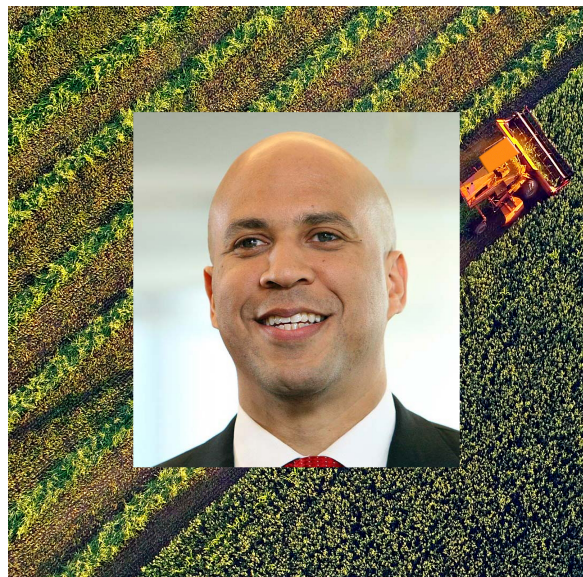


# Cory Booker: Taking on Big Ag & Going Big on Climate

<https://www.climateone.org/audio/cory-booker-taking-big-ag-going-big-climate>

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**Greg Dalton:** This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton.

**Ariana Brocious:** And I'm Ariana Brocious.

**Greg Dalton:** Often the climate conversation has been about tailpipes and smokestacks. But it's not all about how we move or how we produce energy. One of the big overlooked levers is what we eat.

**Ariana Brocious:** Our food system accounts for [one third](#) of human caused emissions. There are many factors at play there, but raising meat and dairy is a big part of it.

**Greg Dalton:** and while we're electrifying transportation and building solar and wind farms, not as much is being done to reduce emissions from the food system.

**Ariana Brocious:** And while addressing climate can feel daunting, this is one area where I personally feel I have some agency. I've been a vegetarian for about 20 years, and while I know that my diet alone won't make a difference, it makes me feel like I'm living aligned with my climate values. And while I've never been one to convince others how they should eat, I do know that if more Americans ate less meat and dairy on a large scale, we could begin to impact these huge systems.

**Greg Dalton:** And it's not just climate issues, the food system hits about every issue we care about: equity, compassion, justice.

**Ariana Brocious:** That's what motivated Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey to get on the Agriculture Committee - because he finds all the issues important to him wrapped up in our

agricultural system.

**Cory Booker:** When we started really looking at our food system, I was stunned to realize how savagely broken it is.

**Greg Dalton:** Our food system is broken.

**Ariana Brocious:** And just like so many other areas of our economy, agriculture is becoming dominated by fewer and fewer companies, who wield most of the power and receive most of the benefits. Row crop farmers - who grow soy, corn, etc - are incentivized to amass larger and larger farms to make a profit, and the mechanization of agriculture has dramatically reduced the number of people who make a living from agriculture in the last few decades.

**Greg Dalton:** And as power becomes more concentrated, it tends to lack empathy.

**Ariana Brocious:** And there's a lot of places where that lack of empathy comes through.

**Greg Dalton:** I recently had a conversation with Senator Booker live at the Commonwealth Club of California. He is a gifted storyteller, and started the conversation with a story that surprised many in the audience.

**Cory Booker:** I always try to tell stories, where histories replete our lives or replete with the small actions of individuals making big changes. I always tell people the quick story about a white guy sitting on a couch in New Jersey watching TV and seeing the crisis on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. And he is so disturbed by these people being beaten with billy clubs and gas that he decides to go to Alabama then laughs because he can't afford a plane ticket not to mention to close his business. All he says, well, I'm gonna give an hour a week of pro bono work to a civil rights organization in New Jersey. And finds us one call the Fair Housing Council works with them over the years to design these test cases where you send a black couple look at a house there, turned away, and a white couple comes. Five years later after they get good at it, they amazingly he says he gets a case file where black family coming up in the South looking for communities with great public schools and is turned away from housing. They set up the sting operation and the black couple's told the house is sold; the white couple put a bid on the house for the black family. Bid is accepted, papers are drawn up. On the day of the closing the white couple doesn't show up, the lawyer and the black man does. They get attacked in the real estate agent's office. Real estate agent punches the lawyer and sics a dog on the black guy. But after a lot of legal rigmarole the black family in 1969 moves into the home, has this incredible community, incredible public schools. And 41 years later, the baby in that family becomes America's fourth black person ever popularly elected in the United State Senate, me.

And so, a lot of people underestimate what a small action on big issues can actually do when it ripples out in time and space. So, don't discount your power. The most common way people give up their power is not realized that they have it in the first place. And even you can't do everything about an issue, do something today that you didn't do yesterday. Do something this year that you didn't do last year to be a part of a larger movement for change when it comes to climate.

**Greg Dalton:** And food is one area where climate can often seem very abstract like power plants and things remote from people. But food is a place where people, if you're fortunate you can vote three times a day with your fork. I didn't know that agriculture is the third largest industry in New Jersey. So, talk about food and climate and what brought you to be so passionate about food.

**Cory Booker:** Well, on the point we're making before a lot of it is our, you know, W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* talks about the tragedy of men, forgive the genderize language, but the

tragedy of humanity is that we know so little about each other. And lot of things allow injustice to fester is not being focused on learning about your neighbor, learning about your fellow person. And that means that we often get involved in these very impersonal systems that sustain and perpetuate injustices. Like I always say that I did not know the ills of fast fashion, for example. And I bought t-shirts, wore things just never put my thought into wait a minute, who made the shoes I'm wearing. What were the providence of the clothing I'm wearing and how am I and my dollars and my ignorance participating in systems that are pushing injustice on the individuals who are making them just as on our environment? And so, for me, I never imagined 10 years ago when I got to the United States Senate that I would be battling not really battling but having to ask and maneuver myself to get on to the agricultural committee. I just never thought I would do it. And I did it because one of my great staff members came up to me and said every issue you care about, all the issues you care about and have been working on intersect within our food system. And the more I listened, at first, I laughed at him, then I joined him, which is often the process. But I thought you're insane why do I want to sit on the ag committee for. But when we started really looking at our food system, I was stunned to realize how savagely broken it is. And the only people that really works for are these big multinational corporations that more and more controlling everything that we eat. It is a system that's broken for farmers. If you interview farmers and majority of American farmers are actually small farmers, but the system does not support them. They have higher suicide rates they're going out of business at alarming rates. There is mass consolidation of farms. It's broken for farmworkers. I was challenged by the United Farm Workers Association to go out and work on a farm. I was stunned that number one how difficult the work it was. But what was more stunning to me besides the fact that I was sore for days and days afterwards was just having conversations with the farmworkers about sexual harassment, wage theft. It's broken for our ecology what we prioritize and emphasize and incentivize is a farm system that poisons our lands, poisons our rivers and streams causes flooding even though farmers are great stewards of the land they are pushed into a system that often is very destructive. It's broken for our environment, climate change issues. It's broken for the end-user. I give this last example of how Americans are trapped in this unjust system because their government is subsidizing all the food to make a six while one party government tells you half of your diet should be fresh fruits and vegetables. Less than 10% of our accepts these go to that.

And so, kids in San Francisco or in Oakland can walk into a corner store and find a Twinkie product cheaper than an apple not because of the free market, but because government has decided that we're gonna cheapen the happy meal we're gonna cheapen the Twinkie and all the other stuff that we want you to eat we're gonna make more expensive, harder to access and drive rates of disease that most Americans should be stunned by. We live in a nation right now where one out of three of our government dollars. Your tax dollars is being spent on healthcare. And to pay for healthcare with the majority of the things we're paying for are preventable diseases. The majority of them are diet-related diseases. So, this food system is broken for everybody, but mostly it's broken for all of us. Because we are seeing in America diabetes rates, hypertension, all of these rates of illness and disease and suffering spiking up. And our government is fueling that because they're subsidizing the fast food or the hyper processed foods and then we're paying for it again on Medicaid, Medicare and health care benefits. There is a way out of this broken system. And that's one of the reasons why we moved to the ag committee start finding common sense, win-win solutions to get America out of this sickness, illness, economic injustice, environmental injustice, climate fueling injustice as well as injustice for American farmers.

**Greg Dalton:** Big ag makes us sick and big farmers there to sell us pills when we get sick.

**Cory Booker:** Yes.

**Greg Dalton:** Well, we're at this moment now where talking about this food system. The farm bill

comes up every five years. It is happening now. This is a big unwieldy thing. What would you like to see in the farm bill to make both a healthier people and a healthier planet? There's been some talk about climate smart agriculture getting into the farm bill. It's a big massive thing. What would you like to see in it?

**Cory Booker:** Well, I want to set the stage a little bit. So, my team has put out a suite of bills often endorsed by the Farmers Union by healthcare groups by environmental groups to deal with our food system. Whole suite, involves everything from composting to food waste to big factory farms, CAFOs, to the overuse of antibiotics on our food system. We decided to put up a whole bunch of bills that can point to the way out. And we want to show folks that it doesn't have to be this way and there are smart policy solutions that can do something about it. More than this, though, we wanted to go a little deeper and start talking about unfortunately, the power of big ag in Washington. People often think that the oil industry is one of the most powerful lobbyists. I would say that actually big food is more powerful because of their deep influence in the way we draw our policy up on both sides of the aisle. So, simply it's something that should not be controversial should be based on science like nutrition standards or school lunch programs become these hotbeds of fights for folks that want to continue to push unhealthy food, deeply sugar filled processed foods and we're aware of that. So, here's this farm bill as you said that rolls in every five years. We have tried to put out bills about the way to go. And what we're trying to do now is have some realpolitik on one hand about what knobs can we turn in this farm bill that could get us closer to some of our ambitious goals for health, well-being, climate change, and more. But at the same time what I think is lacking in every great movement is just that courageous empathy we started with. You know I look at I'm a product of civil rights activist parents who would tell me that the civil rights movement wasn't a movement of black people for black rights. It was a conscious movement of creating a movement based on common ideals and our common values. But the biggest obstacle was getting people to understand the crisis in our country that they were participating in and that their silence, inaction was contributing to. So, the great thing about these incredible artists of activism in the civil rights movement is they found ways to dramatize what other people could not see. That's why the big standoff with Bull Connor, the big protests that they were able to do that all of a sudden got people off the sidelines to realize what's happening. So, this farm bill I'll talk about the specific objectives we have, but our ability to make the change is really dependent upon the average American understanding that the system is broken and that I can do something. Because there is not enough political will yet to make the kind of dramatic changes. So, in the farm bill there's a number of different areas where we're trying to turn knobs up. So, one of them is this understanding to trust American farmers. They are very good stewards of the land and they often know that they're doing things that are killing their soil. Soil which is rich in biodiversity, rich in the power to sequester carbon to hold on to water. What's happened now is things that are allowing too much runoff drought poisoning their soil. I remember going to meet with a Republican farmer in the Midwest who told me I used to be able to fish in my creek. I used to be able to drink from my well. But since the CAFO has moved here I can't do either anymore. And so, what we saw when I got onto the ag committee is that there are some very small programs in the ag committee. Things like EQUIP that have acronyms so I probably can't name every word for. But environmental programs incentivize farmers to engage in environmental practices that help create goes win-win-win-wins but they were way over subscribed. So, one of the things in the Inflation Reduction Act that my team was able to do was to put billions of dollars into these programs which farmers rejoiced in because now they are able to do things like cover crops, rotational grazing and other things that we know fundamentally can not only help farmers be more successful but actually could do things that help our ecology and our environment. And so, those are the programs we're going after now to say, can we expand certain things. But one of the specific examples I'll give you and I could go on talking about the farm bill for a long time but I want you to know this is one example. Because the farm bill has two sides. There are agricultural programs, but another big part of the farm bill is food stamps.



**Greg Dalton:** SNAP is the biggest part of it.

**Cory Booker:** SNAP. And remember what SNAP is, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program. I'm not exaggerating, Coke and Pepsi make billions of dollars annually. Think about this for a second, because of SNAP payments being used to buy sugar water. Billions of dollars. And the correlation between sugar waters and diabetes rates is stunning. And what used to be adult onset diabetes is now proliferating on our children and our families. Half of Americans now are diabetic or prediabetic stunningly a quarter of our children are diabetic or prediabetic. And so, there are some people that think we should go about this by banning the use of SNAP on certain things. That becomes politically fraught. What we want to do is expand the program to create incentives. So, let me give you an example. When I was mayor of the city of Newark. We knew we had a crisis of food deserts all around our city. And we're trying to expand access. We did a lot of different creative things. One of the things I love was taking massive plots of city land and turning them into farms. One of them was an entire city block in a very low-income neighborhood in Newark that we turned into an urban farm. I returned to that farm recently to film a documentary Food, Inc. 2 and did not realize as I'm filming it that women would be coming up and wanting to offer their testimony. So, I'll never forget these two elders African-American women. One had gut issues that she had a \$700 with prescription drugs to deal with the problems she was having in her gut. Her co-pay was hundred dollars and then the rest was being picked up by taxpayers, these prescription drugs. But as soon as she started sourcing her food from an organic urban farm in her neighborhood, her gut issues went away. The other one was an octogenarian who had diabetes for years. And she has a little now an Instagram account about being a vegan in her 80s. But she actually reversed her diabetes completely. And so, the program that they were taking advantage of that we're talking about has a terrible name, GusNIP. But it's basically the double bucks program where if I go to the supermarket and use one dollar of my SNAP to buy sugar water or highly processed food. I get a dollar like any consumer. But if I go to fresh fruits and vegetable markets, I can get double that. And when I went there, I used \$10 to buy an amount of food at this urban farm. I couldn't believe how much food, put Whole Foods to shame. But then I realized that other people using SNAP payments could double that amount. And so, what we believe in our philosophy right now in this fight until the consciousness of our country gets higher and higher and higher. And by the way when you create these points of light, all of us wanna condemn darkness. When people point of light show the way it attracts a lot of attention. We want to expand these programs that can show dramatically that we can make a difference in people's lives for local farmers and others if we do these things.

So, we want to expand the GusNIP program. We want to expand programs that incentivize farmers in their practices. We're in the farm bill looking to do things okay, you know what I may not be able to end the over subsidization of highly processed foods, but we had a hearing last week in Washington with a local what they call specialty crop farmers. What are specialty crops in America, fruits and vegetables? I mean it's the majority of what we're told to eat. The commodity crops are going to things like ethanol standards in gasoline. They're going to feed, not food, but feed for animals. It's the number one reasons for rainforest deforestation right now is clearing land that grow commodity crops to feed animals. And so, what we said is well let's talk about why can't people who do specialty crops get crop insurance. Or other programs that help to sustain the growth of these more regional local farms that actually create more resilient of food systems. So, that's what we're looking in the farm bills. What dials can we turn up what changes can we make what pilot programs can we put in to advance the cause and create more points of light that can begin to cast away the darkness and show people like the North Star the way to go.

**Greg Dalton:** You're listening to a Climate One conversation about our food system with Senator Cory Booker. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. On our new website you can create and share playlists

focused on topics including food, energy, EVs, activism.

Coming up, the ripple effects of a pivot away from globalized supply chains.

**Cory Booker:** We know that when we create holistic localized systems for food and other critical supply-chain elements that we are a stronger, more resilient and more nationally secure society.

**Greg Dalton:** That's up next, when Climate One continues.

This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton.

Let's get back to my conversation with Senator Cory Booker. Recently the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of California allowing the state to uphold a proposition related to the sale of pork meat.

It **forbids** meat sold from places where pigs are confined in "gestation crates" – barely bigger than the pig's body.

**Cory Booker:** California won. That's the only time I've ever written an amicus brief to the Supreme Court maybe my law professors now will respect the fact that I actually use my law degree. But California is doing so many things that are forcing, because you are 40+ million people here and such a big powerful consumer market. When you all make changes it's hard for those corporations not to have to change your practices nationwide. And I'm really grateful these propositions on humane raising of animals, these propositions on things like or these laws you're all passing things like composting makes such a big difference. And so, my team looked at this composting problem and again we think that what's lacking in America is a composting infrastructure. And what we're trying to do to our composting law is to create more incentives for state and local communities to shift towards composting. And the power of it as you alluded to is that we have a, first of all, we have a food waste problem we've another bill all about food waste where we have a food waste problem in this country that is horrific. About a third of our food is wasted and goes into landfills that create methane, which is significantly more harmful to our climate problem than carbon. And so, what we have said is let's figure out a way not to punish, not to make people complain my friends on the right about overregulation. But let's start creating grants and incentives to build out that infrastructure and show again points of light of people that are using that composting in such constructive ways. Where instead of throwing something away you compost it and you're actually creating industries you're creating materials for farmers to use for growing foods. It has again this multiplier effect for the investment of a government dollar in the growth of local economies in the support of local agricultural industries and more. And so, that's what folks lose in this whole thing. And we all in our language have to start getting away from falling into the partisan divide. And it's really problematic when you have issues that should unite Americans around common values. And I understand there are big concentrated corporate interests. But when you start having conversations with human beings and start around what our common values are. You can often arrive at policy conclusions that make it hard for the big corporate concentration to go.

**Greg Dalton:** So, one part there we're talking a lot about carrots or whether it's incentivizing people to buy an apple versus a Twinkie. One thing in the IRA was it's basically a tax bill that rewards people for buying a heat pump or electric car, etc. It's not the regulatory stick that Democrats usually wield.

**Cory Booker:** Exactly.

**Greg Dalton:** And the Republicans in this recent, you know, debt ceiling thing that I don't want to get into very much because I'm kind of sick of it, is that one reason they didn't go after the IRA because it is that its tax policy it's carrots. Do you think the Democrats should learn a lesson from

this and use incentives more and less of that regulatory approach that they are so known for?

**Cory Booker:** A hundred percent. We have got to find ways, understanding politics. And again, as consciousness grows more things become possible. Civil rights legislation failed for years until consciousness grew and we all get things done. But for now, we have got to be better at looking for win wins and not falling into a partisan divide. Creating incentives is a good way, especially if I can demonstrate to you. And again, the way the Congressional Budget Office measures things often comprise difficulty. But when you can demonstrate that this action you are incentivizing will help to encourage behavior that provides a greater societal benefit and often a greater economic benefit as well. And we as Democrats need to focus on those strategies and then defend them. Because there are interests, like for example the billions of dollars we got into climate smart solutions for farmers. That money is being gone after now. In the coming budget battles, they're gonna be trying to cut a lot of these wins that the Biden administration got that actually farmers love. I love that Chuck Grassley and I, with a lot of our differences, were able come together and fight in my early days in the Senate for wind tax credits. Because when I went out to Iowa to run for president, I was surprised how many windfarms I saw on farm. Farmers were getting win wins with that. And so, when you do programs that actually benefit people despite their party, they begin to defend the fight for those programs.

**Greg Dalton:** They call that mailbox money.

**Cory Booker:** Yes, exactly. Farmers call it money that they're going to get. And that's why I've fallen in love with farmers, the more I sit with them. Again, Republican or Democrat they may identify different parties than me but we share common values. People in my inner city of Newark and farmers in the Midwest. They may have a lot of things that they may seem to divide us but the lines that tie those groups together are so strong that if we start to affirm those connections, we can overcome the political gridlock.

**Greg Dalton:** You also sit on the Foreign Relations Committee. And one thing that unites Republicans and Democrats these days seems to be, you know, banging on China. And China's commonly cited as enemy for both parties. China also have as it control most of the supply chain for both solar panels and batteries and that are needed to transition away from fossil fuels. So how does the escalating tensions with China fit into the energy transition.

**Cory Booker:** Right.

**Greg Dalton:** Hard one by doing the other.

**Cory Booker:** Right. I tried to, the Chinese government and often when people say China and I heard this from the previous president. It fuels a lot of hate towards Chinese-Americans and towards Asian-Americans in general. And at the time when the skyrocketing hate crimes against Asian-Americans in this country it's important that we remind people --

**Greg Dalton:** Thank you. My wife is Chinese. My kids are biracial and they were afraid of the anger.

**Cory Booker:** I mean I cannot tell you coming to San Francisco and hearing a lot of my Asian-American friends talk to me about the hate crimes that are there and something we should keep present. And so, the Chinese government is definitely doing things that should have us all conscious. I mean the pandemic was full of lessons, collateral lessons, despite the over a million Americans have died as a result of COVID. We should not lose the lessons that came from that horrific pandemic. And one of things like supply chain security and defense. And so, when it comes to the unifying Democrats and Republicans around this idea of China competition it's working across the

board. And one of the reasons why Joe Biden had perhaps this most successful Congress in my lifetime because everything from the CHIPS Act to the IRA, a lot of these things were about doing things to counter China. And again, globalization we can argue about pros cons of all of it, but we know that when we create holistic localized systems for food and other critical supply-chain elements that we are a stronger, more resilient and more nationally secure society. And so, that is another way that I'm finding alliances with Republicans again that people in the right like to often demonized. But from Lindsey Graham to young Republicans like young, to Mitt Romney. There's a lot of really good alliances going on that are doing things that are gonna help our country have greater national security but also have incredibly inspiring environmental benefits as well.

**Greg Dalton:** And Chris Coons and Kevin Cramer, Republican have a new bipartisan bill on tariffs which is partly aimed at China to get at that. Race is also part of, we're talking about race or relations in China it's also part of food. And the USDA is responsible for implementing the farm bill and yet the agency has a real historic problem with racist practices. Last year I talked with John Boyd, president of the National Black Farmers Association. He told me personal stories of his application for farm operating loan being thrown in the trash can by a USDA official who was later found guilty of discrimination but still allowed to keep his job. Let's hear from John Boyd.

**Cory Booker:** Yeah, please.

**John Boyd:** We had two settlements, but nobody was ever fired. No senior person at USDA or no local person, for that matter was ever fired for the act of discrimination. And as I organized it further, I went South, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, Louisiana. The discrimination was more pervasive with many blacks weren't even given a loan application. I was given one mine was tossed in the trash can and all kinds of stuff that I personally faced. But the further I went South the more egregious and more blatant the discrimination was for black farmers.

**Greg Dalton:** John Boyd, president of the National Black Farmers Association. Senator, your reaction to John Boyd and what the USDA is doing to address its legacy.

**Cory Booker:** Yeah, John's become a strong ally of my office as soon as the Biden administration won their election that got them the presidency. And we saw what the shift in Congress we immediately went to the administration to try to start doing things that would rectify these specific past harms. And John's one story, but lots of great news organizations around the country have elevated these stories of black farmers who have been cheated denied resources discriminated against. It is stunning. Black farmers used to control, there used to be over a million black farmers in America proportionate to the population of African-American is all coming out of slavery blacks return to the land. But that history, especially even since 1950, blacks have been moved off their land continuously losing opportunities and dwindling down to a very small amount. And so, I've taken this problem on and won some victories, got court battles that set back but still have some resources right now and the billions of dollars trying to help African-American farmers and farmers who have been subject to specific discrimination. But it's still not enough. This is one of the sadder chapters. And when we think about generational wealth in this country the number of Americans can trace their family wealth to the Homestead Act for example, or other policies which excluded predominantly African-Americans. It is a very sad chapter that contributes to a lot of the income disparities that we have today. We, as a society have to begin to look for ways to win, especially when there's a specific measurable harm to looking at those communities and finding ways to make them whole. It is the very ideal of America to be a nation of liberty and justice for all. But these are lot of farmers in America who are very frustrated that faced unimaginable injustice and haven't found a way to be made whole and make it right.

**Greg Dalton:** Meat accounts for about 60% of greenhouse gas emissions from food production. One

of the biggest tensions in climate conversations is the weight of individual choices versus actions. What should the average person focus on building more healthy and just food system.

**Cory Booker:** Well, I think this is a personal choice we all make and I'm one of these folks. I'm a vegan, but I only supposed the last thing I want my government to do is to tell me what to eat. Very ideal freedom is eat whatever you want. But I will tell you this. I don't want my government picking winners and losers. I don't want my government that is subsidizing some foods to the harm of other foods. We should be creating a far more level playing field and understanding that we are a nation right now that is using practices forget your diet for a second that are unsustainable. And as the entire planet earth is moving more towards the standard American diet, SAD, as the globe is moving more towards our diet. We will probably need about four planet Earths just to have the land necessary to feed the exploding demand for pork, chicken and beef. These are not the way we are doing these practices right now are not sustainable. So, I'm just a big believer that we need to start looking at alternative proteins. We need to start making more awareness out there of different alternatives and also stop picking winners and losers. That said, there's exciting things going on whether you're vegan or vegetarian or carnivore or what have you. There's a lot of exciting things going on that should inform us all in our policy decisions and perhaps maybe in our personal decisions. So, I just sat with Dr. Mark Hyman yesterday or day before yesterday in my office. And all he wanted to do is talk to this vegan about buffalo. And Mark believes that you should reduce the meat increase vegetables but he loves his meat and he loves eggs. But he was telling me about this powerful Buffalo regenerative farm that he had been to. And I was blown away by the way he is talking about because they're doing rotational grazing environmentally practices that really harking back to the days of buffalos used to rule the plains. And so, he went to explore it and he said he couldn't believe what this regenerative buffalo farm has achieved. He said that, especially when you compare them to others that are doing it the standard American way.

**Greg Dalton:** Factory farms.

**Cory Booker:** Factory farms. And he said, in these prairies, the biodiversity exploded. Species of plants that roam the plain that people hadn't seen in years and years and years. The soil became biodiverse the nutrients in the soil it was exploding again with life not dirt but soil. And then he said what was really interesting to him was because the soil held the water and I've seen these pictures of people who do farming with chemicals that kill everything in the soil and dirt and it's flooding rolling one off right next to farms that use regenerative practices that are green that are rich you can see the life in the soil. But the thing that I've never heard before that marked to me was, he said that in this vast acreage historically, there have been streams and rivers in them, but they had all dried up. But as soon as they turn it back because the soil was holding so much water the streams the rivers the creeks came back and flowing to the point that neighbors were jealous. Wait a minute, how did you get this water back on your land. And they weren't doing anything they weren't out there watering. It was just the power of nature to heal itself if you go back to these regenerative practices. And so, again I want people to be happy. I think joy should be the center of our being. So, I'm not telling you what to eat, but the more I find that I grow my consciousness and align my diet my shopping habits, especially those of us who are privileged enough to have some flexibility and are not living paycheck to paycheck, which unfortunately is 40+ percent of Americans. But the ability to align your values and your personal habits together that's integrity.

**Greg Dalton:** We've been talking with Cory Booker about how the ag industry is dominated by a few major multinational corporations. Let's pause my conversation with him to take a closer look at one way cattle ranchers are attempting to circumvent the tightly controlled meat market.

**Ariana Brocious:** The meat industry has transformed since the 1980s, when the Reagan administration loosened antitrust laws. Today, just four companies control 80% of the market. That's

meant higher prices for consumers, and a lower return for the people raising the animals. Senator Cory Booker is critical of how that economic concentration hurts ranchers and rural communities, and of the larger system of factory farms or CAFOs--concentrated animal feeding operations where most of our meat comes from. His Farm System Reform Act would address monopolistic practices of meatpackers and put a moratorium on large factory farms. As Elizabeth Rembert reports, one group of ranchers in Nebraska is creating their own meatpacking plant to gain greater financial sustainability.

**Elizabeth Rembert:** Hundreds of cows crowd close to the edges of a pen to push their necks through a fence to get to the golden corn grains in a feed trough.

Trey Wasserburger looks out at the cattle from his pickup. He runs this feedyard outside of North Platte, Nebraska, along with his father-in-law.

**Trey Wasserburger:** These will be probably ready to go here in the next 30 or 40 days and they'll go to a large packer and they'll be in the beef supply chain in 60 days, probably.

**Elizabeth Rembert:** Wasserburger adds up the time it takes to breed, birth and raise the cows on ranches to get them to this point.

**Trey Wasserburger:** Geez ... yeah, you're talking this is a three year deal probably to get here.

**Elizabeth Rembert:** And now the feedyard work starts. Cassie Lapaseotes runs her family's feedyard in western Nebraska and says it's kinda like how you expect a clean bed at a hotel.

**Cassie Lapaseotes:** When these cattle come into a feed yard, we want their pens to be clean, their water tanks to be clean, the feed to be freshly laid out in front of them.

**Elizabeth Rembert:** Wasserburger and Lapaseotes are proud of how they take care of their animals to bring quality meat to the market.

But when companies buy their cattle to turn it into steaks, they basically get a predetermined rate ... which is based on the price of cattle that's a much lower quality than what Wasserburger and Lapaseotes are raising.

**Trey Wasserburger:** Be like an Audi and a Kia...and the Kia sets the price for the Audi. It's a broken system, totally.

**Elizabeth Rembert:** Right now their paychecks don't reflect the sweat, science and money they've invested.

**Trey Wasserburger:** <TUTS> Not yet, that's where Sustainable Beef comes in.

**Elizabeth Rembert:** Wasserburger and Lapaseotes are founders and board members of Sustainable Beef, a meatpacking plant designed and owned by ranchers and cattle feeders.

Wasserburger and his father-in-law are planning to integrate solar panels, manure collection and methane gas recovery to lessen their environmental footprint. The ranchers hope that keeping processing closer to home can help them regain control - and profit - to keep their livelihoods sustainable into the future.

The idea gained momentum after the pandemic when COVID forced packers to limit operations and turn away market-ready cattle.

**Trey Wasserburger:** I still remember June of 2020. We couldn't get any cattle in anywhere. I lost a third of my equity in cattle almost overnight.

**Elizabeth Rembert:** It was a new low, as ranchers lost buyers and shoppers faced empty shelves. But it wasn't a new problem.

For decades companies like Tyson, Cargill, JBS and National Beef have absorbed other meat processors, leaving less buyers to compete for animals. Feedlots and cattle ranchers have been forced to take lower and lower prices. From 1980 to 2017, 40% of them went out of business.

So the ranchers in Nebraska came together to create their own plant, where they can process the meat and give fair prices for premium beef.

Sustainable Beef CEO David Briggs drives around the construction site, where 100 people work to move dirt and set up a foundation.

When the plant is operational, it'll process around 1,500 cattle a day. That's about 1.5% of the nation's capacity, Briggs says.

**David Briggs:** Our mission was not to just be a local, it was to help with the national security concept, and actually be a player in the overall industry.

**Elizabeth Rembert:** Walmart will help them do that. The retailer has invested in the project and agreed to buy and distribute all of Sustainable Beef's product. Even with a boost from the nation's most popular grocery chain, Wasserburger says they're not trying to compete against the Big Four packers.

**Trey Wasserburger:** This is like comparing the Yankees to my son's T-ball team. We don't want to be the Yankees and we're not trying to be and we're not pretending like we are. This model works for us and our families and so we're gonna play ball how we know how.

**Elizabeth Rembert:** Austin Frerick is a Yale fellow who's studied concentration in the meat market, and says they have an uphill road. This isn't the first time ranchers have tried coming together to start their own packing plant.

**Austin Frerick:** If they succeed, that means the Big Four lost a little bit of market share. And there's nothing in recent history that says those four will lose a point of market share without a fight.

**Elizabeth Rembert:** Past startups have tripped over logistics, collapsed under market pressure or even been swallowed up by one of the giant packers. Still, he hopes the ranchers can find a foothold.

**Austin Frerick:** If they can carve out a niche where they can play T ball, at least are playing baseball ...

**Elizabeth Rembert:** But he says the broader industry needs regulation to truly level the playing field for projects like Sustainable Beef.

**Austin Frerick:** I want a bunch of baseball teams. The best thing we can do for them is break up the big four, put competition back into these markets, so they have a chance to succeed.



**Elizabeth Rembert:** Briggs and the ranchers know it's a challenge. But for a new future in cattle, they think it's worth a try.

For Climate One, I'm Elizabeth Rembert.

**Ariana Brocious:** Elizabeth is a reporter with Harvest Public Media, a collaboration of public media newsrooms in the Midwest and Great Plains. And I just want to say one note about the term about sustainable beef which can kind of seem like a misnomer on a climate show.

A lot of the cows people eat are raised on ranches, they start their lives eating grass but at some point they move to these feedyards or feedlots where they're kept in more concentrated operation and from there they go to the slaughterhouse. So that's pretty conventional, that's the majority of beef you find at the grocery store. So when we talk about sustainability from an agricultural emissions standpoint, that might be things like capturing the methane that comes off manure lagoons or dairies. That's not what we're talking about here, we're talking about the idea that the concentrated market of selling cows is just unfair and this is trying to create a more regional and economically sustainable option for farmers.

**Greg Dalton:** Coming up, what if the biggest obstacle to progress is ourselves?

**Cory Booker:** The most toxic threat is the hate that is growing on Americans for each other. And this is creating an environment where we can't even talk to each other.

**Greg Dalton:** That's up next, when Climate One continues.

This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton. Let's pick up my conversation with Senator Cory Booker.

**Cory Booker:** The most powerful way and my favorite story in leadership is about Gandhi entertaining visitors in his tent. The mother who asked Gandhi emphasize dietary discipline and Gandhi talk about vegan this guy was like a fruitarian vegan. And she says, tell my son to stop eating sugar. And he goes, I won't. And she seems to protest. And he goes, no, I'm sorry I won't but come back in two months and ask me again. She comes back into the tent with her son two months later, Mahatma, sir with great respect my son will listen to you. He has terrible dietary habits his health is suffering would you tell him to stop eating sugar. Gandhi gets up, put his hands on the boy. Mahatma touches this child and says, my child, you must stop eating sugar. The mother was pleased the child was affected and she's going to leave, but she stops and says forgive my disrespect, but why didn't you just tell my son to stop eating sugar two months ago? And he said, because two months ago I was eating sugar. And so, I have seen in my life the greatest impact I can have on others is when I'm deeply authentic living according to my values. That's what often this is. Nothing worse than a politician that talks right and walks left.

[Applause]

And so, I want people to pursue their joy. I want people to expand their understanding of Americans. Because the most toxic threat to our nation right now I believe this and we have real problems in America and we have real problems globally. But I think the most toxic threat is the hate that is growing on Americans for each other. And this is creating an environment where we can't even talk to each other or far more common values. I was campaigning pretty hard in the last midterm election traveling all around the country. And I sat down on a plane and I often have people saying nice things to me often, unfortunately, people usual send me Mother's Day cards because I often get called you mother something else. So, I get all kind of reactions across America as I crisscrossed the nation. But people are being really nice to be on this plane ride and I sit down next to a mom and a

daughter 80 and 60 and they don't know who I am. And here I am large African-American male and for my ego some people might think this is wrong, but for my ego I love hearing what they said. They go, sir, who are you? Are you a professional athlete? And I'm like, well, I could be if I wanted to. But I said no ma'am, I'm a United States senator. And immediately all of us in America if you need a politician congressperson you want to know what tribe they're in. Are they in your tribe, their tribe or my tribe? The other rising, the impersonality of that. Where do you stand with me or against me? And too much we have a binary world in America. And I said ma'am, I'm a Democrat. And she looks angry at me and says, I should've brought my Trump hat.

Now there is a moment all of life our power is not in what happens to us. Our power is never in the stimulus it's always in the response. And we have a choice to respond with love, empathy, compassion, or to respond with negativity hate lower frequencies of our being. And I look at the woman and I'm not dancing to this tune. And I look at her and I go, oh my gosh, Donald Trump, he signed two of my biggest pieces of legislation into law. And she seems surprised by that. And I go through some of the common values of that legislation. One on criminal justice reform. One on getting investment into low income rural and urban areas in America. And the record was scratched. It's a long flight, but in the end of the flight we are talking about our personal lives. I learned about their family they learned about mine. We're affirming our commonality and talking about some of the problems in America being we don't talk to each other. We don't listen to each other.

And so, my biggest worry about a lot of these issues is when they fall into the pardons we stop listening. There's a paper I remember if I remember correctly, they did a study where they took arcane educational issue policy and this is a Democrat policy. And immediately 80% of Republicans were against the policy because it was labeled Democratic policy. But Democrats were not much better when they flip it around. When it says Republican policy, all Democrats hated it. And that is the crisis because the issues we're talking about cannot be solved in a partisan way. I'm looking at the Senate right now and I hate to tell you the map for 2024 is looking pretty bad. We are defending a lot of seats we being Democrats are defending seats are gonna be hard, I hope I'm gonna be everywhere from Montana to Ohio to even West Virginia if Manchin will have me. But my point is we have got to start not only I think every election matters every election is important, but somehow, we have to commit ourselves to creating more dialogue, more ability to affirm each other's humanity and still believe that we have common cause in this country. Because when America acts with a sense of increased compassion and empathy and common cause we dazzle humanity in what we achieve. From immigration laws that let the entire plan is diversity come here and breakthroughs in science defying gravity going to the moon to even affirmations of human rights and human dignity that have put us as a standard bearer for our planet that's still struggling with LGBTQ rights as we see in Uganda and elsewhere. We can do these things when we stop hating each other. And even if we disagree find ways to affirm this commonality. I call it love people who call it just affirming your fellow citizenship.

[Applause]

And so, I'm not saying that there are big issues I keep returning to gun violence that anguish me. I've lost people I know to assault rifles. I'm not saying that we're gonna solve those with kumbaya moments. But I know we can't solve those unless two things happen. One is we stop demonization which often prevents coalition. And number two is what King said. When we rush to demonize the other side, we forget the wisdom of what King said. So, what we have to repent for in this day and age is not just the vitriolic words and violent actions of the bad people, but the appalling silence and inaction of the good people. To me whether it's climate change or gun violence. If you pull these issues, Democrat Republicans, most people agree with us. But yet there's too many people that are not turning their head and their heart.

As Frederick Douglass says, I prayed for years for my freedom and I was still a slave. And it wasn't until I started praying with my feet that I found my freedom. More people need to get up off the couch like the guy watching the Edmund Pettus Bridge who said, you know what I'm not going my inability to do everything to undermine my determination to do something. I'm gonna do the best I can with what I have where I am. But the key is to do something. This is what we're missing. There are too many people on the sidelines of America and don't realize they're needed to make history and to save the future.

**Greg Dalton:** Oil companies have lied and deceived the American public for a long time, in particular executives. And again, like you said about China it's the Chinese government, not the Chinese people. Not every rank-and-file worker who works in the fossil industry they hear that and might say, oh you think I'm bad have that division. Executives certain companies, particularly Exxon. Some people in climate and the left think that oil companies that anything that's bad for that, you know, anything that's good for them must be bad. They have to be like run out of business don't want to deal with them. What's your approach to the villains which in this case, the industry you talk about empathy and working with people you disagree with? How do you apply that to the fossil fuel industry?

**Cory Booker:** Well, I'll say some things that, you know, Abraham Lincoln said, too much agreement kills a conversation. I am a guy that really believes because I'm on the foreign relations committee I see the global context, that Americans are demanding oil, they are. So, when you point your finger and want to vilify the people that are delivering oil to your pump you got to look in the mirror first.

**Greg Dalton:** That's hard.

**Cory Booker:** It's hard. And then Americans might want to, and it's a global market by the way. We're not living on the oil that we're drilling here in the United States. We're buying oil from around the world. And we may succeed in stopping some drilling here, but if we're still not doing anything about demand guess where that oil is coming from.

**Greg Dalton:** Nigeria.

**Cory Booker:** Places that have worse environmental protections. Your oil drilled here has better carbon models than the oil drilled over there and then these are petro-dictators who are engaged in that oil is like you're paying blood money there. So, let's not be too self-righteous about the problem we have here. I'm a big believer that we need to be fast tracking our efforts to get the demand for oil lower. And without vilifying but start to try to expand the promise. And I'll give you one example you're talking about this in the car right over here because we thought you are gonna bring this up I'm grateful you didn't, so I don't know why I'm about to. This is my staff is like, you know, they find this a driving test. If you look at the, don't look at the barrier, you look in the barrier you drive into the barrier. They made me look at this beforehand. But we just had a big moment on the Senate floor where part of the debt ceiling fight were some permitting issues. And I'm surprised they get Democrats telling me Corey, we got to do some permitting reform. And I'm like, yeah, I'm all for permitting. In order to get the transmission, we have massive transmission problems now with solar, wind, how are we gonna get that. We definitely need permitting reform or else that slowness of our transition off of oil is going to be affected. I'm the biggest believer in permitting reform. And I'm the biggest believer in just dumb regulation stopping things.

When I was mayor of the city of Newark, I had people bringing in cargo putting it on trucks and driving it to Exit 8A far away from Newark warehousing and there. And then when they needed to be sent out, they took back into Newark spewing all this carbon into the air and smog that gets my kids four times the asthma rates. So, I said all this vacant land in Newark I want a bill down there but the

EPA comes in and says, well you have to have groundwater standards at the same level of residential. And so, I had to start jumping over all these environmental hoops that ultimately, we're gonna reduce the amount of carbon that I have. You're causing the problem to your environmental delays that I need to do. So, we'll find very few Democrats that's friendly towards me as understanding. That we need to have the common goal here and not mess it up with all this muckety-muck. But what I get so frustrated about and I wish Americans could have seen everything that I see. We did this environmental injustice tour to America. And from going to Duplin County, North Carolina, where the CAFOs are where these contract farmers who have miserable lives because they are short of sharecroppers. But these big multinational port corporations who three or four of them control the whole market dictate to the contract farmers how they have to raise things big warehouses of pigs all the feces going through these grades into massive lagoons and then they're sprayed onto fields in low income communities.

And so, you walk through these communities, community of African-Americans who has been on that land since slave times since slavery was around. And now the value of their land is going to the floor. They can't open their windows. They can't put their clothing on the lines they have respiratory diseases clusters of disease there spiked and they said how can we have this happen. How could Americans eat their bacon and not understand how we're suffering. Again, it's the lines that divide us that stop us from having empathy and understanding. Whatever religion love your neighbor it's not a geographic thing we're all each other's neighbors. But I travel to a place called Cancer Alley. You don't need to know. Look up Cancer Alley you're gonna see section of the Mississippi that's near Baton Rouge where again it happens again to be a low-income community this is a low income African-American community where the particulates in the air all of these things have been permitted that's spewed these chemical plants are spewing stuff in there the cancer rate cancer clusters. I sat and I couldn't hold back my tears. As family after family in this crowded black church were getting up and telling about their family members who have died of cancer. I could take you Uniontown, Alabama I could go to the places where we don't know the absolute misery and suffering of other Americans based upon systems whether it's petrochemicals or the food industry that are poisoning Americans right now. And so, that's my bigger frustration is that again there are too many people that just don't know about the systems that we're participating on. And when you expand that lands beyond America - And you start visiting other countries, whether it's people working in warehouses that produce the devices we carry around or the clothing that we have. The poverty that worries me most, and I'm a United States senator made a decision to live the last 25 years in the community or below the poverty line where we don't mistake wealth with worth. I do a lot of economic justice things the child tax credit. Me, Bennett, Brown others fought for that help cut poverty, but we couldn't get it to be permanent. Common sense things to address poverty I do it internationally. But the poverty that most worries me every day is the poverty of empathy in this world. Somehow we just don't understand the suffering of someone that often is not that far away that we feel again it's not about blame it's about responsibility, that we feel no responsibility in and live in a blissful ignorance of the challenges that are affecting people Democrat, Republican, forget they're affecting people human beings. Until we can close that gap then things are not, until we close that gap, we're not gonna make the changes we need to make.

**Greg Dalton:** Thank you for that. I wish more senators thought that way and talk that way. And thank you Senator for bringing the power of your heart and your mindfulness into this conversation here today with us.

**Greg Dalton:** Thank you very much. Senator Cory Booker.

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**Ariana Brocious:** Brad Marshland is our senior producer; Our managing director is Jenny Park. Austin Colón is producer and editor. Megan Bisciegia is our production manager. Wency Shaida is our development manager, Ben Testani is our communications manager. Our theme music was composed by George Young (and arranged by Matt Willcox). Gloria Duffy is CEO of The Commonwealth Club of California, the nonprofit and nonpartisan forum where our program originates. I'm Ariana Brocious.