



# Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 692, Interview with Aaron Rimmler-Cohen

**Jasmin Singer:** Welcome to Our Hen House, Aaron.

**Aaron Rimmler-Cohen:** Hello. It's so wonderful to be here. Thank you for having me.

**Jasmin:** Yeah, absolutely. I'm completely thrilled to talk to you.

So, I have a lot that I want to cover with you. You're doing a lot of really cool work. So I'll start with this- animal advocacy organizations like Farm Sanctuary have always made it a centerpiece of their advocacy to end animal agriculture, starting with factory farming.

But obviously, we will still have to feed everyone, and while there may be theoretical arguments that this is going to be much easier and better once we end animal agriculture, we need more than theory. So you talk about advocacy as having to include building the good, which makes so much sense to me, and I love the way you put it.

So, in a nutshell, what is the good that needs to be built?

**Aaron:** Sure, and thank you for asking. I think it's, in a nutshell, how do we build just and sustainable food systems that can nourish everyone without harm?

And often, for us, building the good as a national nonprofit- and by the way, a national nonprofit that's historically white, historically wealthy- we have an obligation to shift resources to the community-driven change-makers that are building the good and (are) often building these more just sustainable plant-based food system supply chains that could one day nourish everyone for decades. And they've been doing (this) without support, without resources.

So our question is- how do we use our network, our membership, our rescue education, and advocacy approaches in order to support those community change-makers and in order to support policies to build the kind of plant-based food system supply chain that can nourish everyone and do so in ways that support animals, people, and the planet?

**Jasmin:** Oh, very well said. And so important.

So Farm Sanctuary is, of course, a sanctuary for animals. So why is a farmed animal sanctuary a good starting place for doing this kind of advocacy?

**Aaron:** Yes. And really, when you ask me that, I think back to Gene selling vegan hotdogs under the banner dedicated to ending factory farming, right?

Rescue has always been a part of an overarching strategy to do two things: number one, end factory farming and end animal agriculture at large, and number two, build the good. Build a space for individual transformation. And that individual transformation happens for the farmed animals who are taken out of this horrifying factory farming system and are able to live more free and fulfilled and vibrant lives on sanctuary.

And that transformation also happens for the individual visitors who come to sanctuary and who can experience a human-farmed animal relationship that's not extraction or exploitation but one of mutuality.

Gene always says, "Friends, not food." Right? And I think part of that is recognizing the emotional and thoughtfulness that comes with being a farmed animal and living as a farmed animal. And often, within the vegan movement, we talk about the immense harm that's caused not only to animals but also to people and the planet. But I think when a lot of people hear that word, harm, they think of physical harm.

And that physical harm is clear, and it happens all across the factory farming process. But there's also a kind of continuous horrifying harm that's happening to these social, thinking, emotional beings who are living in the worst imaginable conditions. And so I think that with sanctuary, we can start to recognize the power of our lives, and we can say our lives collectively- animal beings, human beings- and we can say, "Hey, the factory farming system and the factory food system for animals is horrifying, and it does not allow them to live the kind of lives that they deserve," and that the same thing is true for people.

The factory food system prevents the kind of fulfilling life that is deserved all across the food system supply chain, and that's for farmers, workers, for folks who are within our shared environment. You know, I'm here in North Carolina, and I'm well aware that not only are 9 million pigs my neighbors but also those pigs are situated in factory farming conditions that create horrible outcomes for the Black and Indigenous communities, primarily, who are living near those factory farms.

We can recognize the kind of lived experience at sanctuary that comes with factory farming and also the possibility of a more fulfilled life. And we can recognize that the harms that are caused are different across farmed animal beings and human beings. And we can also recognize that the harms caused by our factory food system are intersectional and compounding and often reflect and perpetuate systemic racism.

**Jasmin:** Yeah. Wow. There's a lot there.

So obviously, completely changing the way we raise food is a big job. So let's break down how to build the good into some of its parts. Let's talk about allies. Who do you believe will be part of this fight?

**Aaron:** I think we all have to, I think we have to realize that today's food systems work for nearly no one outside of a few multi-million dollar landowners and a few multi-billion dollar corporate investors and corporate consolidators.

That's who we've built today's food system for. And so we need to meet folks where they are, and we need to say, "Hey, if you care about food because of your health, if you care about food because of the sustainability of our planet- 33% of global greenhouse gas emissions come from the food system, but only 3% of public financing for climate change goes into food. So it's this underserved, underrepresented category that we need to uplift. Food matters whether you care about social justice or vibrant rural and urban economies, or animal wellbeing."

And I think we can care about all of those things. And I think that by meeting folks where they are and by saying, "Hey, how do we work together to build a food system that works better for all of us- animals, people, and the planet?" we can all be involved.

But then I think there's this question of who should take a leadership role. And when I think about who should take a leadership role, I think about our amazing

partners like the Eva Clayton Rural Food Institute in Henderson, North Carolina. They came out of the Green Rural Redevelopment Organization, which is this amazing Black-led micro-farming enterprise that connects public aggregated distribution. Basically, getting a bunch of farmers together who wouldn't normally have enough crops to be able to sell it to market, and getting those crops together and selling them to the local schools, selling them to the local hospitals, selling them to the local child and adult care food facilities.

And not only are they building health and wealth and racial justice, but also building a food system that's predominantly plant-based and moving towards entirely plant-based. And I think we have to recognize that in order to end animal agriculture, that's probably, if we're being realistic, not a two-year, not a five-year journey to ending animal agriculture.

I think about Gene again, it was 1986, and we've come a long way, but if we recognize that our ultimate goal is to end animal agriculture, we can pick up so many allies along so many steps of the way that can get us to food system supply chains that are not only 80, 90, 95, 99% plant-based, but also just and sustainable.

And so I think about folks like the Eva Clayton Rural Food Institute. I think about folks like the Sicangu Tribe in South Dakota, who we're learning from and supporting, and I think about the ways in which we knew how to nourish everyone in ways that were symbiotic with our shared environment and the ways in which that knowledge was lost.

And it was lost by people who looked like me and sounded like me. And we're going to learn from folks, predominantly, who don't look like me and sound like me. But what we can do as Farm Sanctuary and what we can do as allies is meet folks where they are, learn from them, support them, and build a platform where we can all work together for food system transformation that works for all of us.

**Jasmin:** So, let's stick on this subject for a moment. I told you before we started recording that I used to be the Campaigns Manager for Farm Sanctuary. It was more than 15 years ago at this point, I think. And I worked out of New York City. I had some issues with these coalition-building endeavors. I had some issues when people literally brought to the table animal products while I was representing Farm Sanctuary.

It has traditionally been very hard for vegan organizations such as Farm Sanctuary to find common ground with advocates for small, sustainable

agriculture that wants to include animal agriculture. Do you agree, and if so, what is your approach to that difficulty?

**Aaron:** Absolutely. It's difficult, but also, I think so much has changed over the last decade, and it's changed in ways that mean that not only do folks want us at the table, but they're also much more appreciative of our compassion, our kindness, and our values.

I think that we are in a fundamentally different place. Whether you wanna call it an animal-centered or a plant-based or a vegan movement, whatever you want to embrace as your identity, we are wanted at the table more than ever before. And I think what they want from us is, number one, for us to never forsake our own values, right?

I tell them our long-term goal is to end animal agriculture, and our mission statement is to pursue bold solutions to end animal agriculture and foster just and compassionate vegan living. That's who we are. And if you can respect that, we can respect who you are and what you're trying to do for your community, and what you're trying to do to build good for the food system that you see as nourishing folks without harm. And I think what's amazing and what I'm seeing is when you get in the room with them, and you say, "let's start with a foundation of respect, and let's start with shared priorities and recognize how we might be able to accomplish some wonderful things by working together."

If you start with that conversation, they get much more vegan, much more animal-centered, and much more plant-based over time. And so they might bring an animal product to that first meeting, but by the fourth, they're not. And by the sixth, they're talking about how amazing the plant-based vegan ravioli thing that they had was, and to see that kind of transformation requires being in the room, and it requires starting with respect.

And I understand how difficult it can be for us as vegans to not center the emotionality that we feel and that we rightfully feel. But I think that in order to move towards the kinds of systemic change that we need to end animal agriculture, we have to embrace that "meet you where are" approach that Gene always talks about.

**Jasmin:** Totally agree, completely.

So, switching gears just a bit, subsidies are, you know, as we all know, they're a huge part of the problem of keeping factory farms in business. So can you first talk about the big commodity subsidies and how they work?

**Aaron:** Yes. So the US invests tremendous resources into our food systems, and most of them support, like I said, the billionaire investors and the millionaire landlords who own giant tracks of land in the Midwest and the mountain west.

And actually, the way in which our subsidy system works has changed a couple of times over the last. But basically, what you need to know is they're gonna help you on the front end to get loans that are subsidized by the public. And that means that they get really cheap debt to buy more land to expand, to industrialize even further.

And then they get guaranteed profits through essentially revenue-based insurance. And what revenue-based insurance is, the government, or the USDA's phrase for "if you're not making a certain level of profits this year, we'll take care of you." And we only give it to basically corn and soy farmers. There's technically corn, soy, wheat, sorghum, cotton, sugar, those kinds of big commodities, but it's basically corn and soy.

And why are we giving it to corn and soy? It's not the corn and soy that you're eating, for the most part, in the supermarkets. It's feed, it's fuel, and it's supporting industrial inputs for foreign countries. That's what we're subsidizing, and we're subsidizing it through cheap credit and through guaranteeing profits, and we do it for the industrial inputs that run our global food system, but we don't do it for the fruits and vegetables that actually nourish people.

**Jasmin:** Do you have hope there, by the way? My book that came out a couple of years ago was called *The VegNews Guide to Being a Fabulous Vegan*, and when I was doing the chapter on the subsidies, I was like, "I don't know man. This is big." Do you have hope?

**Aaron:** So I look at the subsidies in a slightly different way. I think that the commodity crop and the big industry subsidies that we always talk about and that I just ran through are gonna be the last thing that fall.

It's gonna be the last thing that kind of leads to the collapse of factory farming. I think the first thing that we can do in the meantime is...set aside how horrible all of that programming is for just a second. Set aside the credit and loan subsidies for a second, and 85% of our federal food investments are actually nutrition subsidies, school food service, and different other kinds of conservation services that I think can be shifted to better support food that nourishes people and supply chains that work for animals, people and the planet.



For example, those revenue-based subsidies, or if you look at the Environmental Working Group, how much you're spending in a given year via the US taxpayer dollar, it's somewhere between \$10 billion and \$25 billion a year. And if it's a particularly bad year because of the weather or because of Trump's trade war, it might be \$45 billion a year, but we spend \$30 billion a year on our school food and associated child and adult care feeding services, and we spend 70 to, depending on the economic conditions of the country, 100-110 billion a year on SNAP, on nutrition assistance. And we can use those huge pots of money to incentivize plants and plant-based food purchasing, processing, and production that can build the supply chains that can nourish everyone.

And then once we've got those big robust plant and plant-based food system supply chains that are nourishing more people, that are more community-driven, that are more resilient, then we can go, and we can say, "We don't need these commodity subsidies anymore. Get rid of all of them." And then, at that point, I think we have a political argument that says we can nourish everyone.

And by the way, it's amazing, right? We do these commodity subsidies because big ag says they're feeding the world. This Farm Bill- that needs to be the number one lie that we take down, right? We can't even feed our own communities. I care about getting to a world that is 100% plant-based, but I think the vast majority of people in the United States of America think we should be building food systems that nourish everyone.

**Jasmin:** Mm-hmm. Alternative funding. I really like it. That does give me hope. I'm not given hope often, so thank you. Aaron.

Speaking of your vision, your vision includes a more community-focused approach to food infrastructure. You touched on that a bit, but can you talk a little bit about why that would lead to less reliance on animal agriculture?

**Aaron:** Yeah, absolutely. I think we first have to just look at the communities that are doing this kind of community food infrastructure work. So Boulder, Colorado, for example, built a kitchen for its public schools and it dramatically increased the amount of plants and plant-based food that went into the schools.

And also, for the animal product that it had, it prioritized animal welfare. It's one of the only schools in the country to actually prioritize animal welfare in its purchasing. So obviously, that's not enough, right? We wanna get to a place that's a hundred percent plant-based, but in a world where we have municipalities prioritizing animal welfare as a stated priority, that's a world that can lead to real shared progress for everyone.

And that's happening not just in Boulder, Colorado, which is, let's say, quite progressive. It's also happened in Missoula, Montana, and Pittsburgh and in towns here in North Carolina and all across the country. It's a scalable model, and the way it works is it provides a purchasing point for plants and plant-based foods, right?

We just got done talking about how plants and plant-based foods don't get all of the subsidies that come from the federal government. So what this does is it provides an anchor point for purchasing for farmers who are growing those plants and plant-based foods, and it also provides a processing point because what a lot of folks don't realize is that you might be getting sweet potatoes that were grown three miles away from your house, but those sweet potatoes might have been processed 300 miles from the farm.

So that's still 600 miles of food travel for those sweet potatoes. And it makes no sense, and it's because we don't have the kinds of supply chains that can support plants and plant-based foods. So when we think about community food infrastructure, like kitchens for schools, like food hubs connected with local processing facilities, what we're doing is we're building the supply chains that can support plants and plant-based foods that can nourish everybody without harm to animals, people, or the planet.

**Jasmin:** Okay. So to summarize those points that you recently made, what support do you want to see the federal government give for this shift?

**Aaron:** Yeah, three things. Number one, we can pass Susan Collins School Food Modernization Act. It's a Republican bill. It's a great bill. It's a good start. Number two, we can give schools and community-based organizations access to the kind of subsidized credit that we give all the industrial farmers.

So that means municipal bonds that are cheaper for food infrastructure, and that also means social impact bonds to achieve the kind of food system transformation outcomes that we want to see in the world. Those kinds of social impact bonds are working in child services and carceral services, in terms of reducing recidivism, not in terms of actually getting out of our carceral complex, so that's a different conversation.

Let's give communities the long-term support that they need to build this infrastructure. And that means loans, and that means the kind of grants that exist in Susan Collins's School Food Modernization Act.



**Jasmin:** Okay. And then, so that was my second question, which is, just so that we're totally clear, to summarize the role that school food has in this shift.

**Aaron:** Yeah, so school food is something that we spend tremendous money on at the federal level, but we all have choices at the state and local level about how we can make those procurement choices. And so we can do two things. We can give schools and communities the money that they need to build the infrastructure to actually process plants and plant-based foods.

And we can also incentivize plants and plant-based foods. So, take a look at Michigan. They're doing an amazing program where they subsidize in-state fruits, vegetables, and legumes. So 10 cents a meal for Michigan farmers. If that's a nationwide policy, schools have better incentives to buy local, fresh produce and also legumes as a replacement for protein.

And that passed in Michigan with Farm Bureau support, by the way.

**Jasmin:** Oh, interesting. So it's possible. Everything you're saying is possible. You're not just like a philosopher who's like, "Maybe we could do this if that happened."

**Aaron:** No, I mean, I cited a Republican bill, a Farm Bureau policy in Michigan, and a really wonky loan proposal.

And I think that's the thing that we need to kind of recognize- is that we can fight against factory farming, but to actually start shifting resources to build the plants and plant-based food system supply chains that we need, it's gonna take kind of wonky insider sounding policies to start shifting money and start shifting resources to go where it needs to go to work for everybody.

**Jasmin:** So what about the Healthy Future Students and Earth Pilot Program Act? I know that Farm Sanctuary is supporting that bill. What is it?

**Aaron:** Yeah, it's a beautiful bill, and I think that it's exactly the kind of pilot program that, if scaled, could also lead to anchoring plants and plant-based foods as an option for every child in America.

So basically, what it does is it provides money to start scaling for 50 schools across the country, I believe was the last version of the bill, to provide plants and plant-based foods as an option for any student who asks for it. And it's an amazing bill because it not only provides grant money, but it also provides support for the kinds of infrastructure needs that we were just talking about.

And I think, by the way, it's also a wonderful way to organize with farmer, environment, justice-centered organizations who recognize school food as an important priority for them as well.

**Jasmin:** Excellent. How would you keep it plant-based?

**Aaron:** So the Healthy Future Students and Earth Pilot Program Act is an exclusively plant-based program.

The meals are required, and I think that's the difference between the Michigan policy, which is like a 10-cent incentive, and it doesn't require every meal to be fully plant and plant-based. So that's passable in the short term. And then the Healthy Future Student and Earth Pilot Program Act, that's required to be plant and plant-based. And that's, I think, a beautiful long-term solution.

**Jasmin:** So when is the next Farm Bill, and what are you advocating for?

**Aaron:** Absolutely. So the Farm Bill is this year. It happens every five years. And basically, the way to think about it is it's 85% nutrition assistance and then 15% factory farm bailout. And so we're saying, number one, stop the factory farm bailout. Pass Earl Blumenauer, Cory Booker, and Chellie Pingree's Food and Farm Act. It's a great alternative.

In 2017, Friends of the Earth promoted at ASPCA called it the most important animal-centered piece of legislation that year. The Food and Farm Act is a great alternative to the Farm Bill. And then, number two, let's build fruit and vegetable incentives into SNAP purchases for everybody.

So if we know that 85% of the Farm Bill is SNAP, is nutrition assistance, why shouldn't every person in the country, no matter where they shop, whether it's a farmer's market or a grocery store, get 30 cents cash back for dried, fresh, frozen fruit and vegetable purchases? It's a common-sense policy. It scales. A Massachusetts pilot worked in 2010.

The Biden administration just said fruits and vegetable incentives are his number one priority. I say we hold his feet to the fire on that one and give fresh, dried, frozen fruit and vegetable incentives to every person on SNAP in the country, whether they're close to a farmer's market or not.

**Jasmin:** Totally. And by the way, I am completely on board, obviously, with the idea that plant agriculture should replace animal agriculture. I mean, bring it on. But, can you explain why you think that in order to achieve that, we should

favor small farms over big, perhaps corporate farms? Isn't big potentially more efficient?

**Aaron:** Sure. So I think we do need a mixed approach. So I would never say that we need an exclusively community-driven food system, right? We had an agricultural system in the late 19th century and early 20th century where 50% of people were farmers- we're not going to go back to that. But number one, currently, the industrial crop production that happens in the United States causes immense harm to farm workers and immense harm to our environment.

And we need to be okay saying that crop production today isn't perfect. That doesn't mean that you're not doing immense good by going vegan. That doesn't mean that you're not doing the least harm practical by being vegan. It just means that we need systems change. And there are certain things that we can do through our individual purchasing habits, and there are certain things that we can do by organizing together. Building a food system where the crops are grown, and the money flows back into the community a little bit more is moving an extremely consolidated and extremely industrialized system back to a more balanced one.

So I think that's how I think about it.

**Jasmin:** Okay. That makes sense. And what are the most important crops that need to be grown right now to support a transition to a healthier food system?

**Aaron:** Yeah, so I think that there are two sets of crops. There are the crops that nourish people directly- so that's fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains- that are going to nourish people and aren't currently incentivized.

And then there's the kind of inputs that can support plant-based meats. And we haven't talked about plant-based meats yet, but I do think if we just step back and say, "Hey, what are all of the different opportunities that we have to meet folks where they are and to start shifting preferences?" Plant-based meats could be in the future potentially useful, but also, if we step back and say, "What are our big strategies for getting to an environmentally sustainable decarbonized future?" We have two strategies in this country. Number one, electrify everything, and number two, create carbon sinks. And plant-based meat production is essentially the electrification of meat production.

It fits in perfectly with what the environmental advocates want. And by the way, on the carbon sink, we don't need to wait for direct air capture. If we set aside 10% of US farmland in this country to support agroforestry, that would sink

30% of all US greenhouse gas emissions. Not 30% of food system emissions, 30% of all US greenhouse gas emissions by setting aside 10% of US farmland for agroforestry.

So the food system can be this amazing carbon sink getting us to a decarbonized future. And we need to grow crops that can serve as inputs to plant-based meats in that way. In addition to the fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains you might be thinking about.

**Jasmin:** I love that. I just want you to know that I want the last 30 seconds of our conversation to play on repeat in my house.

So I was just going to ask you how climate change enters into this conversation, but you did sort of just cover it. Is there anything else you wanna add about that?

**Aaron:** Yeah, just that our environmental crises are both local and global, right? Factory farming is a problem, not just because it's accelerating climate change but also because it's poisoning people's water and poisoning people's air, causing immense harm to people, and often in ways that reflect and perpetuate structural racism.

And whether it's the Des Moines Waterworks suing the National Pork Producers for what they're doing to their rivers and streams or what's happening here in North Carolina. The environmental crises that are caused by factory farming are about water and air, and soil in addition to climate. And we need to be thinking about it as such if we want to build allies and meet folks where they are.

**Jasmin:** What is the Food System Shift Trust?

**Aaron:** Yes. So this is, I think, both a short-term pilot project and a long-term idea. So the short-term pilot project is number one; how can we support great community-driven organizations that can potentially start to scale these more just sustainable plant-based food system supply chains?

How can we support them, and how can we learn from them? And so the Eva Clayton Rural Food Institute in Henderson, North Carolina, is one of those partners, the Sicangu Community Development Corporation, which represents the Sicangu Tribe in South Dakota on the Rosebud Reservation, is another partner.

And so right now, what we're doing is shifting monetary resources and understanding how we could start to build both community-driven and more national food system supply chains around their members and around their production approaches. And then number two, I think that over the long term, we need, as vegans, a vehicle to not just invest our money as consumers but to invest our money ethically as investors.

Usually, we typically say like, “Oh, I'll put it into my 401K or my index fund, and I'll forget about it.” And what we forget when we do that is we're reinvesting in the entire US economy, which often means reflecting and perpetuating all of the harms that come with, in particular, food production in the United States.

And so what we're trying to do with this Food Systems Shift Trust is build a real estate investment trust component that is going to allow vegans two years from now, three years from now, all across the country to say, “Hey, 5% of my investment savings I want to go into this trust that's going to help transition land ownership and transition land use to be just sustainable and plant-based.”

**Jasmin:** I love that. Yeah, I think also it can embolden activists. It can embolden vegans to be able to feel like we can do something. So would the land held by the trust be completely free of animal agriculture?

**Aaron:** Yes. So I think we're still working out exactly how the details of a food system trust could work, and also, who owns land and who possesses land is a question of both our food system supply chain outcome goals and also questions of justice.

So, for example, we're not requiring that everything that the Sicangu Tribe does within their community be fully plant and plant-based. That would not be respecting their cultural heritage, would not be respecting their food sovereignty. But what we do request is that any of our resources and any of our support only support plant and plant-based food. That's how we've started to build this sort of common ground in a technical way.

But we actually haven't gotten to the point where we're buying land or shifting land. And one of the tools that we've been building out in a different capacity is called a compassion easement. And so when you think about what Gene did when he started the sanctuary movement is create all of these amazing, you know, couple hundred, at least across the country now, facilities to house farmed animals, which is a beautiful thing within the paradigm of mutuality and respect. But what we realized was, if you don't have a good succession plan and

if you just said, “Hey, how should this land be used?” The land could be sold to future animal agriculture farmers, and that is the last thing we want.

So one of the tools that we've been designing is called a compassion easement that would prevent animal agriculture or the exploitation of animals on the land in perpetuity in a way that's legally enforceable. And so we can apply that on our own land because obviously those are our own values, and we can test that with other sanctuaries across the country.

And I think, ultimately, we can get to a place where we are fully respecting our values of having a fully plant-based vegan food system supply chain, even as we're working with partners who might be 80, 90, 95% of the way there.

**Jasmin:** So you've talked in this context about Farm Sanctuary achieving SHIFT, i.e., sustainable, healthy, interconnected, frontline-led transformation.

Why is there nothing specifically about animals within those stated goals?

**Aaron:** I so appreciate this question, and I think when we developed the "food system shift approach," we were doing it within the banner of our mission statement, which was to pursue bold solutions to end animal agriculture and foster just and compassionate vegan living.

So in some ways, to me, the SHIFT approach is a description of a process, and that process will never include animal exploitation. I think part of what the SHIFT approach does is it also starts to get at an act of shifting financial resources, social resources, political resources away from the national nonprofits who have typically fundraised for self-perpetuation as much as for impact to support(ing) the community-based organizations that are actually building the just sustainable plant-based food system supply chains that can one day nourish everyone.

**Jasmin:** So, when will it launch?

**Aaron:** So the pilot projects have already launched. You're hearing this in April. So that means we are four, four and a half months in pilot partnerships. We've shifted resources. We're learning how they're being used already. We've seen incredible outcomes. So, for example, we provided seed funding to the Eva Clayton Rural Food Institute.

They had their kickoff bringing together more than 200 farmer, funder, worker, environment, justice, community-driven organizations, and animal-centered



organizations, all together under one roof to talk about how can we accomplish three goals: sustainable farmer opportunity, land justice, and nutritional security.

And they framed all of that, plants and plant-based foods, as critical means to accomplish those shared ends. If I didn't know better if I were listening, I would think this is a collection of vegans talking about vegan proposals. But I think the fact that they're not embracing necessarily the label as a vegan or a plant-based organization. You know, if you're building towards those outcomes, I think that we should be thrilled by that, and we should be thrilled that they wanna partner with us. And I am, and I'm so grateful for their work and to be able to learn from them.

**Jasmin:** So do you feel like it's easy to relate those topics that you mentioned at the round table, like universal nutritional security and sustainable farm opportunity, to a shift to plant-based agriculture? Is that an organic, so to speak, hahaha, shift?

**Aaron:** Yeah, absolutely. And I have to give amazing credit to Alexandra Bookis, our Senior Manager of US Government Affairs, who's hosted two events now on Capitol Hill, attracting more than a hundred congressional staffers.

The second event was sponsored by the ranking member of the rules committee, representative Jim McGovern and the topics were universal nutritional security and sustainable farmer opportunity. Right? These are shared priorities, but when you went around the room, and you listen to the national advocacy organizations like Farm Action, Center for Biological Diversity, the local community organizations like Grow and the Corbin Hill Food Project, and even the congressional representatives and even the USDA, there was incredible recognition across the board that plants and plant-based foods represent critical means to achieve these shared goals.

And I don't think we're gonna convince the USDA tomorrow that a plant-based food system should be an end in and of itself, even though you and I completely agree that it should be. But I think we absolutely can convince them that plants and plant-based foods are critical to getting them where they say they want to go. And if we just take them at their word and we hold them accountable to that, we can make so much progress.

**Jasmin:** So then, what are next steps?

**Aaron:** Yeah, so next steps are supporting Earl Blumenauer's Food and Farm Act.

By the time that this has come out, we will have hosted another big, much more public-facing Capitol Hill event where we are bringing together that big tent coalition, where we're bringing together the press, where we're making what I'm sure has felt at times like a difficult conversation because we're talking about a lot of policy concepts and a lot of big theories.

But at the end of the day, there are two messages that I want folks to sort of walk away with. This year's Farm Bill is around the Food and Farm Act and around the event we do with Blumenauer, Booker, and Chellie Pingree's office, and that's number one- that our lives in today's factory food system are harmed and made worse off in so many ways by the Farm Bill. And "our lives" is animal beings, farmed animal beings, and human beings.

And number two- we can work together to build the good. We can work together to build food system supply chains that work for animals, people, and the planet. And we have all the resources that we need to do so; we're just misusing them.

And that misuse hurts animals, people, and the planet. And so, next steps are, number one, hosting that kind of more public-facing messaging event that starts to represent this broader big tent coalition. And number two, a bunch of very specific wonky campaign-y things like the cashback on SNAP, 30 cents for fruits and vegetable purchases. If you're on SNAP you get cash back for healthy choices.

Number two, the GAO reports, the government accountability office reports that we're working with Representative Ro Khanna's office to shine a light on all of the different environmental harms that come from the current food system. And working with the USDA, local state governments, civic sector partners, and anyone and everyone to, number one, recognize shared priorities and, number two, start thinking critically about how we can use the resources that we already have access to (in order) to build the food system supply chains that we want, that can work better for all of us.

**Jasmin:** Okay. Amazing. I like the brass tacks guide for people listening to this.

Like, here's what we can do about it. I don't always get that from people I'm interviewing, sometimes, it's just these sort of far-off concepts, and I appreciate how tangible this feels.

So I have one more question for you before we get into our bonus content for our lucky flock members.

You recently went from Senior Future Food Systems Manager to Senior Director of Advocacy at Farm Sanctuary. What does this change entail, and how much will you be involved in the Future Food Systems project?

**Aaron:** Yes, so I'm thrilled by the transition, and I'm so grateful to Gene and to the organization and frankly to the wider movement. To be able to be a professional doing this work in this role is dream come true in so many ways, and I'm so grateful and humbled by the opportunity, and I think part of what we're doing is recognizing that we don't have two different advocacy agendas. We don't have an agenda to end animal agriculture and a food system agenda. We are going to end animal agriculture through a just and sustainable food system transformation. We have one advocacy agenda for animals, people, and the planet.

And yes, there are different priorities, and certain bills might prioritize certain outcomes more than others. But it's a complimentary, cohesive, unified framework where we can meet folks where they are, and we can shift resources to support food systems that work for everyone, and we can also, at the same time, do even better to ground our animal-centered advocacy in the stories of sanctuary.

When I think about Yoshi, a chicken person resident who is going through the amazing research, which by the way, is animal-centered and agency-centered happening at Farm Sanctuary. This totally radical paradigm-shifting approach to research that is amazing, and it's getting at that inner social life and that full life and emotional life that we were talking about of the residents earlier. And when I think about Yoshi's experience, and then I think about what's happening in Hawaii to pass cage-free eggs, or when I think about what's happening with the avian influenza epidemic/pandemic, and the ways in which that threatens Yoshi's flock, his friends, his neighbors, the way in which the entire factory food system creates so much harm for Yoshi as an individual, I think that we can do so much to ground our animal-centered advocacy and frankly, our food system's advocacy in that sanctuary ethos of building the good and of really walking the walk.

And when I think about the trust, by the way, that's the way I think about it. In the same way that sanctuary is walking the walk for animal-centered advocacy. The trust is walking the walk for our food system advocacy.

**Jasmin:** Aaron, thank you so much for all of this. Can you tell our listeners how they can find you online and support your efforts?

**Aaron:** Yes, it should be hopefully easy. You can follow Farm Sanctuary @FarmSanctuary on all of the different social media. I am, unfortunately, secretly an 85-year-old and don't really do the social media scene. So follow Farm Sanctuary, and you'll see me there.

**Jasmin:** I know some 85-year-olds who do the social media scene. I'm just saying...

**Aaron:** Oh my God! No, you're right. That was so ageist of me.

**Jasmin:** Totally ageist! Totally.

**Aaron:** No, it was bad. No, it was. It was. \*Jasmin laughs\*

I'm glad you called me on it.

Thank you, and I'm so excited for this flock feature!

**Jasmin:** I'm so excited too. So if you're a flock member, be sure to tune in on Tuesday. And Aaron, thank you again for all that you're doing to change the world for animals. We so appreciate you.

**Aaron:** Thank you so much for having me.