



National Young Farmers Coalition Colorado River Basin 2018 Farm Bill Platform

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The National Young Farmers Coalition (NYFC) is a grassroots network of farmers, ranchers, and supportive consumers fighting for the future of agriculture. NYFC works to shift policies and address the most critical structural and economic barriers preventing motivated people from building successful careers in agriculture.

NYFC's Western Program represents a growing, diverse network of farmers and ranchers across the seven states of the Colorado River Basin, many of whom are eager to enter the agricultural industry and launch long-term, successful careers in agriculture. In the Colorado River Basin, our work focuses on protecting water for agriculture, building incentives to ensure the good stewardship of land and water, assisting farmers and ranchers in adapting to drought and climate change, and empowering young farmers and ranchers with tools they need to enter roles of water leadership.

This is a crucial moment. The western United States is in the midst of a growing water crisis. Western states face myriad threats and challenges such as extended drought, climate change, and a booming population that are increasing demand for food and freshwater. In the Colorado River Basin, a seven state and two country region that produces around 85% of U.S. winter produce, demand for water is expected to significantly outpace supply by 2060. Flows across the basin in 2012 and 2013 were the lowest ever observed over a two-year period, raising particular alarm for agencies such as the Central Arizona Project, which delivers water to farms and cities throughout central Arizona. The Rio Grande, an essential freshwater source for irrigated agriculture in northern Mexico and the Southwestern U.S., is also projected to experience decreased water

availability and an increase in extreme weather events. By some estimates, agricultural losses in New Mexico alone could range from \$7-34 million by 2030 due to water shortages. In addition, the Colorado River Basin regularly faces the threat of a call on the river.

The Conservation Generation

In the Colorado River Basin, young farmers and ranchers are critical to addressing both our dwindling water resources and producer populations. In 2015, NYFC surveyed young farmers and ranchers across the West, with a focus on the Colorado River Basin. Based on participant responses, we found that the young farmers and ranchers we surveyed are conservation-minded, learning to farm under increasingly dry and variable conditions, and willing to innovate. They offer hope of land and water stewardship that builds off the work of previous generations to regenerate rather than deplete natural resources. But as older generations phase out of agriculture, we need more young farmers and ranchers on the land to be able to scale up these conservation practices and creatively address water scarcity while continuing to produce food for the nation.

In addition, we found that cost-share programs designed specifically to provide young and beginning farmers and ranchers with financial and technical support to improve conservation outcomes are not reaching them. Without this support, few young farmers and ranchers will be able to scale conservation practices in the years ahead. We also offer recommendations for increasing on-farm water conservation and efficiency, and protecting irrigated farm and rangeland that is accessible to young farmers and ranchers.

The 2018 Farm Bill: Recommendations to Support the Conservation Generation in the Colorado River Basin

For decades, the voluntary conservation and stewardship efforts of farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners have been supported by a series of federal laws collectively known as the Farm Bill. The Farm Bill represents the nation's largest investment supporting voluntary conservation and management of America's working lands and water resources. Farm Bill programs fund easements to protect agricultural lands, promote efforts to enhance water stewardship, assist farmers and ranchers in adapting to extreme weather and drought, support technical advisors to help landowners conserve natural resources, and much more. Several Farm Bill programs also provide for direct financial and technical assistance to young and beginning farmers and ranchers to develop and implement the skills and practices necessary to manage a viable operation in the face of a changing climate.

Efforts are underway to shape the development of the next Farm Bill, which expires in September 2018. This provides an opportunity to continue to support and expand programs and other resources that provide young and beginning farmers and ranchers with the tools they need to be good water stewards and help address water scarcity in the Colorado River Basin. NYFC will be working with Congress to build support for the following recommendations to ensure that the next Farm Bill will continue to play a critical role in promoting water conservation and efficiency, farm viability, climate resilience, farmland protection, and providing assistance to young and beginning farmers and ranchers struggling with water resource challenges such as drought.

Strengthen Incentives for Water Conservation and Efficiency

- Increase the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship (CSP) funding set-aside for Beginning Farmers and Ranchers from 5 to 15 percent to more

accurately reflect BFR demand for EQIP and CSP contracts;

- For EQIP, maintain existing benefits for historically underserved producers including the higher payment rate for installing conservation practices and the advance payment for the purpose of purchasing materials or services to implement a conservation practice;
- Establish a dedicated ranking pool and allocation of EQIP and CSP funds for a climate resilient agriculture initiative with the goal of accelerating implementation of core conservation practices that help agricultural producers build healthy soils, promote on-farm water stewardship, and enhance both farm viability and resiliency of land and water to extreme weather events;
- Establish a Small Acreage EQIP pilot program to make cost-share dollars more accessible to small acreage operations. The pilot program should also allow for more flexible land tenure requirements to allow producers with temporary land tenure arrangements to access cost-share assistance and streamline the conservation planning and application process to reduce the paperwork involved for both small acreage producers and NRCS to process contracts for smaller operations;
- Reauthorize the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) while also increasing the program's ability to provide technical assistance to partner organizations, adding support for beginning farmers and ranchers to program priorities, increasing funding for state-level projects, increasing the covered program RCPP funding reservation from 7 to 10 percent, and continuing to designate the Colorado River Basin as a Critical Conservation Area;
- Reauthorize the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program, which is USDA's only competitive grants

research and demonstration program focusing solely on sustainable agriculture;

Increase Participation by Young and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers in Conservation Cost-Share Programs

- Create a dedicated funding stream within the Conservation Title to advance outreach to beginning farmers and ranchers to encourage adoption of conservation practices. Funds will be allocated to local technical service providers (TSPs) for staff and training to assist beginning farmers in applying for USDA conservation programs. Funds may also be used for cooperative agreements between the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and other entities to expand conservation program marketing efforts
- Fund a Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coordinator for each region through the USDA Office of Advocacy and Outreach to coordinate technical assistance, facilitate cooperative agreements, and develop statewide outreach plans to help beginning farmers and ranchers gain access to all USDA programs and services;
- Over the next five years, increase mandatory funding for the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP), which can be used to develop training programs for agricultural service providers and beginning farmers on innovative water conservation and efficiency practices.

Protect Irrigated Farmland to Ensure Land and Water Access for Young and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers

- Maintain and enhance funding for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to increase farmland acreage protected and help protect agricultural water rights;

- Prioritize agricultural land easement project proposals that enhance both climate change mitigation and resiliency; for example, several state Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offices currently give higher priority to ACEP projects that will provide multiple benefits such as building soil health and climate resiliency and where landowners are already implementing practices identified in a conservation plan for the property;
- Increasing funding for the CRP Transition Incentives Program (TIP) to \$50 million over five years; this program provides retired/retiring landowners or operators with two additional annual rental payments on land enrolled in expiring CRP contracts, on the condition they sell or rent this land to a beginning farmer or rancher;
- Seek additional CRP-TIP reforms such as providing enhanced incentives for longer-term leases or sale to beginning farmers and ranchers and strengthening conservation provisions.

Ensure Racial Equity Across the USDA Conservation Programs

- Increase funding for programs that help historically underserved farmers and ranchers gain access to land and government services, such as the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program (known as 2501), the Highly Fractionated Indian Land Loan, the Indian Tribal Land Acquisition Loan, and the Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program;
- Develop an EQIP pilot program to evaluate indigenous production practices that conserve natural resources and install approved practices on tribal lands;
- Require collection and public release of demographic data to enhance Congressional oversight of USDA's efforts to address historic and existing racial disparities in federal farm programs.