

Friends of the Earth ❖ Center for Biological Diversity ❖ Restaurant Opportunities Centers United ❖ Food Chain Workers Alliance ❖ Food Democracy Now! ❖ Green America ❖ Center for Food Safety ❖ FoodBabe.com ❖ Real Food Challenge ❖ Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

October 5, 2015

Mr. Eugene I. Lee Jr.  
Chief Executive Officer  
Darden Restaurants  
1000 Darden Center Drive  
Orlando, FL 32837

Dear Mr. Lee,

In honor of Food Day, October 24, 2015, environmental, consumer, food and worker organizations including Friends of the Earth, Center for Biological Diversity, and Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, Food Chain Workers Alliance, Food Democracy Now!, Green America, Center for Food Safety, FoodBabe.com, Real Food Challenge, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, urge Darden Restaurants to ensure its food purchasing and management practices are sustainable and healthy for its customers, its employees and our planet. On behalf of our over two million supporters, we would like to schedule a meeting with your company to discuss our requests.

Food Day 2015 — the fifth national Food Day — is focused on educating and mobilizing eaters and food service entities that supply nearly half of American’s meals to take action “Toward a Greener Diet” from field to plate. A greener diet is one that embraces more plant-based foods and fewer animal products, while improving the environmental, animal welfare, and social conditions under which our food is produced.

Adopting “greener diets” or serving “greener plates” is critical in order to reverse the enormous ecological, health, animal welfare and social damage caused by the standard American diet and our industrial food system. This chemical intensive industrial farming system is depleting and degrading our soil, land and water — key resources upon which future food production, food security and your business depend. As a recent panel of top U.S. scientists and nutrition professionals concluded in creating recommendations for the 2015 U.S. Dietary Guidelines, a diet “higher in plant-based foods...and lower in animal-based foods is more health-promoting and is associated with lesser environmental impact.”<sup>1</sup>

A greener diet must also improve the conditions and ensure dignity for the workers who grow, pick, cook and serve our food, as defined by the vision of ROC-UNITED and Darden employees as part of the “Dignity at Darden” campaign.

As a leading casual-dining operator with more than 1,500 restaurants and 150,000 employees, serving more than 320 million meals a year, Darden has a unique opportunity and responsibility to use its considerable purchasing power to support a healthier, fairer and more sustainable food system. We ask Darden Restaurants to adopt greener menus that support the well-being of its customers, its workers, farmers, animals and our environment. Specifically, our organizations ask Darden to ensure at least 20% of its food purchases adhere to these guidelines by 2020, which are based on the Good Food Purchasing Policy.

These include supporting:

1. **Local Economies:** by purchasing food at fair prices from local and regional small and medium-sized food producers;

2. **Environmental Sustainability:** by reducing meat and dairy purchases 20 percent, including serving smaller portion sizes and adding meat/dairy-free entree options; sourcing from organically certified food producers (including, no factory farms/CAFOs) and purchasing 100 percent of meat raised without the routine use of antibiotics;
3. **Animal Welfare:** by sourcing meat from producers that adhere to verifiable high-welfare standards: Animal Welfare Approved, Global Animal Partnership (at least step 2) and/or Certified Humane Raised and Handled;
4. **Good Nutrition:** by including generous portions of fruits and vegetables, legumes, whole grains; and by reducing salt, added sugar, fat, and red and processed meat; and
5. **A Valued Workforce:** by ensuring living wage and sustainable working conditions, both in your supply chain and for all the employees in your restaurants.

The Good Food Purchasing Policy was approved by the LA City Council and LA Unified School District in 2012 and govern those entities' purchasing practices (including 127 million meals at LAUSD).

By making these changes, Darden can help Americans eat healthier while encouraging better food production practices and building a thriving business that can reduce costs and mitigate risk. For example, reducing overall meat and dairy purchases by serving smaller portions sizes, Darden can help improve public health, lower greenhouse gas emissions, reduce pressure on scarce water resources and reduce food waste, all while reducing volatility in its supply chain and improving the company's bottom line.

Americans consume significantly more meat than is recommended by USDA guidelines and far more than the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup> Restaurants like Darden contribute to overconsumption by offering many meals with portion sizes larger than the USDA recommended serving sizes (e.g. the 2010 Guidelines recommend no more than 1.8 ounce servings a day of red meat).<sup>3</sup> High consumption of industrially produced meat, especially red and processed meat, is associated with increased risks of diet-related disease (heart disease,<sup>4</sup> diabetes<sup>5</sup> and cancer<sup>6</sup>), large quantities of energy-intensive inputs (pesticides, fertilizer and fuel), huge water consumption and significant greenhouse gas emissions and air and water pollution. In contrast, plant-based foods require far fewer resources (nitrogen, water, energy and land) per gram of protein, generate much less pollution and are associated with lower weight, longer life spans and decreased risks of heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.<sup>7</sup>

In the last few years extreme drought conditions and fast-spreading diseases have decimated portions of the beef, pork, egg, chicken and turkey industries, significantly boosting the cost of these foods and exposing major vulnerabilities of the prevailing factory farming model.<sup>8,9,10</sup> These same massive scale industrial farms are contributing to the rise of antibiotic resistant infections in humans. A stunning 70 to 80 percent of all antibiotics are sold for use in animal agriculture and fed routinely to animals that are not sick, to promote growth and prevent diseases that spread easily in crowded and unsanitary conditions. Given the severity of this public health crisis, we urge you to ensure that 100% of your meat is raised without the routine use of antibiotics by 2020.

Purchasing and serving less and meat and cheese and more plant-based foods will free resources up for Darden to respond to growing consumer demand for *better* meat and dairy products that do not rely on the routine use of antibiotics, hormones, chemical fertilizers and toxic pesticides. Meat and dairy raised in sustainable, organic, humane and well managed pasture-based systems can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase climate resiliency, protect natural resources and enhance soil and water quality<sup>11,12,13</sup> biodiversity, and pollinator health.<sup>14</sup> These practices also improve public health and provide safer conditions for workers.

By shifting its menu towards more sustainable options, Darden can meet growing consumer demand and address increasing concerns about the food safety, animal welfare, health and environmental impacts associated with meat from conventional facilities, often considered to be factory farms. A recent study by Fortune magazine and Survey Monkey found that more than 50% percent of consumers were concerned

about hormones and antibiotics in their meat.<sup>15</sup> This concern is reflected by a 10 percent increase from 2012-2013 in sales of meat brands with no added hormones<sup>16</sup> and the rapid growth in the organic meat market. According to a 2015 analysis, one-third of consumers bought organic meat/poultry in 2013, many of whom were seeking to avoid hormones and antibiotics.<sup>17</sup> Between 2009 and 2012, sales of meat and poultry raised without routine use of antibiotics rose by 25 percent,<sup>18</sup> with the trend continuing today.<sup>19</sup> In 2011, USDA certified organic meats was the fastest growing segment of the \$31 billion organic foods industry<sup>20</sup> and according to SPINS market data, leading brands with certified organic and grass-fed product labels grew by 80 percent, while brands with animal welfare claims grew 23 percent from 2012-2014.<sup>21</sup> Millennials, who number around 80 million, particularly are interested in a “flexitarian” or reduced meat diet for a range of health, environmental and social reasons. According to the Beef Checkoff program, Millennials care about where their food comes from and want their beef to be raised with care for animals and the environment.<sup>22</sup> Not only that, Millennials are limiting their children’s red meat consumption.<sup>23</sup>

We urge Darden to treat its workers with dignity, including paying a living wage so that they too can afford a healthier diet and a lifestyle that sustains their well-being. By providing a fair wage, Darden will enhance its employees’ purchasing power and contribute to local economic vitality. In addition, we urge the company to increase its purchases of food from local and regional, small and mid-scale producers. By doing so, and paying fair prices, Darden will increase opportunities for farmers, strengthen the local economy, provide fresher food, attract more customers, protect precious farmland and support a more resilient food system.

As a leader in fast casual dining, Darden can and should be a leader in shifting how food is produced, including the conditions for those who produce and serve it. Ensuring that 20 percent of your food meets the Good Food Principles will be good for the health of Darden’s customers, the planet and its employees — the people who are the face of your company and vital to its success. Darden will also be rewarded by the millions of eaters who increasingly care about how their food was produced.

We stand ready to help Darden meet these goals and hope that you will give us the opportunity to meet with company representatives to further discuss these issues. Please contact Kari Hamerschlag, Senior Program Manager, Food and Technology Program at Friends of the Earth ([khamerschlag@foe.org](mailto:khamerschlag@foe.org) or 510-207-7257) by October 22, 2015 so that we may discuss Darden’s current policies and how your company can show its leadership in corporate sustainability. We would be happy to answer any questions you might have or provide further information on these issues.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to working with you and hope to be able to highlight your company as an industry leader.

Sincerely,

Kari Hamerschlag, Friends of the Earth  
Stephanie Feldstein, Center for Biological Diversity  
Lauren Jacobs, ROC-UNITED  
Dave Murphy, Food Democracy Now!  
Rebecca Spector, Center for Food Safety  
Alisa Gravitz, Green America  
Jose Oliva, Food Chain Worker Alliance  
Vani Hari, FoodBabe.com  
Pete Huff, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy  
Anim Steele, Real Food Challenge

cc:

Jeffrey C. Smith, Chairman of the Board  
Brandon Tidwell, Manager of Sustainability

Jessica Dinon, Manager of PR & Communications  
David George, President, Olive Garden

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