

# A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: The Role of USDA Programs in Addressing Climate Change

Kristin Weeks Duncanson | March 16, 2022

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## Framing the Conversation

Good morning. I am Kristin Weeks Duncanson, representing the AGree Coalition. I'd like to thank Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Thompson, and all the Members of this Committee for the opportunity to testify today.

As part of my statement, I will be submitting several documents from the work of the AGree Coalition for the record (see appendix).

I was 19 years old and an intern for a Senator from Minnesota when I worked on my first Farm Bill. Since then, I have been engaged in farm bills as a Senate staffer, commodity group leader, but most importantly, as a farmer from southern Minnesota.

My husband Pat and I own Highland Family Farms in Mapleton, Minnesota. We grow soybeans, corn, small grains, and raise hogs. On our farm, we are trying to become more resilient, and we are always planning for the future. Practicing conservation is how we manage the increasing risks to our farm from extreme weather.

We practice conservation on all our acres, we are transitioning some acres to organic production, and we are thinking about how we can grow saplings on marginal lands to supply reforestation efforts. We work towards economic, environmental, and community sustainability with every decision we make in our operation.

I am also a member of the AGree Coalition, a group housed at Meridian Institute, that builds consensus around ideas that will make agriculture more resilient, profitable, and sustainable. Today's hearing is timely as the Committee turns to how the next farm bill will help farmers – and our whole food system – reduce risk and address a changing climate.

As a business owner and farmer, better information is the foundation of how I manage risks from disruptions to my operation due to pandemics, wars, or climate change. I am always thinking about how I can get more information about the things I can't control, but that affect my farm.

This Committee has repeatedly asked, "How do we convince more farmers to adopt conservation practices?" The simple answer is better data. Data that is up to date, accessible, and can be analyzed to show the costs and benefits of conservation practices.

The AGree Coalition sees agricultural data as central to programs throughout the farm bill. USDA and private sector companies both collect an enormous amount of data from farmers. *USDA has an opportunity to use our data to advance widespread adoption of conservation. AGree's farmer-centric approach is grounded in the understanding that farmers must see how conservation practices benefit farm profitability in order to bring adoption to scale.*

As programs are developed by both government and the private sector to incentivize new adoption of climate-smart practices, many farmers and policymakers are also asking how the contributions of “early adopters,” the early innovators of these practices, will be recognized and rewarded. The most sustainable way to both maintain and expand climate-smart agricultural practices is to build the business case for conservation adoption through new data collection and research by USDA. Building the evidence base for the connection between conservation practices and risk can help us embed incentives for the adoption and maintenance of climate-smart agricultural practices throughout markets, finance systems, regulatory processes, and crop insurance programs.

USDA must link and analyze data across mission areas; create incentives for farmers to submit additional data they want to report about their farming practices; and make this data available to qualified, trusted academic institutions and researchers so they can show us what works.

It's easy to get bogged down in concerns about data privacy or who gets access. I answer those criticisms by pointing out that USDA has, for years, shared confidential data with land-grant universities. Processes to protect privacy – including requirements that all published reports use only aggregated, non-identifiable data – already exist. Researchers who break a contract and reveal personal data face jail time.

When you ask farmers, “Should your data be combined with other farm data to help you understand what conservation practices will work on your farm, helping you to reduce your risk and become more profitable?”, the answer is yes. Most farmers are just fine with sharing most data that they *already* are reporting. But USDA is woefully behind when it comes to managing data or having the ability to analyze what they do collect from farmers about the outcomes of conservation.

I recently jotted down all the data I report to USDA – for the farm program, for conservation programs, for crop insurance, plus data I report to my crop insurance agent, the data I report to my lender and to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. All that data is already integrated on the John Deere platform. It's helpful to me, certainly. And it's also helpful to them. They're going to use it to sell me more stuff.

However, not all farmers are participating in this private sector data revolution. It is the role of USDA and Congress to make sure that the new insights coming from analyzing big data are available to all kinds of farmers.

The promise of big data is only fulfilled if we use it for the benefit of farmers. It does none of us any good to be siloed at USDA like it is now, with the private sector investing and marketing for only a few crops, to only the most tech savvy farmers they select.

One example of how USDA can use data to improve tools for farmers is by using data to improve the connections between conservation and federal crop insurance. Cover crops, no-till, crop rotations,

rotational grazing, and other conservation practices make crop and rangeland more resilient to drought, bring more water-holding capacity for the deluges we increasingly see, and save farmers money through reduced pesticide applications. Yet these practices are peripheral to the crop insurance program, and only recognized many years after adoption when a 10-year APH (Actual Production History, the 10-year average of a farmer's yields) fully incorporates that less-risky system. Or after 20 years, for a farmer growing two crops. Or 30, for the farmers growing three.

You see the problem: farmers that use conservation become less risky and more resilient. Their probability of loss *decreases*. But that is only recognized in crop insurance through an APH that takes *decades* to establish. Hence, many farmers are talking about improvements.

**Let me be clear** – we support the Federal Crop Insurance Program and the reliability it offers to farmers. We also support that crop insurance should recognize and even incentivize farmers to adopt conservation to reduce risk and resilience on the way to an uncertain future.

Agriculture is going to change dramatically over the span of the next farm bill. By the time we get to 2028 – when the bill you are about to write will expire – this country and farmers like me who grow our food are going to be different. Those who purchase our products will be different. Let's plan for the future, rather than addressing the needs of the past. Thank you for this chance to share my vision for the next five years.