



**Opening Statement of Chair Kathy Castor
Hearing on “Solving the Climate Crisis: Opportunities in Agriculture”
Select Committee on the Climate Crisis
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As prepared for delivery

Last week, our committee began exploring natural climate solutions. Nature gives us effective and inexpensive opportunities to keep our air and water clean and to reduce carbon pollution. Today, we will discuss similar opportunities in agriculture and how farmers are contributing to climate solutions – and can do more.

Farmers are on the front lines of the climate crisis. Earlier this year, the Midwest experienced extreme rains followed by severe winds and blizzard conditions across the region. The effects were devastating: the storm decimated livestock, flooded some fields for months, and left millions of acres unable to be planted. Some areas along the Missouri River are still flooded now – seven months later.

Similar stories can be told in other parts of our nation, whether it’s fires in the West or hurricanes in the Southeast. In fact, extreme weather conditions made the past year one of the worst for agriculture in decades. The climate crisis is increasingly putting America’s agriculture at risk, through harsher floods, longer droughts, unexpected frosts, and other extreme weather events. Anyone who eats should care about the climate crisis.

In August, I visited with Florida agriculture leaders that included citrus, strawberries, dairy, timber and ranching and the University of Florida ag extension scientists. The farmers and ranchers advised me that rising temperatures and extreme events are impacting their operations and they need help adapting, and they impressed upon me that they want to be part of the solution to the climate crisis.

They are not alone. As farmers across America increasingly wrestle with the impacts of higher temperatures, they’re also looking for opportunities to help solve the climate crisis. Through land management strategies and smart partnerships, they can have an enormous impact. America’s farms are uniquely situated to become powerful carbon sinks, all while becoming more resilient to the impacts of severe weather events.

In the United States, agriculture is responsible for nearly 10 percent of annual greenhouse gas emissions, which primarily come from nitrogen fertilizer application and livestock. But through innovative and proven conservation practices that we’ll hear about today, they can reduce these emissions.

Farmers are already doing a lot to combat the climate crisis, and we must invest in them to help them do even more. Climate-smart agricultural practices, such as reducing tillage, planting cover crops, and diversifying crop rotations, can increase farmland’s potential to sequester carbon and

mitigate climate change. These practices to improve soil health can also reduce costs, increase yields, and make farms more resilient to the impacts of extreme weather.

One of the most important things we can do to fight the climate crisis is protect our farmlands. In the last several decades, we have lost millions of acres of agricultural lands to development. Protecting current farmland from development reduces the pressure to convert natural areas to new cropland, leaving intact the forests, grasslands, and wetlands to provide the climate benefits we discussed last week.

Congress has already taken steps to incentivize climate-smart agricultural practices. Congressionally-authorized USDA programs – such as the Conservation Stewardship Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program – offer farmers technical and financial assistance to increase conservation activities. The Conservation Reserve Program pays farmers to voluntarily retire land from production for less resource-intensive uses. And the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program permanently protects farmland through agricultural conservation easements. Congress also passed important improvements in the 2018 Farm Bill, which increased and expanded upon these initiatives.

The USDA also administers the Rural Energy Savings Program and the Renewable Energy for America Program which help support energy efficiency and renewable energy in rural communities. And, of course, the Renewable Fuels Standard and federal tax incentives for wind and solar have provided sustained economic benefits to farmers and rural counties across the country.

But there is still work to do.

We can help the agricultural sector increase their critical role in carbon storage. And we can help farmers maintain and increase their profitability, while also helping solve the climate crisis. Today we'll explore ways Congress can help make this a reality.