



Testimony for the Record
by the Environmental Working Group
Submitted to the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry of the House
Agriculture Committee
A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: The Role of USDA Programs in Addressing Climate
Change
March 16, 2022

To avoid the worst effects of climate change, we must reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture.

Agriculture is a significant and growing [source](#) of greenhouse gas emissions that, if left unaddressed, will jeopardize our efforts to avoid a climate crisis. In particular, [nitrous oxide](#) emissions from fertilizing crops and animal feed, and the [methane](#) emissions from livestock and their manure, are growing sources of greenhouse gas emissions. Unless we reduce nitrous oxide, carbon dioxide and methane emissions from agriculture, we will fail to make the greenhouse gas reductions [needed](#) to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

Voluntary conservation programs administered by the Department of Agriculture (USDA) could play a significant role in reducing the impacts of farm pollution, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and mitigating the effects of climate change.

Unfortunately, many farmers are [turned away by USDA](#) when they apply to participate in voluntary conservation programs because the agency lacks the resources to accommodate them. Last year alone, more than 100,000 farmers were [turned away](#)



from USDA's two flagship working lands conservation programs. What's more, most USDA conservation funding flows to practices that fail to reduce emissions.

To meet the climate challenge, Congress must increase funding for conservation programs and must ensure that practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions are prioritized. Fortunately, the same practices that reduce nitrous oxide and methane emissions also improve air and water quality and make our farms better able to withstand the extreme weather caused by climate change.

To address the climate crisis, the Committee should:

- Quickly enact the Build Back Better Act, which includes \$27 billion for conservation practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- Make climate change the primary focus of working lands conservation programs.
- Make long-term and permanent easements the primary focus of land retirement and restoration programs.
- Support job creation in the [plant-based](#) and alternative protein sectors.
- Reduce support for conservation practices that do not reduce emissions.
- End support for "climate-dumb" conservation practices that increase emissions.

In the past year, USDA has taken steps to incorporate climate goals into conservation programs, including the establishment of a [pilot program](#) within EQIP, announcing a [new initiative](#) to finance the deployment of farming and forestry practices that reduce emissions, [creating](#) a new Climate-Smart Practice Incentive for general and continuous signups within the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and [releasing](#) an updated list of



agriculture and forestry practices that reduce emissions for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and EQIP.

Much more must be done to ensure that existing conservation programs are helping to meet our climate goals and to support job creation in the plant-based and alternative protein sectors.

For example,

- Most of the practices identified by states as “priority practices” to be eligible for 90 percent cost-share under EQIP do not reduce greenhouse gas emissions or, in some cases, actually increase emissions.
- Several practices eligible for enrollment in EQIP’s Conservation Incentive Contracts (CIC) either do not address greenhouse emissions or actually increase emissions.
- The list of CSP “climate-smart” agriculture and forestry practices does not include bundles of enhancements.
- Most Conservation Reserve Program acres are returned to production after contracts expire, releasing soil carbon into the atmosphere.
- Acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program have fallen.
- Agricultural land easements do not require that producers adopt any practices that reduce emissions as a condition of enrollment.
- While USDA has provided nearly [\\$50 billion](#) in subsidies to livestock operators since 1995, USDA has provided just \$30 million to support jobs in the plant-based protein industry.



Some “climate dumb” conservation practices [actually increase emissions](#). Other practices and enhancements financed through EQIP and CSP provide little to no benefit to the environment or public health. According to [EWG analysis](#), payments for these structures, equipment or facilities appeared in one-third of EQIP contracts but received nearly two-thirds of EQIP payments, diverting badly needed resources from proven practices.

Even if we stopped burning fossil fuels today, greenhouse gas emissions from food and farming could make a climate catastrophe unavoidable. Farmers are already bearing the brunt of the extreme weather caused by climate change. But, the devastating economic impacts of the climate crisis are not the only reason for farmers to act: as emissions from energy and transportation continue to fall, and emissions from fertilizer and animals grow due to rising protein demand, agriculture’s contribution to the climate crisis will steadily increase. By 2050, greenhouse gas emissions from animals and the production of their feed could easily account for one-third of U.S. emissions

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record.