

Farm Bill Fact Sheet

Protect farmers and mitigate climate chaos with increased incentives and full funding for conservation programs in the Agriculture Improvement Act, the 2023 Farm Bill

Nancy Polan 4/7/23

We know that immediate action is needed to lessen the rate and severity of the climate crisis. The [Sixth Assessment Report](#) by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released on March 20, 2023, synthesizes years of analysis of the causes and consequences of rising temperatures, concludes that we are now unlikely to avoid the targeted limit of 1.5^o C. above pre-industrial levels by 2030. The report concludes that we possess the tools and knowledge to address this crisis, but we don't have the political will necessary at this pivotal moment.

In an effort to address the crisis, the [Food, Soils, and Agriculture team](#), one of ten issue teams in the LWVUS Climate Interest Group, (CIG) has assembled science-based data and developed outreach and education materials for League members, policymakers, and the public. League members are encouraged to use these educational tools to raise public and Congressional understanding of the potential power of the Farm Bill to slow global warming.

The current agricultural system is responsible for 11% of US GHG emissions, which would be considerably higher if fertilizer production is included. Recent [research](#) shows that "global food consumption alone could add nearly 1 °C (1.8°F) to warming by 2100. If the food system is transformed and more climate practices adopted, an [analysis](#) by the Environmental Working Group indicates that soil" beneath croplands, and pastures is capable of storing enough carbon to offset [annual U.S. GHG emissions by up to 10%](#).

The Agriculture Improvement Act, known as the Farm Bill, can become an historic climate law – *but only if environmental and conservation initiatives are fully funded and farmers are incentivized to use climate smart practices*. Major USDA conservation programs like the Conservation Stewardship Program and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) have notoriously long waiting lists. About three-quarters of the farmers who apply for those programs can't get funding. 75%! *Currently a large percentage of conservation funds are not used to reduce GHGs*, for example "In 2020, [only 21.5 percent of EQIP spending](#) went to practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In 2019 and 2020, more than \$100 million went to EQIP practices, like animal waste storage facilities, that increase greenhouse gas emissions."

Unfortunately, some members of Congress are [questioning the need to increase conservation funding](#). Some members are even eyeing the farm bill as a chance to redirect climate smart agriculture money to increase crop subsidies and insurance programs for corn and soy, currently grown in detrimental ways, while other conservative lawmakers want across-the-board spending cuts.

The transition to regenerative, healthy soils practices is expensive. Once adopted, however, regenerative practices bring long-term savings through reduced need for fertilizer and pesticides, and greater crop yields. Most farmers lose money during the first few years of transitioning to organic and regenerative farming practices. Lack of funding for the transition is holding back many small and mid-size farmers who want to adopt climate friendly practices. Most subsidies now go to giant commodity farms that grow corn and soy primarily in the Midwest growing corn and soy to pay for big

machinery and huge amounts of fertilizers and pesticides. Current practices on these large farms degrade soil and make them less resilient to erratic weather, floods, and drought. Extreme weather events due to climate change are quickly washing and blowing away the richest soils in the country. Iowa is currently [losing soil faster](#) than at the height of the 1930s dust bowl!

The 2023 Farm Bill must increase funding for small and mid-size farms. Based on their size, Massachusetts farmers are unable to compete for some subsidies and grants that are only available to farms larger than 1,000 acres. Massachusetts would benefit from additional federal funds for rural and urban farmers: to adopt regenerative practices: to build local agricultural markets; for more farm-to-school programs; more community farms; more school farms; and mobile farmers market vans. There is a critical need for incentives and programs that support new and beginning farmers, including extra support for people of color and indigenous farmers.

On March 8th, a group of [Massachusetts farmers joined a climate rally](#) in Washington, D.C. and met with legislators to ask for climate change policy to be a priority in the 2023 Farm bill. Sarah Voiland, an organic farmer in Montague, said, "We wanted to join in asking Congress to help diversified organic farms like ours withstand increasingly erratic weather, like the record rainfall [that] drowned our crops in 2021 and the subsequent drought in 2022." They met with U.S. Senators Ed Markey and Elizabeth Warren, and U.S. Representatives Jim McGovern, Richard Neal and Ayanna Pressley, who all expressed support for making climate change a priority.

Organizations like the [National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#) are pushing Congress to boost funds for already existing conservation programs that help farmers. In addition to reducing GHG emissions, conservation programs prevent soil erosion, create wildlife habitat, and clean water.

Additional federal resources can help farmers with education, technical assistance, and funding to improve soil health and lock carbon in the ground by using regenerative practices such as:

- reduced pesticide use
- reduced use of fertilizers that emit nitrous oxide, a very potent greenhouse gas
- no-till farming
- cover crops planting
- agroforestry – integrating animal grazing among crop trees
- [Plant hedgerows](#) to help sequester carbon in the soil, manage pests, and provide habitat for pollinators and other wildlife.

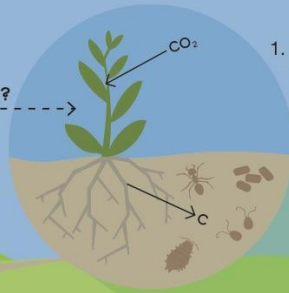
In addition, funding is needed for research and technology to determine the best farming methods for sequestering carbon – a key metric for measuring farming effectiveness at combating climate change.

Additional Resources:

- The recently released [Massachusetts Healthy Soils Action Plan](#), the first of its kind in the U.S., is an excellent resource for farmers.
- 2023 LWV of California's [Climate Smart Agriculture and Food Action Policy](#)
- [Climate change isn't high priority for \\$1.2 billion USDA farm stewardship program, Environmental Working Group, 4/22](#)

STORING CARBON
RE(STORE)IT!
RESTORING SOILS

HOW DOES IT WORK?



1. Plants absorb carbon dioxide & turn it into a carbon-based sugar
2. These sugars allow the plant to grow & absorb more carbon
3. Roots store & release some sugars deep into the soil
4. Organisms eat the sugars & build healthy soil

PERENNIAL PLANTS & DIVERSE CROPS
Provides harvests for several growing seasons from a single planting

COMPOSTING
Supplies nutrients to improve the health of soils and crops

MANAGED GRAZING
Rotation of livestock according to forage availability & soil health

FARMERS USE THESE METHODS

COVER CROPPING & CROP ROTATION
Covers exposed ground between plantings

ZERO OR LOW TILLAGE & MULCHING
Reduces ground disturbance & protects soils with natural cover



BENEFITS OF REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE

These practices have many benefits, from local to global.

Farmlands are restored for long-term sustained use, making surrounding communities & environments more resilient.

Research shows that regenerative agriculture could sequester 100 percent of yearly CO₂ emissions, a significant step towards reversing climate change.

BUILDS HEALTHY FARMLANDS

- improves soil health & structure
- improves water holding capacity of soil
- reduces erosion
- increases production
- improves adaptation to climate change

SUPPORTS FARMERS & FARMWORKERS

- reduces exposure to harmful chemicals
- improves & revitalizes rural economies
- reduces time, labor, input, & fuel costs
- improves quality of life

PROTECTS LOCAL ENVIRONMENTS

- improves biodiversity & wildlife habitats
- reduces air & water pollution from dust, manure, & pesticides
- reduces use of synthetic chemicals
- reduces unused plant & animal wastes

BENEFITS CONSUMERS & THEIR FAMILIES

- improves nutritional quality of food
- improves diversity of diets
- improves food security
- reduces exposure to toxic chemicals

REVERSES GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE

- reduces respiration of carbon from soil
- improves capacity of soil to store carbon
- reduces emissions from input production
- reduces on-farm fuel use

Implementation is site specific and depends on soil characteristics, crops grown, & local climates. Practices are rooted in organic methods and can be integrated into farms and pastures transitioning from conventional to organic.
Learn more: <https://greenamerica.org/restore-it>

