

SUMMARY

Rural Investment: Building a Natural Climate Solutions Policy Agenda that Works for Rural America and the Climate

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America's farms, ranches, and forests are vital to solving climate change. Forests absorb the equivalent of 11–15 percent of U.S. greenhouse gases (GHGs) while agriculture accounts for about nine percent of U.S. GHG emissions. Under any reasonable scenario, meeting aggressive climate goals will require farmers, ranchers, forest owners, and public land management agencies to prioritize climate mitigation across hundreds of millions of acres. To be successful, the federal government must be prepared to invest billions of dollars in policies to encourage natural climate solutions.

Yet, federal climate change policy faces considerable skepticism in rural America, particularly among agricultural and forestry stakeholders. This report outlines a menu of policy ideas capable of both garnering the necessary support from rural America and helping the U.S. reach its climate goals through natural climate solutions.

The report first examines which agricultural and forestry practices will be most important in reducing GHGs. According to our analysis, policies that reward only those landowners and producers who can significantly reduce GHGs are likely to fall short in building the coalition of rural Americans necessary to support significant investments in natural climate solutions.

To win broader support, federal policy should consider a suite of investments in agriculture and forestry focused not just on GHG mitigation, but on jobs, climate resilience, agricultural and forest productivity, and non-climate environmental benefits such as clean water and others. In addition, natural climate solutions policy should (1) rely on market- and incentive-based approaches, (2) allow for collaborative, flexible, local- or state-driven projects, (3) encourage investment of private capital in mitigation and resilience, (4) invest in the people and resources to deliver incentives and technical assistance, (5) encourage sustainable, carbon-beneficial bioenergy in both agriculture and forestry, (6) support research into agricultural and forest productivity and resilience, and (7) ensure programs are delivered equitably.

The report then examines specific policy options, including: carbon offsets, establishment of a carbon bank, tax incentives, Farm Bill programs, crop insurance, research and technology, public lands management, providing technical assistance, and providing assistance to tribes and beginning and minority landowners. In addition, Congress should also examine investments in sustainable bioenergy, forest products markets, and agricultural and forestry jobs.

Advocates for natural climate solutions should be prepared to advance policies through a number of potential vehicles including economic recovery legislation in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, stand-alone climate legislation, opportunities in annual federal budgets, national infrastructure legislation, or the use of administrative policies and discretionary dollars at USDA and the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Such a rural investment package must be designed based not just on where the tons are, but on where Congressional votes and, ultimately, where rural voters are.