



November 22, 2019

Rep. Kathy Castor, Chair
Select Committee on the Climate Crisis
U.S. House of Representatives
H2-359 Ford Building
Washington, DC 20024

Rep. Garrett Graves, Ranking Member
Select Committee on the Climate Crisis
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Chairwoman Castor and Ranking Member Graves:

From its inception in 2010, the **National Young Farmers Coalition** (Young Farmers) has brought farmers together to tackle the obstacles preventing the next generation from building successful careers in agriculture. Climate change poses a grave threat to the agriculture industry, and by extension to everyone who depends upon it for their everyday food, feed, and fiber needs. While farmers and ranchers are dealing with the effects of the climate crisis head-on, they are also a critical part of the solution. As the Select Committee works to propose legislative solutions to this global emergency, agriculture must be at the center of the climate conversation.

Young Farmers and Ranchers are Already Feeling Climate Change Impacts

Tools and resources to assist with adaptation to a changing climate are imperative, as young farmers and ranchers are already feeling the impacts of climate change. Of the 3,500 young farmer respondents to the 2017 National Young Farmer Survey, 66% reported experiencing the impacts of the climate crisis: unpredictable weather patterns, more severe storms, increased pest pressure, increased uncertainty in water supply, and/or increased rate of disease.¹ Young farmers and ranchers are facing the doubly difficult task of beginning their careers in a challenging industry at a time when their environment is rapidly changing.

Further, Young Farmers recognizes that these impacts are not felt equally by all. The most vulnerable communities are least able to adapt due to limited resources, structural marginalization, and poverty. Crop loss, food shortages, distribution disruption, and eventual increases in food prices and access will impact communities of color and low-income communities first. Question 11b in the Request for Information asks, “How can Congress better

¹ Building a Future with Farmers II: Results and Recommendations from the National Young Farmer Survey. 2017. <https://www.youngfarmers.org/resource/building-a-future-with-farmers-ii/>

identify and reduce climate risks for front-line communities, including ensuring that low and moderate-income populations and communities that suffer from racial discrimination can effectively grapple with climate change?” Young Farmers encourages the Select Committee to apply the same lens to its agricultural proposals.

In many cases, practices that help farmers adapt to the changing climate also provide climate change mitigation and carbon sequestration opportunities. For example, when a farmer applies soil health practices to increase the amount of organic matter in her soil, she also increases the ability of her land to retain moisture in instances of drought or to absorb moisture in instances of heavy rainfall. This overlapping of benefits is reflected in the proposals shared below.

Young Farmers and Ranchers are Part of the Solution

Despite the climate challenges already being faced by young farmers and ranchers, it has been well-documented that they need to be part of the solution. As highlighted by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition’s “Agriculture and Climate Change” report, myriad studies have documented the climate benefits of farms and ranches operated with a systems approach to conservation; further, conservation practices are among the most cost-effective solutions to reducing overall U.S. emissions.² However, these climate benefits cannot be achieved and continued without a new generation of farmers and ranchers to carefully steward agricultural lands.

Young farmers and ranchers are already working to do their part. In the 2017 National Young Farmers Survey, 75% of respondents described their farming practices as “sustainable.” Seventeen percent of respondents were USDA certified organic, compared with the 1% national average.³ According to a 2012 meta-analysis of factors that impact farmer adoption of conservation practices, “[a]ge has a significant and negative impact on BMP [Best Management Practice] adoption, suggesting that older farmers may have a shorter planning horizon than younger farmers.”⁴ Investments in the success of young farmers and ranchers means an investment in a new generation of growers who are able to continue their conservation practices throughout their agricultural careers.

This hopeful solution is undermined by several worrying trends:

- The average age of farmers continues to climb—up to 59.4 in the 2017 Census of Agriculture. Farmers over the age of 65 outnumber farmers under the age of 35 by a ratio of six to one.
- Though agricultural land makes up nearly one-half of the landmass of the United States, that land is being lost to development at a rate of nearly three acres per minute.⁵ With

² National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. 2019. Agriculture and Climate Change: Policy Imperatives and Opportunities to Help Producers Meet the Challenge. Washington D.C.

³ Building a Future with Farmers II: Results and Recommendations from the National Young Farmer Survey. 2017. <https://www.youngfarmers.org/resource/building-a-future-with-farmers-ii/>

⁴ Baumgart-Getz, Adam; Prokopy, Linda Stalker; and Floress, Kristin, "Why farmers adopt best management practice in the United States: A meta-analysis of the adoption literature" (2012). US Army Research. 179. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/usarmyresearch/179>

⁵ Sorensen, A. A., J. Freedgood, J. Dempsey and D. M. Theobald. 2018. Farms Under Threat: The State of America’s Farmland. Washington, DC: American Farmland Trust.

each acre lost to development, we lose its capacity for carbon sequestration, maintaining regional food production, food security, water retention, and air quality.

- Beyond the permanent loss of land to development, communities of color also deal with land loss because of challenges around heirs property;⁶ according to the Census Bureau, 80 percent of land owned by black farmers has been lost since 1910, partially due to challenges of heirs' property.

These trends of an aging population and a shrinking agricultural land base will undermine the potential of agriculture to be a part of the solution to climate change if not addressed in the very near term.

The responses below, in addition to proposing climate change solutions that work for all of agriculture, highlight this important fact: **young farmers and ranchers must be supported in order to maintain and improve the stewardship of U.S. agricultural land to combat climate change.** Specifically, Young Farmers proposes that Congress:

- Improve outreach, education, and technical assistance for climate resilient agricultural practices,
- Strengthen financial incentives for on-farm climate resilience,
- Increase affordable land access opportunities and secure land tenure for farmers and ranchers, and
- Prioritize research and data collection on climate change and agriculture.

Young Farmers thanks the Select Committee for its work on the vitally important issue of addressing climate change, and for its consideration of these proposals. We look forward to continuing to work with you to empower young farmers and ranchers to tackle the climate crisis.

Sincerely,



Sophie Ackoff
Co-Executive Director



Martin Lemos
Co-Executive Director

⁶ As defined by the Georgia Heirs Property Law Center, "Heirs property refers to a home or land that passes from generation to generation without a legally designated owner resulting in ownership divided among all living descendants in a family." <https://www.gaheirsproperty.org/heirs-property>

6. What policies should Congress adopt to reduce carbon pollution and other greenhouse gas emissions and maximize carbon storage in agriculture?

I. Improve outreach, education, and technical assistance for climate resilient agricultural practices.

- a. **Fully staff Natural Resources Conservation Service offices and devote more staff time to technical assistance and outreach.** Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) at USDA provides farmers and ranchers with hands-on, customized help to improve the environmental performance of their operations. Serious gaps have opened in USDA's technical assistance network due to declining staff levels and budget for program implementation. From fiscal years 2003 to 2012, the size of the workforce declined at all of the USDA's service center agencies, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), further limiting the capacity of local field offices to conduct outreach concerning available programs and services.⁷ Congress should increase funding for CTA, and ensure staff is trained on applying climate-resilient principles on small-scale farming operations and on working with young, beginning, and socially disadvantaged farmers.
- b. **Increase the capacity of the Technical Service Provider network.** As third-party conservation experts, Technical Service Providers build on the capacity of NRCS to provide customized conservation solutions to farmers and ranchers. Congress should encourage state and local partners to streamline and accelerate the TSP certification and training process by coordinating state and local training opportunities with those offered by NRCS. For example, the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension provides a series of online courses and materials for individuals interested in becoming TSPs with a focus on nutrient management. A similar network of coordinated TSP training programs should be established for climate-resilient agriculture through university or public agency programs designed to meet TSP certification requirements for irrigation water management, soil health management, climate resilience, and other conservation areas critical to promoting on-farm climate stewardship practices. NRCS should also offer more TSP training opportunities focused on small-scale farming operations, sustainable agriculture methods and practices, and challenges faced by young, beginning, and socially disadvantaged farmers, to ensure investments are made equitably.
- c. **Fully fund Cooperative Extension and build a network of climate resiliency specialists within the Cooperative Extension System.** The Cooperative Extension System (CES) is a nationwide network that draws on research from land grant universities to provide localized conservation assistance (among other topics). Federal funding for the CES has declined in the past 20 years, leading to a corresponding decline in the number of extension staff over time and across

⁷ United States Government Accountability Office. (2014). USDA: *Workforce Decisions Could Benefit from Better Linkage to Missions and Use of Leading Practices*. <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/662175.pdf>

regions.⁸ Congress should increase federal funding for CES programs through the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) to account for the loss of state and local dollars. Young Farmers also encourages Congress and USDA to direct NIFA dollars to support new CES training and outreach targeting young and beginning farmers and ranchers and promoting climate-resilient agriculture practices. In particular, Young Farmers recommends increasing funding for NIFA's Family & Small Farm Program, which provides financial and technical support to CES to develop outreach programs for smaller farming operations, including those in urban and semi-urban areas.⁹

- d. ***Increase funding for the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program and encourage coordination across projects.*** Through the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP), a part of the Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach (FOTO) Program at USDA, farmers and ranchers receive training, education, and technical assistance from organizations in their communities. This program allows farmers and ranchers to begin or maintain their agricultural operations—a necessary first step to allowing their continued stewardship of agricultural lands. Congress should continue to increase funding for this program in future farm bills, and fully appropriate additional funds on an annual basis.

When compared to other parts of the country, BFRDP remains underutilized in the Intermountain West and Colorado River Basin, two areas of the U.S. greatly impacted by climate change.¹⁰ NIFA should work with regional partners to develop and implement BFRDP projects in under-served regions, with the two-fold goal of (1) improving access to information and technical support on climate-resilient agricultural practices (i.e. soil health management), and (2) increasing the adoption of these practices. Congress should also encourage enhanced coordination between BFRDP projects to develop a strong climate-resilient agriculture training network and support ongoing efforts across the country.

- e. ***Increase funding for the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program (also called the 2501 Program).*** The 2501 Program, also part of FOTO at USDA, funds organizations working to address the needs of socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers and ranchers, including helping farmers and ranchers address heirs property and other land transition issues. In order to ensure that farmers of color and veteran farmers are able to continue their operations and steward their agricultural land, Congress should continue to increase funding for this program in future farm bills, and fully appropriate additional funds on an annual basis.

⁸ Sun Ling Wang. (2014). "Cooperative Extension System: Trends and Economic Impacts on U.S. Agriculture," Choices.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The Land Stewardship Project. (2016). Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program; Progress Report on 2015 Awards.

- f. ***Ensure that technical assistance is culturally appropriate for distinct populations of farmers and ranchers.*** Federal resources and programs should be offered in a culturally appropriate manner to farming populations, especially socially disadvantaged groups and historically under-served producers. Congress should mandate that any technical assistance and training be made available in multiple languages, be presented in relevant pedagogies, and reach beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. Technical assistance should incorporate indigenous and culturally-relevant production practices when working with populations that use traditional methods. Many traditional and indigenous farming practices, such as cover cropping, crop rotation, intercropping, agroforestry, organic composting, and integrating crop-animal agriculture, have been “climate-smart” for thousands of years.

II. Strengthen financial incentives for on-farm climate resilience.

- a. ***Expand existing conservation programs to meet demand.*** The USDA NRCS manages many conservation programs that help farmers and ranchers address their conservation goals and needs. Congress should provide additional funds to existing programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), that focus on helping farmers and ranchers change their practices and systems towards more climate-smart options. These programs work effectively and are generally well-utilized among farmers and ranchers: There are more than 70 million acres of land enrolled in CSP, and over 42,800 active EQIP contracts in 2018.¹¹ However, funding is not adequate to meet the full demand for these voluntary programs. Congress should increase funding to levels commensurate with the unmet demand for these programs.
- b. ***Increase the CSP and EQIP set-asides for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.*** As stated above, CSP and EQIP are popular and effective programs to help farmers and ranchers improve their environmental performance. With beginning farmers operating 25 percent of farms in the United States, and an increase in socially disadvantaged farmers from 2007 to 2017, it is important to update funding priorities in the conservation programs to better reflect the changing demographics among farmers and ranchers.
- c. ***Create a microEQIP program.*** Beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged farmers, and other underserved producers typically operate on fewer acres than their counterparts. In addition, small farms make up 90 percent of farms,

¹¹ Natural Resources Conservation Service Conservation Stewardship Program Program Report: https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/NRCS_RCA/reports/fb08_cp_cstp.html
Natural Resources Conservation Service Environmental Quality Incentives Program Program Report: https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/NRCS_RCA/reports/fb08_cp_eqip.html

operating nearly half of farmland in the United States.¹² Congress should establish an EQIP pilot program specifically designed to work for small farm and ranch operations. Federal farm policy should recognize that multiple and diverse models and scales of agricultural operations are necessary for agriculture to not only adapt, but also mitigate, the current and emerging climate conditions.

- d. ***Establish a new Landscape Conservation Initiative at NRCS focused specifically on water conservation and climate resilience.*** In developing new national initiatives, Congress should encourage NRCS and local partners to incorporate a broader range of conservation practices that provide increased drought resiliency, carbon sequestration, and enhanced instream flows for fish and wildlife as compounded benefits. For example, through this initiative more funding could be set aside to promote agricultural conservation practices that increase water-sharing opportunities and protect the farmer or rancher's water rights while making the producer financially whole.
- e. ***Fund on-farm carbon sequestration and pay-for-performance programs.*** Pay-for-performance environmental programs have the potential to efficiently incentivize farmers and ranchers for the ecosystem services that they provide for society at large. For these programs to be successful, Congress must provide resources to increase USDA's ability to measure, evaluate, and report on the carbon sequestration, soil health, and greenhouse gas mitigation benefits of farm conservation programs and practices. USDA should then utilize that data to pilot and develop pay-for-performance models based on soil health science and evidence-based carbon sequestration outcomes. In developing these pilot programs, additional care must be given to streamline the process for farmer and rancher participation to allow for small-scale, beginning, young, and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers to benefit. These pilot programs may also spur public-private partnerships, or serve as an effective model for privately-run markets.

III. **Increase affordable land access opportunities and secure land tenure for farmers and ranchers.**

- a. ***Increase funding for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.*** Since 1996, federal conservation easement programs have permanently protected over 1.6 million acres of farmland and rangeland from loss to development.¹³ Protecting agricultural land through the USDA's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) increases opportunities for farmers and ranchers to access affordable land and enables them to pursue conservation systems essential to combating climate change as landowners. Further, permanently protecting agricultural lands from development ensures that their carbon storage capacity is

¹² Robert Hoppe and James M. MacDonald. USDA. Economic Research Service. (2016) America's Diverse Family Farms, 2016 Edition. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details?pubid=81401>

¹³ American Farmland Trust. "Our History." <https://farmland.org/about/our-history/>

maintained into the future. Congress should increase funds to these programs to meet the demand of landowners working to preserve their land, livelihoods, and environment.

- b. ***Prioritize working farm easements within the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.*** Congress should ensure secure land tenure for young farmers and ranchers by pursuing policies that make working farm and ranch lands affordable and accessible. Secure land tenure allows conservation-minded producers to access land and implement conservation practices in addition to providing long-term security for making conservation investments. By prioritizing agricultural viability in federally funded easements, taxpayer dollars will be used more efficiently: not only is the land protected from development as described above, but it will remain under active management and stewardship by a farmer or rancher who can continue to actively apply conservation practices as well.
- c. ***Create tax incentives for land to transition to beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.*** Similarly, to ensure affordability and access, Congress should use tax incentives to facilitate the transfer of land to beginning and socially disadvantaged producers. Tax incentives, like a reduction in the capital gains tax or tax credits for land sold or rented to beginning or socially disadvantaged farmers, can help reduce the cost of land in order to facilitate the transfer of land to a new farmer.
- d. ***Address other barriers to land ownership by beginning farmers and ranchers.*** While not strictly environmental or land-based interventions, it should be noted that there are many additional barriers that keep young farmers and ranchers from building successful and sustainable operations. In particular, Young Farmers stresses that student loan debt keeps many first-generation farmers and ranchers from being able to access the credit needed to purchase land or grow their operations. Additionally, the need to make monthly student loan payments prevents many college-educated young people from pursuing agricultural careers in the first place. In supporting the next generation of stewards of U.S. agricultural lands, Congress should take a holistic approach to reducing their barriers to entry.
- e. ***Provide increased resources to address the issue of heirs property.*** As noted above, heirs property poses a significant issue to many farm families of color, many times resulting in the loss of land. Congress took an important step towards addressing this issue in the 2018 Farm Bill with the introduction of the Relending Program to Resolve Ownership and Succession on Farmland. This program should be fully funded through the appropriations process, and based on the outcomes of the initial implementation, should be amended to continue serving the needs of farm families with undivided interests. Young Farmers supports the proposals of the Rural Coalition to further prevent land loss due to heirs property.

7. What policies should Congress adopt to help farmers, ranchers, and natural resource managers adapt to the impacts of climate change?

I. Focus on conservation practices and systems that provide simultaneous adaptation and mitigation benefits.

- a. As noted above, many of the same practices and systems that allow farmers and ranchers to mitigate their climate impacts also help make them more resilient to the changing climate. For this reason, Young Farmers reinforces the importance of the proposals above that address climate change adaptation in addition to mitigation.

In particular, the proposals to improve outreach, education, and technical assistance for climate resilient agricultural practices and to strengthen financial incentives for on-farm climate resilience above should also be viewed as adaptation opportunities.

II. Strengthen risk management strategies to support young farmer and rancher operations.

- a. ***Continue to improve Whole Farm Revenue Protection.*** Young Farmers highlights the need for improved risk management for farmers and ranchers as they are dealing with an increasingly variable climate. In particular, the Whole Farm Revenue Program provides the potential for farmers to craft a policy that fits their needs because of high diversification or innovative practices, insuring the expected revenue on their entire operation rather than by crop. However, the program has room for improvement by reducing the amount of paperwork required, as it can be burdensome for highly diversified farms; improving the ability of farmers to account for expected growth, especially as this happens exponentially at the beginnings of their careers; ensuring that the indemnity payments are meaningful for farmers dealing with natural disasters; and increasing training for USDA staff conducting outreach on this policy.¹⁴

¹⁴ Cara Fraver, Scott Marlow, and Jonathan Coppess. 2019. “Specialty Crop Risk Management: An Issue Paper on the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program and Whole Farm Revenue Protection Insurance.” <https://foodandagpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/08/2019-April-Specialty-Crop-Risk-Management.pdf>

12. Our understanding and response to the climate crisis has relied on U.S. climate observations, monitoring and research, including regular assessment reports such as the National Climate Assessment. What policies should Congress adopt to maintain and expand these efforts in order to support solutions to the climate crisis and provide decisionmakers – and the American people – with the information they need? Where possible, recommend the scale of investment needed to achieve results.

I. Prioritize research and data collection on climate change and agriculture.

- a. *Invest in new and ongoing research on climate and agriculture.*** Congress should strengthen production systems by accelerating investment in public research on agriculture systems with focused attention to agroecology, soil health for agricultural resilience, perennials, biodiversity, and on-farm adaptation and mitigation strategies.
- b. *Authorize the USDA climate hubs.*** Congress should officially recognize the USDA climate hubs and the value they provide in the form of regionally-specific information and training to build support for on-farm conservation practices.
- c. *Improve access to cheap and effective tools for monitoring and evaluating on-farm water use and soil health.*** Young Farmers encourages Congress to set aside funding for agricultural service providers to purchase necessary equipment and resources to promote on-farm soil and water conservation practices. In particular, Congress should establish a revolving loan and/or block grant program for states to provide funding to agricultural service providers to purchase water and soil-moisture measuring equipment. This could include mobile irrigation labs to assist agricultural water users in quantifying water use, conserving existing water use, and reducing dependence on groundwater and surface water supplies, for example.

The new conservation equipment access program could be modeled after successful state programs. The South Dakota Department of Agriculture’s Conservation Revolving Loan Program makes loans available for conservation districts to secure the necessary equipment, materials, and supplies needed to further their programs.¹⁵ The Texas Water Development Board’s Agricultural Water Conservation Grants Program offers grants to state agencies and political subdivisions for technical assistance, education, and metering projects that conserve water.¹⁶ Through this program, conservation districts have been able to purchase irrigation water meters and fund demonstration projects designed to provide producers with better information concerning water use and conservation strategies tailored to their operations.

¹⁵ South Dakota Department of Agriculture. “Conservation Tillage Loan,” <https://sdda.sd.gov/conservation-forestry/grants-loans/conservation-tillage-loan/>

¹⁶ Texas Water Development Board. “Agricultural Water Conservation Grants,” <https://www.twdb.texas.gov/financial/programs/awcg/index.asp>

- d. ***Prioritize research on farmland ownership, tenure, and transition.*** In order to understand the success of interventions intended to help farmers and ranchers access land and help farmers of color maintain land tenure, additional data collection is needed. Congress made an important step in this direction by authorizing data and analysis on farmland ownership, tenure, transition, and entry of beginning farmers and ranchers and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in the 2018 Farm Bill. This analysis should be fully funded through the appropriations process and carried out on a regular basis.