

# The True Cost of Food

**Purpose:** Students will define mono-cropping, federal subsidies, diversity, and locally grown foods, explain the difference between cheap and affordable foods and identify 3 hidden costs in food that is grown with less sustainable methods.

**Duration:** 30-40 minutes

**Materials:** 10 pieces of large paper (flip-chart size) Markers, tape, The Sierra Club's True Cost of Food video ([www.truecostoffood.org](http://www.truecostoffood.org)), media player and screen.

**Procedure:** 1. Prepare the 10 flip-chart pages before the presentation, by writing each of the words and symbols below on 1 page:

Mono-cropping + Subsidized Factory Farmed Food = "Cheap" Food

Diversity + Fresh Locally Produced Food = "Affordable" Food

Before showing the film, tell the students that they will need to understand a few terms that will be mentioned in the video. Tell them you will show them two word equations that will prepare them to understand these new concepts.

- a. On a wall on the left hand side of the room, tape up the page that says "MONOCROPPING". • Ask if any students know what this term means. • Then explain: It means mass-producing 1 crop, which can lead to more "pest" problems and the need to use more pesticides, depletes soils, and produce less disease resistant plants. Less healthy plants can mean poor quality, taste and nutrition.
- b. On a wall on the right side of the room, tape up the page that says "DIVERSITY". • Ask if any students know what this term means. • Then explain: In this case, it means planting various crops or raising a variety of animals in an area to minimize the impact of any one species or variety on the environment, as well as the ability for a disease or pest to effect an entire crop. Food that is raised in a healthy environment will require minimal or no antibiotic or pesticide use, and produces food that is healthier for us.
- c. On the left wall, after ""MONOCROPPING", tape up the "+" and then the "SUBSIDIES" page. • Ask if any students know what the term "SUBSIDIZED" means. • Then explain: Subsidies are money given to farmers by the government (which comes from our taxes) to decrease the cost to consumers and increase the supply of food. In 2000, the U.S. food supply provided 3,800 calories per person per day. The average American consumed 2,700 calories per day, creating an overabundance of food that is often poorly managed and wasted. (Source: Center for Sustainable Systems, University of Michigan, [www.css.snre.umich.edu/css\\_doc/CSS01-o6.pdf](http://www.css.snre.umich.edu/css_doc/CSS01-o6.pdf)) • Ask if anyone knows what a "FACTORY FARM" is. • Then explain it is where large quantities of food are produced in a small space, which can lead to disease and pollution.

d. On the right wall, after "DIVERSITY", tape up the "+" and then the "FRESH, LOCALLY PRODUCED FOOD" pages • Ask if any students know what this term means. • Then explain: Food that is distributed within the local economy instead of being shipped thousands of miles uses far less fuel, and the less time between harvesting and eating it, the more flavorful and nutritious it will be. Buying locally also supports the farmers and your local economy, and ensures that you will have access to good food in your community in the future.

e. On the left wall, tape up the "=" and then the "Cheap Food" pages. • Ask if any students know what this term means. • Then explain: "Cheap" food will appear to cost less at the check-out, but there are more hidden costs that we do pay for in our taxes, environmental damage and clean-up, and perhaps even a greater need for healthcare to deal with these effects

f. On the right wall, tape up the "=" and then the "Affordable Food" pages. • Ask if any students know what this term means. • Then explain: "Affordable" food is food with very few hidden costs. There is less damage to the environment, farmers make a decent living and can continue farming, food is more nutritious and tastes better. We know the real cost to produce the food we eat and we choose to pay these costs up front instead of fooling ourselves into thinking the "cheap" food is really less expensive.

3. Play the 15-minute film (recommend ending when then family drives away from the farmer's market, to avoid mixed messages with alcohol consumption at dinner table in last scene).

4. Optional: If there is time at the end of the film, there are many great follow-up questions that can be pulled from the discussion guide for this film, downloadable for free at:  
[www.truecostoffood.org/discussionguide.pdf](http://www.truecostoffood.org/discussionguide.pdf)