



Photo by Ralph Pearce, Country Guide

Soil Health Policy

NATIONAL YOUNG FARMERS COALITION

The National Young Farmers Coalition (Young Farmers) represents, mobilizes, and engages young farmers and ranchers to ensure their success.

With the goal of helping 25,000 young people enter into viable farming careers by 2022, we tackle the most critical structural and economic issues that prevent motivated young people from starting and growing farm businesses.

In short, we are young farmers fighting for the future of agriculture in the U.S.

YOUNGFARMERS.ORG



A PERSPECTIVE FROM YOUNG FARMERS IN ILLINOIS

The havoc wrought on Midwest farms by historic flooding in 2019 brought to national attention, yet again, the impacts of climate change on U.S. agriculture. But for young farmers across the country and in the state of Illinois, last year is just one more season defined by a “new normal” of unpredictable weather and uncertain yields—closing out the hottest decade on record.¹ The impacts of these risks are not limited to yield fluctuations and disrupted planting schedules: these risks compound the multiple challenges already faced by young farmer communities.² In a moment when we need a new generation to enter the fields and steward our nation’s land—primary producers in the Prairie State over 65 now outnumber farmers under 35 by more than five to one³—limiting their exposure to and helping them manage climate risk is essential to supporting them in building farm businesses and revitalizing our rural communities.

We cannot expect our young farmers and ranchers to both produce the food, fiber, and fuel our country needs and accept a new normal when these individuals are weathering climate risk without substantial policy support. Moreover, we cannot build policy that does



1. National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Goddard Institute for Space Studies, “NASA, NOAA Analyses Reveal 2019 Second Warmest Year on Record”, January 15, 2020. <https://www.giss.nasa.gov/research/news/20200115/>.
2. National Young Farmers Coalition, “Building a Future with Farmers II,” November, 2017. <https://www.youngfarmers.org/resource/building-a-future-with-farmers-ii/>.
3. USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, “2017 Census of Agriculture – State Data: Illinois; Table 52. Selected Producer Characteristics: 2017 and 2012,” accessed January, 2020. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Illinois/st17_1_0052_0052.pdf.

not emerge from deep engagement with the farmers who stand witness to climate change and can share unique and valuable insights into the impacts climate change is having on food production, ecology, and rural communities.⁴

From its inception in 2010, the National Young Farmers Coalition (Young Farmers) has united farmers to shift our nation's agricultural policies to better reflect the diversity of young farmers and the challenges they face. And when it comes to climate change, we need climate policy that acknowledges the exceptional climate leadership capability of our young farmers.

Illinois Young Farmer Listening Sessions

In September 2019, the CHI+ILLINOIS and Central Illinois chapters of Young Farmers held listening sessions to discuss the impacts of climate, how farmers are implementing climate action, and the opportunities to shape soil health policy that puts young farmers first. The sessions convened 38 young farmers in Chicago and Georgetown. This brief is meant to reflect some of our discussion and encourage an ongoing conversation between young farmers and Illinois policy makers and farm policy advocates.

Climate Impacts

For young farmers in both Central Illinois and in the Chicago area, the most significant way that climate change is impacting their operations is through the compounding effects of year-to-year uncertainty and multiple extreme weather events per year. Overall predictability of seasonal timing has become very difficult, and extreme weather puts crops and animals at risk from flooding and heat stress. Farmers are also feeling the financial, physical, and mental health impacts of climate change. Persistent uncertainty makes it difficult to design successful business plans in an already risky and cost intensive industry with narrow financial margins,

leading some young farmers to take a break from farming or to pursue other careers. This is a form of attrition that Illinois must respond to urgently to help ensure the success of the next generation of farmers and to invest in their potential to mitigate climate change.

“There is a drought of climate research in Illinois on the issues we are confronting. There’s a lot more research on the coasts and in Europe but here in the Midwest, the resources just aren’t there.”

–Listening Session Attendee

Climate Resilience in Practice

To adapt to the impacts of climate change, young farmers are educating themselves and experimenting and innovating on their own and within their communities; testing new seasonal and perennial crops and crop varieties, experimenting with value-added processes to make use of bumper crops, investing in soil health and infrastructure, and adjusting their farm business and marketing plans to try to ensure that whatever the next season brings, they will have enough success to make it through. Listening session attendees reported that they are doing this adaptation work largely on their own, and that institutional resources are not moving quickly enough to respond to the pace of new threats farmers are facing from a changing climate. More updated research is needed to aid young farmers in making adaptation decisions.

4. National Young Farmers Coalition, “Young Farmers Call for Climate Action”, September, 2019. <https://www.youngfarmers.org/2019/09/climatestatement/>

Recommendations for Policy Makers

The next generation of farmers are on the front lines of climate change and on the leading edge of how to adapt to and mitigate climate impacts. They deserve to not only have a seat at the table where agriculture and climate change policy are being discussed, they deserve creative and equitable policy change. Overwhelmingly, what young farmers want from soil health policy makers is to be heard, consulted, and represented. They want resources developed and designed with their unique challenges in mind. They want policies that do not perpetuate barriers limiting opportunities for young farmers; that recognize the innovation and dedication new farmers bring to climate action; that reflect this generation's prioritization of racial equity and social justice.

There is no substitute for bringing young farmers to the table on agricultural policy—in particular, soil health policy. The following insights and recommendations emerged from the voices of farmers at our listening sessions. **Our chief recommendation to policy makers is to expand opportunities for these leaders, innovators, and activists to shape the policies that will ensure we successfully act on climate change.** As policy makers consider changes to support climate action and soil health in Illinois, we encourage them to incorporate young farmers' voices.

“We want to build cooperative structures to support each other, but government structures are standing in the way and holding back communities of color.”

—Listening Session Attendee



From our listening sessions, we heard many of the following concerns as well as opportunities for the next generation of farmers and soil health policy:

YOUNG FARMER CHALLENGES ARE SOIL HEALTH CHALLENGES

The barriers to young farmers getting on the land and building successful businesses also stand in the way of those young farmers stewarding the land. In working to address soil health, policy makers must also consider solutions to; land access and long-term land tenure; access to credit; access to health care, including mental and behavioral health resources; and student loan debt forgiveness.

STACKED INCENTIVES AND COMPENSATION FOR LONG-TERM PRACTICES

Young farmers already deeply value soil health. While transition incentives are important, policy makers should consider incorporating incentives that reward past, ongoing, and layered practices; recognizing the public service and ecosystem benefits being provided through resilient system-wide approaches.



MORE ACCESSIBLE AND APPROPRIATE GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

Farmers need grant programs that match their unique needs and that are designed to be efficient and easy to apply for. For many young farmers, a small grant award can make a large difference in their farm operation, but complicated processes diminish those gains. In particular, policy makers should consider adjusting or adding to traditional per-acre metrics – more than 2,600 principle producers age 35 or younger in Illinois are farming on less than 50 acres.⁵

EXPANDED DIRECT TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE THAT IS SITE SPECIFIC

Farmers asked for more technical assistance accessing available resources as well as navigating the unique challenges that climate change presents. Policy makers should consider expanding support for Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Agricultural Extension agents.

INVESTMENTS IN UPDATED AND CLIMATE SPECIFIC RESEARCH

Institutions must catch up to the realities of our changing climate by directing research to better support the agronomic practices of next generation farmers who

5. USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, "2017 Census of Agriculture – State Data: Illinois; Table 67. Young Producers Selected Farm Characteristics: 2017," accessed February, 2020

often manage diversified crop productions, and by supporting research into perennial crops and climate adaptation.

FARMER-TO-FARMER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Often the best way to learn and innovate is to work with other farmers grappling with similar challenges. Young farmers are eager to support each other through building community and sharing knowledge. They need more spaces and resources designed to support this peer-to-peer learning.

IMPROVED CONNECTIONS WITH POLICY MAKERS AT ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

Young farmers are often not plugged into the traditional pathways to power. They would benefit from more liaisons and touch-points between city, local, and state governments to help ensure that farmers can navigate opportunities and understand the policies impacting their success.

IMPROVED AGGREGATION, VALUE-ADDED PROCESSING, AND DISTRIBUTION

Climate change brings violent weather patterns, but can also bring unexpected bumper crops. Farms need more flexible supply chain and processing networks to respond to a wide variety of crops and potential value-added innovation.

COMMON SENSE COMPOSTING AND WATER ACCESS REGULATIONS

Urban and rural farmers reported difficulty navigating local regulations governing compost use and transportation. Urban farmers also expressed serious concerns with the complexity and consistency of local regulations governing water access. Effective implementation of soil health practices requires access to affordable clean water and high quality compost.

INVESTMENTS IN SMALL, PRACTICAL ON-FARM TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS

To be climate resilient, farmers need good data on what is happening in their soil and water. Simple, effective technology could support affordable on-farm soil and water testing.

CLIMATE-FOCUSED INSURANCE PRODUCTS DESIGNED FOR SMALLER OPERATIONS

Policy makers should consider creative farm insurance models that reflect the realities of climate risk and direct-to-consumer operations.

CONNECTING CONSUMERS MORE DIRECTLY WITH LOCAL PRODUCERS

Policy makers should consider investing more resources in local food access initiatives, healthcare incentives, and improved consumer education (starting in the classroom about the connection between climate, agriculture, and the food on their table).

INCREASED DIRECT FUNDING FOR ORGANIZATIONS WHO ARE ALREADY MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Local and statewide organizations who are focused on hearing and responding to young farmer challenges, such as Illinois Stewardship Alliance, Land Connection, Chicago Food Policy Action Council, and Advocates for Urban Agriculture.

As Illinois agricultural organizations and policy makers consider further policy change to support soil health practices across the state and respond to the serious and immediate threats farmers are facing from climate change, we urge you to ensure that young Illinois farmers are heard and well represented.

This next generation of farmers will steward Illinois' rich agricultural landscape and will be a crucial asset in mitigating and adapting to our changing climate.



About Our Illinois Young Farmer Chapters

The National Young Farmers Coalition is committed to advocating for young farmers across the country, tackling the unique and systemic challenges they are facing at local, state, and federal levels. Our farmer-led chapters are a crucial element in this work; informing our priorities and powering our policy campaigns by using their lived experiences and voices to drive agricultural policy change. Our Illinois chapters represent a diverse mix of young farmer communities in and around the Chicago area and in the central part of the state. While each farmer faces challenges unique to their experience and the environment they are farming in, there are common threats to their success that are shared across regions and across the country.



CHI+ILLINOIS Young Farmers Coalition

The CHI+ILLINOIS Young Farmers Coalition is a group of beginning farmers in Northern Illinois, including urban, suburban and rural farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs and experts. Their mission is to provide resources for aspiring and beginning sustainable farmers in northern Illinois through a platform of social engagement and policy action.

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Central Illinois Young Farmers Coalition

The Central Illinois Young Farmers Coalition is open to farmers of all ages, as well as chefs, farmer advocates, and aspiring farmers, who are leading the way to create a healthier, more hopeful food system. The group plans to organize social and learning events for its members and hopes to advocate for progressive food systems policy, as well as collaborate on processing and marketing projects.

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THANK YOU TO OUR PROJECT SUPPORTERS:

