



Ceres Climate Smart Agriculture and Health Soil Working Group: *Five Priorities for the 2023 Farm Bill*

Ceres [Climate Smart Agriculture and Healthy Soil](#) (CSAHS) Working Group is pleased to engage in upcoming Farm Bill discussions and share our top five priorities to modernize our food system to benefit agricultural producers, consumers, communities, and the planet. We recommend that USDA programs be reoriented to ensure long-term farm resilience, food security, and rural prosperity.

Improve and Expand Technical Assistance

Our centerpiece priority, Technical Assistance (TA), should provide all of our nation's farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners with the knowledge, tools, and resources they need to successfully participate in USDA-NRCS programs and access financial resources. The USDA has historically underserved small, socially disadvantaged, BIPOC, and beginning farmers, and all working lands conservation programs are critically oversubscribed. Not only should NRCS improve access to TA for all farmers, but it must also be expanded, designed, and delivered in a manner that creates impactful rural development benefits, creating a pipeline of well-paying jobs and generating an ecosystem of rural employment opportunities for farmers, workers, and residents.

We recommend four key opportunities to improve Technical Assistance:

a. Education and Communication

NRCS can improve access to TA and broader educational opportunities for farmers by:

- i. Making its website more accessible and providing comparisons of different programs, a support hotline to take calls and answer specific requests for information, and all materials available in languages appropriate for each farming community.
- ii. Providing more relevant and actionable information, including ROI data and a large variety of examples of successful adoption of regenerative agriculture practices.
- iii. Reaching underserved BIPOC farmers through an education program specifically designed for and by BIPOC farmers with extensive peer outreach.

b. The Application Process

NRCS can improve the application process by:

- i. Providing expertise in grant writing by providers who understand local farmers' needs.
- ii. Increasing support for planning with local, crop-specific agronomy expertise.
- iii. Assisting underserved and BIPOC farmers via a program specifically designed and administered by peers and experts knowledgeable about the necessary resources and tools.

1. As a step toward addressing these disparities, we recommend that the USDA's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) be expressly required to promptly address the deficiencies in processing civil rights complaints, as identified recently by the USDA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) audit. (See, [Report 60601-0001-21, USDA Oversight of Civil Rights Complaints, September 22, 2021](#).) We support sufficient staffing and funding for the OASCR to carry out its mission of ensuring non-discrimination and equity, provided that, at a minimum, the corrective measures agreed upon by OIG and USDA are required to be fully and promptly implemented. (See, [Testimony of Phyllis K. Fong, Inspector General, USDA OIG, before the Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations of the House Agriculture Committee regarding "Review of the Office of the Inspector General Report on 'USDA Oversight of Civil Rights Complaints'" February 15, 2022](#).)

c. The Oversubscription of the Technical Assistance

The USDA should address this issue by:

- i. Expanding internal USDA TA resources.
- ii. Increasing providers through training for third parties, particularly peer-2-peer experts with appropriate language skills and local farming knowledge, early adopters of regenerative and organic agriculture, and Civilian Climate Corps.
- d. Encourage Public-Private Partnerships
 - i. The USDA should create a private-sector liaison to help companies navigate USDA programs and help the USDA track available company and foundation matching funds.

Improve Current NRCS Conservation Programs

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) supports conservation efforts across America's working lands. Still, more can be done to give our farmers the tools to be leaders in climate solutions, water efficiency, and biodiversity while building rural prosperity.

We recommend four key opportunities to improve current NRCS Programs:

- a. Increase incentives and programs that reward outcomes in GHG reduction and sequestration, farmer and crop resilience to weather and climate events, soil water retention and irrigation efficiency, improved air and water quality, biodiversity improvements, and rural prosperity.
- b. Increase investments in R&D and technology for climate-smart monitoring outcomes, including mapping, satellites, sensors, private data aggregation, modeling, data on the ROI of regenerative and organic conversions, improved water use efficiency and water quality, and data on the nutrient density of regenerative and organic crops.
- c. Improve public-private partnership options to leverage non-federal resources and facilitate non-federal partners to execute on behalf of USDA with farming partners, optimizing overall capacity and generating third-party outcomes for non-federal partners.
- d. Increase incentives for long-term beneficial outcomes from agroforestry, hedgerows, and rotational grazing.

Enhance Economic Opportunities for Farmers with Market Development

Debilitating climate events, including drought, heat, floods, and wildfires — as well as increased input and labor costs — are stressing our farmers and threatening our food supply. The opportunity to participate in additional marketplaces can create economic resilience for our farmers and allow them to adopt practices that are good for their business, local communities, and the climate.

- a. Develop a framework of attributes consistent with the highest quality carbon offset standards to encourage ecosystem service markets that offer rewards for permanence and additional outcomes and are accessible for small farmers.
- b. Increase investment in infrastructure for farmers to sell diversified crops, cover crops, and agroforestry products to new local markets.
- c. Expand the availability of organic and other climate-smart commodities in federal nutrition assistance programs, ensuring that all recipients can use their benefits to access organic and climate-smart food.

Facilitate Greater and More Equitable Land Access and Tenure

Nearly half of all U.S. farmland is expected to change hands in the coming two decades, yet new and beginning farmers are leaving agriculture because they cannot secure land. As multigenerational family farms shrink and big farms get bigger, more mid-sized farms are crucial to building resilient food systems and healthy rural communities. Yet access to farmland remains the number one barrier facing aspiring farmers today. There is an unmet need to educate non-operating landowners about regenerative agriculture so that they are better equipped to choose the right farmer. Additionally, we know that transformation of food systems relies on younger farmers, who may be more future-oriented in their operations and more willing to adopt conservation practices that will pay off in the long run.²

To facilitate securing land for new and aspiring farmers, we recommend the USDA:

- a. Establish a separate office and a coordinating position to focus on land access and tenure.
- b. Establish a program to fund community-led cooperative projects, offering loan forgiveness for successful implementations.
- c. Make investments in data collection, reporting, and research on farmland tenure ownership and transition.

Reform Crop Insurance

More frequent extreme weather events are expected, increasing the risk of prevented or failed plantings of crops in many regions of the United States. Crop insurance is an integral part of the farm safety net that provides financial protection after extreme weather events; however, this comes at a cost to the American taxpayer of nearly \$9 billion annually. Improvements to federal crop insurance have been made over the years. Still, our current system continues to disincentivize farmers from adopting practices that would increase their climate resilience by improving soil health and sequestering carbon. Taxpayer subsidized crop insurance should de-risk agriculture, creating long-term farm resilience, food security, and a healthy environment for all Americans.

To incentivize conservation practices while making crop insurance more resilient, we recommend:

- a. Improving conservation policies so they better work for farmers, encouraging the adoption of regenerative agriculture practices and systems.
- b. Supporting initiatives that incentivize farmers to adopt practices like cover crops by linking them to crop insurance.



2. <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1524&context=parkplace>