farmworkers often faced language barriers when seeking vaccines. The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) [argued](#) that grocery workers had not been prioritized appropriately, and Grubstreet [detailed](#) issues with vaccine distribution to New York City restaurant workers. To encourage reluctant workers, companies stepped up — Sanderson Farms, Inc., [assured](#) workers of the vaccine's effectiveness, The Kroger Co. [offered](#) cash incentives and meatpackers, such as Foster Farms, [set up](#) vaccine clinics on-site.

President Biden prioritized worker issues since taking office on January 20. In a January 22 executive order,

he [directed](#) the U.S. Department of Labor to reassess COVID-19 policies. On March 11, Biden [signed](#) the American Rescue Plan, which included provisions for additional COVID testing, personal protective equipment and stimulus checks. However, the bill did not include a minimum wage increase to \$15 per hour. [National Restaurant Association](#) and [National Grocers Association](#) had both lobbied heavily against the wage hike. While [Dole Packaged Foods](#) (CNN) and [Costco Corporation](#) (The New York Times) promised to raise wages independent of national laws, Kroger drew criticism for [closing](#) California locations when local “hazard pay” provisions required a temporary \$4-per-hour increase (Supermarket News).

On February 1, the U.S. House of Representatives [opened](#) an investigation of how the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) handled standards in the meatpacking industry. However, a federal judge [dismissed](#) a lawsuit on March 31 that alleged OSHA failed to protect meatpacking workers (Meatingplace). Separately, a federal judge [ruled](#) that the USDA must withdraw an increase to pork production line speeds because the agency did not adequately investigate worker safety concerns.

2. Protein

Protein as a nutrient and its role in human diets



Protein-rich foods have traditionally occupied the “center of plate” position, so it is no surprise that the category has steadily earned more attention throughout a pandemic with heightened levels of food insecurity. In the annual “Power of Meat” report, FMI (The Food Industry Association) and

the North American Meat Institute [found](#) that retail sales of meat rose by 20%, with 43% of Americans increasing their meat purchases during the pandemic. Mintel [confirmed](#) the trend, calling it “a temporary setback for the flexitarian movement.”

Yet a substantial volume of conversations has been devoted to the development of alternative protein sources, with Good Food Institute [tallying](#) \$3.1 billion of investments. Makers of cell-cultured proteins pulled in funding from some heavy hitters: ADM [invested](#) in Future Meat Technologies, Mitsubishi Corporation [partnered](#) with Aleph Farms, Ltd., and the Qatar Investment Authority funded Eat Just, Inc. Alternative protein-maker Blue Horizon Corporation projected that ongoing development

of “realistic alternatives” to meat products could capture 11% to 16% of the global protein market by 2035.

A spat between state commemorative holidays exemplified ongoing tensions in the protein sector. Colorado Gov. Jared Polis [declared](#) March 20 to be “MeatOut Day” in a nonbinding proclamation that encouraged citizens to forgo meat for one day (The Denver Post). Activist group Farm Animal Rights Movement [welcomed](#) the announcement, while the Colorado Cattlemen’s Association [countered](#) with a “Meat In” movement on the same day. Gov. Pete Ricketts of neighboring Nebraska even officially [declared](#) March 20 “Meat on the Menu Day.”



3. Stewardship

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



Much of the discussion around farm stewardship practices stemmed from the Biden administration's focus on agriculture practices as a key component of mitigating climate change. In the largest point of overlap, USDA Deputy Chief of Staff Robert Bonnie [explained](#) that treating carbon as a commodity —

similar to corn, soy or pork bellies — will allow the agency to create a “carbon bank” that pays out for farmers who can sequester carbon in the soil. Politico writers [captured](#) concerns from agriculturalists about how the policy will actually be implemented. The private sector has already created several examples: Land O'Lakes [launched](#) a carbon marketplace on February 4, touting Microsoft Corporation as its first buyer of carbon offsets.

Leading voices in the industry are increasingly making the business case for changing stewardship practices. Environmental Defense Fund and the National Corn Growers Association [examined](#) per-acre profits of cover crops and reduced tillage. Modern Farmer [highlighted](#) research that links soil health to drought tolerance and recommends that crop insurance reflect such risk. And Bloomberg [reported](#) that an EU-based investment firm — and the \$2 trillion it manages — weighed in on policy incentives.

Limited resources will also force changes in stewardship practices. The Sacramento Bee [covered](#) California's need for restricting water flow to farms in anticipation of drought conditions. NPR's Dan Charles [featured](#) research from University of Massachusetts, Amherst, that estimates as much as one-third of topsoil in the Midwest has been depleted by a century of plowing.

4. U.S. Hunger

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



Fortunately, the topic of hunger moved out of a top-three spot in our rankings for the first time since the pandemic took hold last year. But the topic remains at the forefront of legislative and social policy concerns.

President Biden [signed](#) an executive order on January 22 that called for a boost to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, aka food stamps) and increased access to meals that would have been served at schools. In the following weeks, the administration rolled back Trump-era SNAP restrictions, which freed up approximately \$1 billion per month allotted to 25 million of the neediest Americans. Washington Post reporter Laura Reiley [explained](#) a pair of lawsuits that claimed former USDA secretary Sonny Perdue's interpretation of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act denied

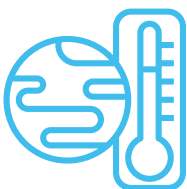
emergency benefits to SNAP recipients. After the hearings concluded in March, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack [said](#), “Today's actions will provide much-needed support for those who need it most.”

A year into the pandemic, influential voices reflected on the effectiveness of our hunger relief system and the role food banks and pantries play in mitigating the issue. Notably, Civil Eats [profiled](#) author Katie S. Martin who advocates for a pivot in food-focused charities' role to one of community empowerment rather than short-term hunger relief.

Feeding schoolchildren — whether remote or in person — remained a persistent topic. At the School Nutrition Association (SNA) Legislative Action Conference on March 8, Secretary Vilsack announced that all schoolchildren would receive free meals through September and the agency is looking to extend the benefits through the 2021-22 school year if necessary ([Food Management](#)).

5. Climate Change

Current and predicted effects of climate change on food production



Shortly after taking office, President Biden [signed](#) a number of executive orders that established his climate agenda. Among the policies, Biden set goals for agriculturists to sequester carbon in soil and protect biodiversity. Friends of the Earth [cheered](#) the nation's reentry in the

Paris Climate Accord, and American Farm Bureau Federation [welcomed](#) the opportunity to “achieve sustainability goals while ensuring climate policies remain market-based and voluntary.” Reuters [summarized](#) Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack's February 23 confirmation, highlighting priorities that address climate change.

On Valentine's Day, Bill Gates [posted](#) an essay on his Gates Notes blog about how to fight climate change. The philanthropist listed eating plant-based burgers as one of four actions consumers can take to cut emissions. The New York Times [shared](#) research from the University of Washington on the impact of climate change on occupational health. Eater explained how warming a climate [increases](#) the risk of foodborne disease and [alters](#) niche food markets. The Counter highlighted ways states are working to mitigate farmworker health risks. But research from Cornell University served as a reminder that the effects are not limited to the future; researchers [estimated](#) that, despite advances in technology, “global farming productivity is 21% lower than it could have been without climate change.

6. Meatless

Vegetarianism, veganism and substitutes for animal products



Continuing a trend in meatless foods, discussions revolved around protein alternatives more than vegan and vegetarian diets as a whole. The two biggest producers of plant-based proteins led these conversations. On January 26, Beyond Meat, Inc., and PepsiCo, Inc., [formed](#) The PLANeT

Partnership, LLC, to develop new snack products. Thirty days later, Beyond Meat [announced](#) separate deals to supply both McDonald's and Yum! Brands.

Bidding to compete with ground beef, Impossible Foods [dropped](#) its meatless patty prices for foodservice

distributors in January and [lowered](#) suggested retail prices in February. On January 29, advocacy group Center for Food Safety [filed](#) a brief in a lawsuit alleging that the FDA approved the Impossible Burger's coloring agent, "heme," without adequate safety testing.

As myriad startups entered the space, investments and other business deals punctuated the quarter. Post Holdings, Inc., [inked](#) a distribution deal with Hungry Planet, Inc., on January 26. Redefine Meat [raised](#) \$29 million in Series A funding on February 16. Danone [acquired](#) Earth Island on February 18. On February 23, Oatly [filed](#) for an IPO. Mark Cuban [agreed](#) to a deal with Everything Legendary in a *Shark Tank* episode that aired February 26.

7. Pesticides

Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and other forms of pest management



On February 3, Bayer AG, which acquired Monsanto Company and its glyphosate-based Roundup herbicide in 2018, pledged \$2 billion to resolve future claims to plaintiffs linking Roundup to cancer ([Progressive Farmer](#)).

In March, Reuters [reported](#) that a May 12

hearing will review the legitimacy of the pledge. Lawyers and Settlements [posted](#) a full timeline for added perspective.

Reuters [was](#) also on the scene on February 19, when Victor Suarez, the Mexican deputy agriculture minister, announced a ban on importing U.S. corn grown with

genetically engineered technology. Suarez "cited studies linking glyphosate to cancer and saying that it harmed pollinators like bees and separately alleged that GMO corn contaminates Mexico's native strains of the grain." On March 30, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack [clarified](#) that the ban does not include animal feed (Farm Journal).

Other important headlines concerning pesticides include EPA [approving](#) aldicarb, an insecticide used to prevent citrus greening; Environmental Working Group's [publishing](#) its annual "Clean Fifteen" and "Dirty Dozen" produce reports; and more than 100 farmworker, public health and environmentalist organizations [urging](#) President Biden to ban the pesticide chlorpyrifos.

8. Human Health

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



The onset of a new year usually brings an onslaught of analysis of various diet plans, providing health and nutrition pundits with fodder for debate. While those discussions were quieter than normal this year, the topic of human health remains pertinent. The March 2 release of

Hooked: Food, Free Will, and How the Food Giants Exploit Our Addictions by investigative reporter Michael Moss, prompted many influential reviews (from [NPR](#), [Food Tank](#) and [The New York Times](#)) and discussion about food from an addiction perspective.

The remaining prominent human health discussions centered around food-related health concerns — many of which were prompted by the pandemic. A March NPD Group report [documented](#) increased relevance of "food as medicine," noting that consumers are "trying foods, ingredients, and substances that help them build immunity, prevent

inflammation, aid their digestive health, and relieve stress and anxiety." Fast Company's Rina Raphael [shared](#) Tufts University findings that the United

States could save \$100 billion if Medicare and Medicaid subsidized healthy foods to prevent chronic illness as "70% of diseases in the U.S. are chronic and lifestyle-driven, according to the CDC."



9. International Trade

Imports and exports of food and agricultural products



Trade policy has become less of a flashpoint as President Biden initially left tariffs and trade agreements unchanged and [signed](#) a “Made in America” executive order. After some review, however, the administration [suspended](#) tariffs on food, whiskey and wine

imported from the European Union, effective March 5. The Coalition to Stop Restaurant Tariffs — composed of celebrity chefs, restaurant owners and their suppliers — [praised](#) the administration for removing costs on goods that “are critical to the success of any restaurant.”

Chinese demand for U.S. agricultural exports remained at high levels through the first quarter. Feedstuffs [tracked](#) meat exports over the first year of the “Phase One” trade agreement and Agri-Pulse [covered](#) elevated demand for corn, but a resurgence of African swine fever has [tempered](#) soy purchases (The Wall Street Journal).

In other trade news, pandemic-related strains on the supply chain created shipping container shortages that Reuters [noted](#) were worsened by the blockage of the Suez Canal. And a coalition of agriculturalist groups [warned](#) of potential trade difficulties after Mexico [banned](#) the import of genetically modified corn (Inter Press Service).

10. Food Safety

Foodborne illness, related recalls and regulation



On February 4, a congressional report [revealed](#) dangerous levels of toxic metals in brands of both conventional and organic baby foods. Consultants to an Associated Press article [said](#) the source of heavy metals

often comes from the minerals added and that rice, a common ingredient in baby food, can acquire high levels of arsenic from watery soils. Class action lawsuits against major manufacturers, including Gerber and Hain

Celestial, [followed](#) (Food Processing). In March, Politico’s Helena Bottemiller Evich [wrote](#) the FDA was tightening standards and “[telling](#) baby food makers they should take steps to reduce metal levels as part of their own food safety controls.”

Food Safety News [reported](#) that foodborne illness outbreaks are pacing slower into 2021 with only three active, multistate investigations. Meatingplace legal blogger Shawn Stevens [encouraged](#) food companies to self-audit food safety practices as FDA and USDA inspectors ramp up plant inspections post-COVID.

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.

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| Jan. 1 | California Proposition 22 takes effect, classifying delivery workers as contractors |
| Jan. 14 | PepsiCo commits to cut carbon emissions by 40% by 2030, reach net-zero emissions by 2040 |
| Feb. 4 | Congress issues report on toxic metals in baby food |
| Feb. 16 | Texas issues food supply chain “red alert” after winter storm hits Texas and the Midwest |
| Feb. 23 | U.S. Senate confirms Tom Vilsack as USDA secretary |
| Feb. 25 | Beyond Meat announces partnerships with both McDonald’s and Yum! Brands |
| Mar. 11 | Senate confirms Michael Regan as EPA administrator |
| Mar. 11 | President Biden signs \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan |
| Mar. 23 | Court upholds USDA National Organic Program decision to allow “organic” label on hydroponically grown food |
| Mar. 31 | Judge halts increased line speeds for pork processing plants |

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