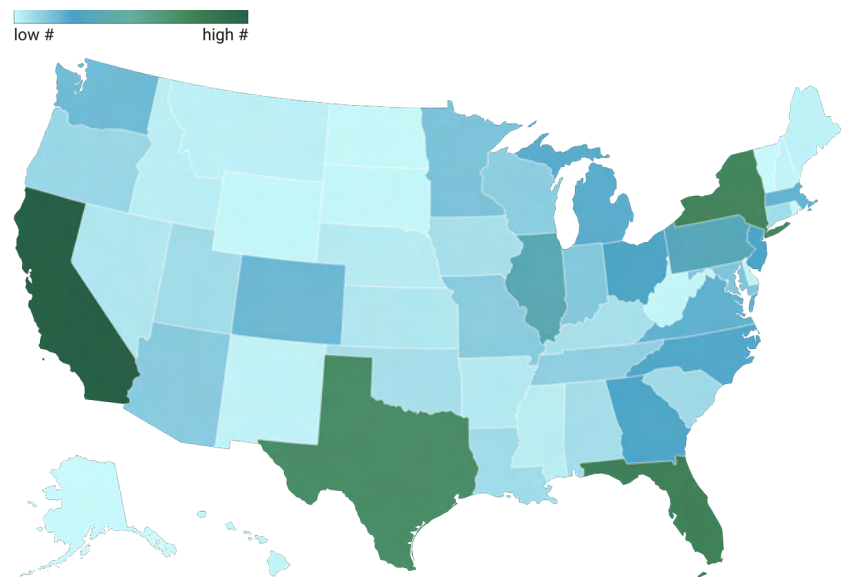


Summary report

This report, commissioned by Purchasing with Purpose with support from SAP, provides the first comprehensive assessment of enterprises in the United States (US) that put people and planet first. Data collected through this research and future initiatives will live in a public dashboard maintained by Good Market, a digital commons for purpose-driven enterprises.

Enterprises putting people and planet first exist to solve a social or environmental problem, prioritize their purpose in operations, rely on self-sustaining revenue sources, reinvest their surplus into their mission, and establish safeguards for long-term mission protection. This research estimates that there are more than 1.1 million of these enterprises in the country. Most are small businesses and span legal forms, from nonprofits to cooperatives, benefit corporations, and limited liability companies (LLCs).

Estimate number of US enterprises that put people and planet first



No study has yet investigated the full range of enterprises putting people and planet first globally or in the US. Reports have been published on these enterprises with either a global or national scope—however, most have focused on social enterprise, a term with which many enterprises putting people and planet first do not self-identify, instead choosing labels more common in their networks or fields, such as “solidarity economy organization,” “impact business,” or “responsible business.”¹ They may also prefer terms that better describe their way of doing business, whether by specialty or model (e.g., green business, fair trade enterprise), legal status (e.g., nonprofit, cooperative), or certification (e.g., B Corp).²

¹ The World Economic Forum (WEF) provides an annex to their 2024 report with definitions of these terms: “The State of Social Enterprise.” Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship. April 2024.

² A social enterprise is a private revenue-generating entity that holds as its primary purpose a mission to create positive societal impact and uses market-driven solutions to do so; Georgetown University Business for Impact. “Jobs for All,” Georgetown University, 2021. <https://www.jobsforallgeorgetown.org>; Halcyon. “SEER Report.” Halcyon, December 3, 2020. <https://www.halcyonhouse.org/programs-1/seer-report/>; Abramson, Alan J., and Kara C. Billings. “Challenges Facing Social Enterprises in the United States.” Nonprofit Policy Forum, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1515/npf-2018-0046>; “The State of Social Enterprise: A Review of Global Data.” Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, 2013. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_State_of_Social_Enterprise_2024.pdf; Dean Hochlaf, Dan Gregory, Emily Darko. “Mission Critical State of Social Enterprise Survey 2023 Social Enterprise Knowledge Centre,” Social Enterprise UK, 2023.

The People and Planet First verification offers a unifying framework for enterprises that may differ in terminology, but share a commitment to purpose, reinvestment, and long-term mission protection. The verification, launched in 2023, was created through consultation with networks worldwide. It establishes affordable, participatory, and accessible criteria designed in response to the realities of greenwashing, extractive business practices, and a fragmented global ecosystem of purpose-driven enterprises.³ People and Planet First’s five standards, listed below, provide both buyers and enterprises with a shared definition.



Five People and Planet First verification standards

- 01 Purpose** **Exists to solve a social or environmental problem:** Social or environmental purpose is publicly communicated online. Plans to update governing documents to include the purpose.
- 02 Operations** **Prioritizes purpose, people, and planet over profit in operational decisions:** Meets minimum sector standards. Publicly communicates online about how people and planet are prioritized.
- 03 Revenue** **Has a self-sustaining revenue model:** Financial records show earned income from products, services, or reciprocal grant contracts. Plan for financial sustainability.
- 04 Use of surplus** **Reinvests the majority of any surplus towards its purpose:** Has a public commitment to reinvesting the majority of surplus towards purpose. Financial records show greater than 50% reinvestment or purpose-related disbursement.
- 05 Structure** **Chooses legal structures and financing that protect and lock-in purpose long term:** Has a public commitment to locking-in purpose. Plans to update governing documents or registration. Current financing and ownership does not prevent future lock-in.

Enterprises putting people and planet first operate across all sectors, with the largest share in services and manufacturing. Examples range from consulting firms and janitorial services to apparel and footwear producers, renewable energy companies, and food cooperatives. These enterprises have specific social and environmental areas of focus, and nuanced approaches to achieving impact. For instance, Rebel Nell fosters economic inclusion through the employment social enterprise model, in which it provides employment, workforce development, and wraparound support to women facing systemic barriers to work. On the other hand, Astoria Co-op and other cooperatives like it achieve economic inclusion through enterprise ownership. Cooperative members collectively own and govern the business, ensuring profits and decision-making power remain in the community.

<https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/12/Mission-Critical-State-of-Social-Enterprise-Survey-2023.pdf>; “Business for Good: The Size and Economic Contribution of Social Enterprise in Australia.” n.d. Social Enterprise Australia. <https://www.socialenterpriseaustralia.org.au/business-for-good/>; Buy Social Canada. “Sell with Impact: Stories and Research from the Canadian Social Enterprise Sector 2.” Buy Social Canada, 2023. <https://www.buysocialcanada.com/wp-content/uploads/Sell-with-Impact-Stories-and-research-from-the-Canadian-Social-Enterprise-Sector-Sep-2023.pdf>.

³ “Consumers Care about Sustainability—and Back It up with Their Wallets.” NIQ. February 6, 2023. <https://nielseniq.com/global/en/insights/report/2023/consumers-care-about-sustainability-and-back-it-up-with-their-wallets/#report>.

Balancing purpose and revenue

Enterprises putting people and planet first generate revenue from multiple sources: the sale of goods and services, grants, contracts, donations, membership fees, and in some cases carbon, water, or biodiversity credits. However, most of these enterprises rely primarily on earned income: Seventy-six percent of survey respondents reported that over half their revenue comes from goods and services. This is true even for nonprofits.⁴ Revenue-generating activities for purpose-driven enterprises may be related or unrelated to their purpose.⁵

These enterprises rely on strategies to protect their purpose such as: avoiding venture capital and extractive financing that could redirect the enterprise away from its purpose; locking in purpose through legal structures that embed mission into governance; adding clauses to governing documents to codify purpose; and choosing ownership models, from worker-owned companies, to family or steward-owned companies, that help ensure the enterprise stays committed to its employees as well as its larger purpose. These measures protect enterprises from mission drift during leadership transitions or acquisitions.

Networks, buyers, and a people and planet first enterprise ecosystem

There is a whole ecosystem of actors with the potential to strengthen and streamline the work of enterprises meeting the five People and Planet First verification standards. However, there are gaps in support, participation, and collaboration. Two key stakeholder groups involved in this ecosystem are enterprise networks and buyers.

Networks

Enterprises putting people and planet first are often, though not always, members of organizations that manage and facilitate global, national, local, and grassroots networks of enterprises. There are hundreds of these enterprise networks throughout the US and around the world. Networks implement capacity-building and advocacy efforts to support their members, and foster community through conferences, events, and online spaces where enterprises connect, learn, receive support, and collaborate. They have distinct goals and priorities based on their members' specialty or model as well as their geographic scope.

Buyers and social procurement

Purpose-driven enterprises may sell their goods and services to consumers in a store, to other businesses, or through contracts with organizations in the public and private sectors. Some enterprises putting people and planet first benefit from social procurement (also known as impact-led procurement): when organizations build systems to intentionally work with suppliers that prioritize a social or environmental purpose.

⁴ Many of the nonprofits that dominate this share of revenue from private fees for service are education institutions, hospitals, and healthcare entities. "Nonprofit Impact Matters: How America's Charitable Nonprofits Strengthen Communities and Improve Lives." 2019. National Council of Nonprofits. <https://www.nonprofitimpactmatters.org/site/assets/files/1/nonprofit-impact-matters-sept-2019-1.pdf>.

⁵ Kim Alter. "Social Enterprise Typology." Virtue Ventures LLC. November 27, 2007. p.18. <https://isfcolombia.uniandes.edu.co/images/201519/LRD31.pdf>.

In the public sector, and at the federal level, there are programs such as AbilityOne, which mandates federal agencies to procure certain goods and services from a network of over 560 enterprises employing individuals with disabilities.⁶ There are currently nine states with legislation that prioritizes purpose-driven enterprises in procurement processes.⁷

In the private sector, companies are increasingly embedding social and environmental performance criteria into procurement systems. An example can be found in Change Please USA's corporate partnerships. The People and Planet First verified enterprise employs people experiencing homelessness, combining barista training, career coaching, and ongoing employment support to help build stability. Change Please's US division has formed partnerships with major corporations like J.P. Morgan and Google, which not only procure Change Please coffee but also host immersive workplace experiences designed to prepare Trainees for career paths in corporate hospitality.

Purchasing gives organizations a cost-effective opportunity to demonstrate their values—an increasingly important factor in attracting and retaining talent. A 2023 LinkedIn study found that 87% of US workers find it important that their employers are aligned with their values, with 60% of the global Gen Z and Millennial population considering value misalignment to be a dealbreaker.⁸ Fortune 500 companies are reported to allocate 75% of their total spend and 65% of their revenue to external supplier costs.⁹ Directing even a small portion of that toward suppliers with rigorous social and environmental commitments offers a powerful, scalable way for organizations to champion a mission and signal it clearly to their target audience.

Consumers

Whether in a grocery store, or shopping online for a new pair of shoes, consumers are constantly exposed to enterprises putting people and planet first. In 2023, total US consumer spending amounted to over \$14 trillion annually—two-thirds of the country's GDP.¹⁰ This scale of spending highlights just how much influence everyday purchasing decisions can have. Supporting an enterprise putting people and planet first may mean choosing to shop at your local grocery cooperative instead of a major grocery store, or purchasing from an ethical apparel or accessory brand.

⁶ "AbilityOne," U.S. AbilityOne Commission. <https://www.abilityone.gov>.

⁷ "Country Profile: United States," World Economic Forum, <https://initiatives.weforum.org/global-alliance-for-social-entrepreneurship/socproc-united-states>.

⁸ Josh Graff. "Company Values Are Deal-Breaker for New Professionals: LinkedIn Study." World Economic Forum. April 19, 2023. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/04/why-company-values-deal-breaker-next-generationprofessionals/>.

⁹ "The State of Spend Report and Supplier Cost Reductions | Proxima." Proxima. September 23, 2024. <https://proximagroup.com/reports-and-research/the-state-of-spend-report-and-supplier-cost-reductions/>.

¹⁰ NIO, 2023.

Key challenges



Challenges faced by purpose-driven enterprises include limited visibility, difficulty accessing finance, exclusionary public and private sector procurement systems, and burdensome impact measurement requirements imposed by buyers and funders. The report calls for coordinated action across a range of stakeholders to mitigate these hurdles, highlighting initiatives from multi-network collaborations resulting in Olympic-scale procurement, to purchasing alliances that cut enterprise costs by up to 25%. A key opportunity lies in social procurement. When companies and agencies make purchasing from these enterprises a regular practice, they unlock more than just quality goods and services—they shift billions of dollars toward innovative business models that reinvest in workers, communities, and the environment.¹¹ The People and Planet First verification highlighted in the report aims to foster the recognition, credibility, and collaboration needed to continue advancing the work of these enterprises.

From momentum to transformation



This report, which presents data and insights from a live assessment, identifies enterprises putting people and planet first as a powerful and growing force across the US. With more than 1.1 million spanning sectors, these purpose-driven enterprises create jobs, drive innovation, reduce inequality, and protect natural resources in the process. Yet, their full potential remains constrained by limited visibility, the “impact tax,” and barriers to finance and procurement.

Collective action emerges as the path forward. Strategies from innovative public-private partnerships that create procurement opportunities, to purchasing alliances that cut member costs by up to 25%, demonstrate how networks can help these enterprises enter new markets and scale. Equally important, are these enterprises’ buyers. Even modest shifts in procurement spending or financing practices could amount to billions of dollars for purpose-driven enterprises, allowing procurers to meet ESG commitments and increase their ability to attract and retain talent, all while contributing to a sustainable and equitable economy. By drawing a boundary of trust around vetted purpose-driven enterprises, the People and Planet First verification offers a uniquely inclusive roadmap. Recognizing and supporting these enterprises as an interdependent ecosystem brings us a step closer to a future in which every transaction strengthens communities, protects the planet, and delivers long-term resilience.

¹¹ “State of Social Procurement - Why Social Procurement Matters.” Weforum.org. 2025. <https://initiatives.weforum.org/global-alliance-for-social-entrepreneurship/socproc-why-social-procurement>.

Acknowledgements

Research for this report, *Mapping Enterprises in the United States that put People and Planet First*, was commissioned by Purchasing with Purpose and conducted by Just Results, an economic development research firm. The principal authors of the report are Allie Miller from Just Results and Rebecca Dray from Purchasing with Purpose. The report editors are Rebecca Dray from Purchasing with Purpose, Jennifer Beason and Kate Booth from SAP, which funded the research, as well as Purchasing with Purpose's partners, listed below. The findings and recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and editors and do not necessarily reflect the views of SAP.

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Official Publication Citation:

Purchasing with Purpose. (2025). *Mapping Enterprises in the United States that put People and Planet First*. Purchasing with Purpose, August 2025.

Acknowledgments

The authors and editors recognize and thank each of our research team members, student researchers, project advisors and peer reviewers and collaborators, listed below. And we extend our admiration and thanks to the representatives from enterprises putting people and planet first in the United States that took the time to participate in this research, whether by submitting a survey response, or getting on the phone with the research team for an interview.

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