



April 29, 2021

Dr. Seth Meyer, Chief Economist
Office of the Chief Economist
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

RE: Notice of Request for Public Comment on the Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad (USDA-2021-0003)

Dear Dr. Meyer,

The HEAL (Health, Environment, Agriculture, Labor) Food Alliance (HEAL) is grateful for the opportunity to submit these comments to the USDA on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home.

HEAL is a national multi-sector, multi-racial coalition led by Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) that is building collective power to transform our food and farm systems for the health of our communities and the planet. Our 50+ member organizations represent over 2 million rural and urban farmers, ranchers, fishers, public health advocates, farm and food chain workers, Indigenous groups, scientists, policy experts, community organizers, and activists. Together, we are creating systems that are healthful for our families, accessible and affordable for all communities, and fair to the hard-working people who grow, distribute, prepare, and serve our food — while protecting the air, water, and land we all depend on.

No matter what we look like, where we come from, or what's in our wallets, we all want to know that our families will be safe and secure now and for generations to come. But today, we are all living through the urgency of the climate crisis. We know that each of us has a critical role to play in stewarding a transition to a future where all of our communities can thrive.

Submitted on behalf of the HEAL Food Alliance
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The reality is that this nation's food and farm system has, for too long, served the interests of a select few at the expense of millions of people and our planet. Consolidation has reached epic proportions, and is now driving public health catastrophes, biodiversity loss, human rights abuses, and climate chaos.

For example, our current agricultural systems heavily rely on animal confinements, mega-farms, and industrial fishing practices that are causing mass biodiversity loss and irrevocable harm to our environment. This system is set up to produce exorbitant amounts of pollution and waste at every stage of the food chain: petroleum based fertilizers and chemical pesticides nitrify and destroy aquatic life, erode the soil, and expose farmworkers to carcinogens; the manufacture of these fertilizers and pesticides to support feed for confined animal feeding operations releases greenhouse gases that cause asthma in rural communities and contribute to climate change. Today, our food and agriculture system accounts for a third of greenhouse gas emissions.

Black, Indigenous, and other producers and communities of color have for too long borne the brunt of the impact. The unregulated power of large corporations enables them to uphold exploitative labor laws that leave a mostly BIPOC frontline workforce vulnerable; and extractive environmental practices that result in toxic air, contaminated water, and asthma, skyrocketing rates of diabetes, obesity, and other diet-related illnesses that hit these frontline communities first and worst. Meanwhile, inequities have created barriers to property ownership and access to funding, credit, insurance, and markets for producers of color.

We want to be clear that we are concerned about carbon-offset schemes and many of the ways that "climate smart" agriculture allows polluters to continue releasing greenhouse gases rather than actually reduce and eliminate their emissions. This is concerning because fuel-based carbon extracted from where it has been sequestered underground for millions of years, safely trapped in the slow carbon cycle, cannot be offset by temporary actions in the fast carbon cycle of biomass and new soil, which simply cannot absorb and sequester fossil fuel pollution at the timescale of fossil fuels either before or after extraction.

Simply paying farmers to do what they've always done won't work. The Earth is not an endless sponge to absorb fossil fuel carbon. If it was, we would not have climate change. Our recommendations are part of a suite of tactics needed that meaningfully reduce emissions. These recommendations focus on the need for investment in widespread shifts to organic, regenerative, and agroecological farming systems; while phasing out big polluters like confined animal feeding operations.

Carbon offset programs are incompatible with sustainable agriculture and may drive further consolidation of farms and agribusinesses.

Market-based carbon credit programs give additional leverage to already powerful corporations, including agribusinesses, that have long squeezed farm income and drained rural economies.¹ Companies may continue to capture the majority of profits and valuable on-farm data at the expense of farmers.

The urgency and scale of the change we seek requires solutions from the frontlines. We understand the need to shift our food system to one where the dominant agricultural production practices are of net benefit to the environment – practices that increase topsoil, store more carbon, enhance biodiversity - and end the exploitation of people and our planet. We know that this depends on supporting those who are stewarding land with care.

Below, please find recommendations from our alliance, and we look forward to continued dialogue with your department to address this urgent crisis.

Sincerely,



Navina Khanna

Executive Director

on behalf of the HEAL (Health, Environment, Agriculture, Labor) Food Alliance

¹ Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP). “Why carbon markets won’t work for agriculture.” January 2020 at 2.

1. Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry Questions

A. How should USDA utilize programs, funding and financing capacities, and other authorities, to encourage the voluntary adoption of climate-smart agricultural and forestry practices on working farms, ranches, and forest lands?

1. How can USDA leverage existing policies and programs to encourage voluntary adoption of agricultural practices that sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and ensure resilience to climate change

Many Black, Indigenous, and other farmers and ranchers of color are often already voluntarily using practices that conserve water, build healthy soil, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and serve communities in ways that build climate resilience. Across the board, the USDA must evaluate all existing policies and programs to ensure that they are meeting the needs of historically disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. Through this assessment, the USDA can and should ensure that these farmers have the tools, technical assistance, and financial resources to thrive, and that barriers to success are removed².

There are several existing conservation programs that USDA can strengthen and expand to support farmers to implement practices that increase their resilience to increasing extreme events such as droughts and floods³.

- The USDA, in collaboration with state-based and regional programs, must ensure that farmers have the **technical assistance and support** needed for ecological restoration on site. This can also help support the creation of green jobs in agricultural areas.
 - Improving the **Conservation Technical Assistance Program** by fostering farmer-to-farmer learning can helping farmers adopt new practices, and will become even more important as climate change impacts require adaptation⁴.
- Through these efforts, we encourage the USDA to invest the **long-standing wisdom and climate resilience from indigenous and other culture-based practices**.
- Through the **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)**, the USDA should incentivize ecologically-informed practices and farming systems. This can reduce fossil fuel dependence, reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture (such as nitrous oxide emissions from soil), perennialize food production, and build soil organic matter that holds water, carbon, and nutrients. Healthy soil is also crucial to enabling farmers' resilience in the face of extreme conditions—including droughts, floods and fires—that

² <https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/leveling-the-fields.pdf>

³ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/comments?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0215702>

⁴ Arbuckle et al., 2012 (check)

comes with climate change. EQIP should prioritize financial and technical resources to encourage practices like cover-cropping; introducing resource-conserving crop rotations; planting prairie strips⁵ and other perennials; agroforestry⁶; improving grazing systems⁷, and reintegrating crops and livestock⁸. These techniques⁹, have proven to have the greatest potential for both mitigating climate change and building resilience. Through EQIP, the USDA can also encourage an agro ecologically-informed, ‘whole-farm’ approach to address a variety of food and farm system challenges like pest management and irrigation. Through support for ecological conservation at farm edges and integration of habitat into agricultural systems, farmers can minimize the harms of monocultural planting systems¹⁰.

- The **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)** already returns an estimated \$4 in benefits for every invested dollar, but demand substantially exceeds the program capacity each year¹¹. This program takes a whole-farm approach and encourages the adoption of climate practices that reduce heat trapping emissions and build resilience, such as by reducing erosion, sequestering carbon, limiting water and fertilizer use, improving air and water quality, and increasing productivity. The USDA should reexamine and expand the definition of “conservation practices”¹² as defined under this program to include traditional Indigenous stewardship practices.
- **Land retirement and agricultural easement programs** should be evaluated and targeted in the context of climate risk and mitigation. For example, the USDA should ensure that regions which are most susceptible to extreme rain events and floods due to climate change are eligible to enroll land in **Conservation Reserve Programs (CRP)**, and focus soil health investments in areas with concentrated nitrate, pesticides, and other contaminants in their groundwater ways and air.

The USDA must align federal agriculture subsidies with environmental protection goals and conservation principles.

- Ensure all federal farm subsidy programs, including the Federal Crop Insurance program, support diverse growing practices and all farmers, including farmers of color, small and midsize farmers, and independent and historically underserved farmers; limit financial support to large mega-crop operations that continue to practice environmentally

⁵ <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/alternativeag/info/Small%20Changes%20Big%20Impacts.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/treesearch/pubs/55775>

⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308521X17310338>

⁸ <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/reintegrating-land-and-livestock>

⁹ <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/turning-soils-sponges>

¹⁰ <https://www.pnas.org/content/114/42/11247>

¹¹ <https://www.pnas.org/content/114/42/11247>

¹² https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/technical/cp/ncps/?cid=nrcs143_026849

harmful farming techniques to the detriment of diversified crop and livestock family farms, the surrounding community, and the land itself.

- Reform commodity subsidies so that they support independent agriculture and new farmer entry; include supply management and grain reserves and a fair pricing system; and promote and ensure resource conservation and environmental protection, diversified production, good labor practices, and fair prices.
- Make conservation a condition of eligibility for premium subsidies. Consistently and effectively enforce current conservation compliance requirements, and improve the level of conservation practices required on all farmland under coverage.
- Meet the emergency needs for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, especially farmers of color and farmworkers, who are hit first and worst in the face of disasters and climate events.

There are also several ways that the USDA can regulate and thereby mitigate industrial practices while supporting the climate:

- Bolstering the **National Organic Program** by reinstating the Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices rule will encourage regenerative, pasture-based practices.
- Revoking **regulatory line speed waivers** that have been granted to chicken, cattle, and pork slaughterhouses, and discontinuing any efforts to advance rulemaking to allow any increase in line speeds will protect working people and discourage raising animals in Confined Animal Feed Operations (CAFOs) which are the largest contributor to climate change in our agricultural system, also pollute water, erode soil, cause public health disasters.

The USDA must work in coordination with other departments to encourage agribusinesses, farmers and ranchers to adopt climate-sane practices. For example:

- Coordinate with the **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** to strengthen the regulation and prevention of agriculture and aquaculture-related environmental degradation from pesticides¹³ and chemical fertilizers (that are often fossil-fuel based). Chemical-intensive agricultural systems which can cause irreparable damage to microbial life that is key to the soil's ability to sequester carbon¹⁴ and be resilient to climate events. Use the California Healthy Soils Initiative¹⁵ as reference.
- Work with the Department of Justice to support anti-trust legislation like **Food and Agribusiness Merger Moratorium and Antitrust Review Act, S. 1596 and H.R. 2933**¹⁶

¹³ http://foe.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/PesticidesSoilHealth_Final-1.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20512724>

¹⁵ <https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/healthysoils/>

¹⁶ <https://competitivemarkets.com/antitrust/>

which would place an 18-month moratorium on large agribusiness, food and beverage manufacturing, and grocery retail mergers and acquisitions. By removing this obstacle that locks small farmers and ranchers out of the market, it will make it easier for independent farmers and ranchers to operate more sustainably.

- Coordinate with the **Department of Labor** to ensure that all those working on farms have their basic needs met in ways that enable them to withstand climate disasters. Ensure that farmworkers have adequate and safe housing, fair pay, and the right to organize and speak out without fear of retaliation.
- Coordinate with the **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)** to ensure that farmworkers also receive emergency funds and disaster relief when climate chaos strikes. Support the **Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)** to enforce worker safety standards during climate disasters.
- Work with the **Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** to strengthen regulation and labeling norms to prevent large food corporations and chemical companies from co-opting¹⁷ the language of regenerative agriculture in greenwashing efforts while continuing several other practices that nullify carbon sequestration efforts¹⁸. Work across agencies to bar industry-led or funded research on their own products from dictating **FDA, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)**, and USDA approvals of public health safety and ecological protections.
- Coordinate with the **Department of Energy** to examine and regulate energy companies' role in causing climate catastrophes like massive wildfires.
- Work with state governments to repeal Ag-Gag laws that prohibit workers and neighboring communities from recording and reporting environmental violations.

2. What new strategies should USDA explore to encourage voluntary adoption of climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices?

- End all federal contracts with and financial support for corporations with known environmental abuses.
- Develop new training, research, and funding programs to promote a transition from industrial animal production to regenerative, pasture-based practices.
- Provide transitional assistance to help farmers get out of the CAFO system and towards higher welfare, pasture-based farming or out of animal agriculture entirely towards plant-based crop production. Look to the Farm System Reform Act¹⁹ for guidance.

¹⁷ <https://regenorganic.org/>

¹⁸ <https://civileats.com/2019/10/29/big-food-is-betting-on-regenerative-agriculture-to-thwart-climate-change/>

¹⁹ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3221/text>

- Equitably compensate landowners for providing ecosystem services including significant and long-term increases in carbon storage, improved air and water quality, soil building, and biodiversity. Compensation programs must include rigorous safeguards to ensure outcomes of decreasing net GHG emissions are achieved and maintained, and that resources are distributed equitably.
- Support regenerative, scale-appropriate ocean farming of seaweeds and bivalves that absorb carbon and improve water quality.
- Take the following measures to significantly increase protection of coastal lands and ecosystems, as rising sea levels and more powerful storms threaten natural systems and human habitations alike:
 - Steadily acquire beaches and marshes as buffers against sea level rise – increase public access and decrease exposed private property that must be insured and protected.
 - Develop plans for “managed retreat” to move buildings and infrastructure away from threatened areas, including restructured flood insurance to facilitate the transition.
 - Rebuild coastal ecosystems including coral reefs, oyster reefs, seagrass beds, wetlands, and marshes.
 - Protect estuaries and reduce nutrient runoff into coastal ecosystems.
 - Mitigate effects of petroleum and industrial infrastructure such as canals and pipelines.
- Ensure land access and land tenure for socially disadvantaged farmers, learning from the Justice for Black Farmers Act. Farmers who own their own land are more likely to and more able to invest in costly ecological farm practices.

B. How can partners and stakeholders, including State, local and Tribal governments and the private sector, work with USDA in advancing climate-smart agricultural and forestry practices?

- Continue and expand stakeholder engagement including more proactive outreach to Indigenous communities, especially those that reside in climate burdened regions.
- Emphasize the engagement and value the expertise of frontline communities and adequately compensate community stakeholders for their contributions to climate planning.
- Prioritize community leadership in decision-making and invest in community-based solutions and actions to the climate crisis — on municipal, county, and state level.

- Adopt Indigenous wisdom, like prescribed burns for forest management and other traditional agroforestry techniques, and a regional approach based on local ecology and community stewardship.
- Promote diversity of species and bar the patenting of seeds in order to protect Indigenous seed varieties that contribute to climate resilience.
- Work with state, local, and tribal governments to ensure safe harbor for families forced to migrate due to climate change.
- Honor treaties and uphold the rights of Indigenous people.

C. How can USDA help support emerging markets for carbon and greenhouse gases where agriculture and forestry can supply carbon benefits?

- Do not allow what should be standard agricultural practices to be sold as carbon offsets. Farmland is often located on land that used to be forest or wetlands. That change in land use would be considered an emission by International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) standards if it were converted today.

D. What data, tools, and research are needed for USDA to effectively carry out climate-smart agriculture and forestry strategies?

- The agency must work to bar industry-funded research for approval of their own practices. The USDA should work across agencies, including the **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)**, the **National Science Foundation (NSF)**, the **Department of Energy (DOE)** and the **National Institute of Health (NIH)**, to increase overall public funding for research and extension to support agroecological and climate-focused research. This can and should include:
 - Support for on-farm farmer trials on systems that could sequester more carbon and improve the health of soil;
 - Research on improving yield and resilience through heirloom varieties of non-GMO seeds and breeds; and
 - Support for Land and Sea Grant Universities to promote producer-led research and development.
- The USDA should enforce and strengthen existing environmental regulations, including the National Pollutant Discharge regulatory system. Specifically, the USDA
 - Must effectively track and publicly disclose the environmental impact of Concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), including CAFO emissions, pesticide use, fertilizer use, and pesticide residues on food.
 - Must effectively track and publicly disclose impacts of industrial agriculture and aquaculture, mining, fossil fuel, extraction, chemical manufacturing and disposal,

and other pollution sources on fisheries and marine ecosystems. The USDA must make available data to consumers showing how far seafood travels and using this data, encourage re-regionalizing and re-localizing seafood production and consumption to reduce carbon footprint.

- The USDA should listen to and learn from Indigenous knowledge and traditional land management practices.

E. How can USDA encourage the voluntary adoption of climate-smart agricultural and forestry practices in an efficient way, where the benefits accrue to producers?

Rather than making environmental stewardship a financial drain on farmers, subsidy programs have the potential to support farmers, especially small/mid-size farms who are already practicing agroecological methods of farming and land management. Specifically the USDA should

- Reform commodity subsidies so that they support independent small and medium scale farms and beginning farmers who are pursuing agroecological methods of farming and land management; include supply management and grain reserves and a fair pricing system; and promote and ensure resource conservation and environmental protection, diversified production, good labor practices, and fair prices.
- Reward stewardship practices. This includes reducing the risk to protect small and mid-sized farmers transitioning to regenerative farming practices and providing a safety net for them; ensuring that these programs are transparent, fair and available to all highly diversified farms²⁰, particularly historically underserved and beginning farmers and ranchers; and making all information publicly available — including the amount of subsidies benefiting each operation, and whether the farm operation is in compliance with conservation requirements.
- USDA can leverage the buying power of the federal government to influence markets. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the USDA bought produce, milk, shrimp and other products. If the USDA collaborated with other state institutions to set up processing and distribution facilities that supported agroecological farmers, more farmers would have the confidence to adopt agroecological practices knowing that they will have a buyer.

2. Biofuels, Wood and Other Bioproducts, and Renewable Energy Questions

A. How should USDA utilize programs, funding and financing capacities, and other authorities to encourage greater use of biofuels for transportation, sustainable bioproducts (including wood products), and renewable energy?

²⁰ <https://www.rma.usda.gov/Policy-and-Procedure/Insurance-Plans/Whole-Farm-Revenue-Protection>

The USDA should *not* incentivize large-scale biomass, biofuels, or the production of wood pellets - which the production of creates negative environmental impacts on the communities and ecosystems that are in the footprint of these facilities. Though they have lower CO2 emissions, biogas facilities release high concentrations of methane that contribute to the climate crisis as well as other noxious gases that are harmful to surrounding communities.

Additionally, increasing the demand for biofuel feedstocks, such as corn and soy, will exacerbate nutrient pollution and lead to more harmful algae blooms that harm fisheries.

B. How can incorporating climate-smart agriculture and forestry into biofuel and bioproducts feedstock production systems support rural economies and green jobs?

By dis-incentivizing large scale confined animal feeding operations and investing in regional-scale farming and food processing systems, the USDA can create new, good, green jobs that pay working people a living wage and support the overall health of local rural economies.

C. How can USDA support adoption and production of other renewable energy technologies in rural America, such as renewable natural gas from livestock, biomass power, solar, and wind?

- No Factory Farm Gas: Gas from confined animal feeding operations entrenches dirty fossil fuels and delays the transition to renewable sources, such as solar and wind.
- Recognize energy as a human right and public good by moving energy out of privatization. In addition to expanding support for electric cooperatives, we encourage the USDA to cooperate with local power companies and other public utilities that serve rural America in investing in renewable energy (wind and solar) generation and provide affordable and accessible energy to all communities. Additionally, the USDA should support community choice energy programs and regional community-governed electrical grids that link together urban and rural communities. These programs can provide energy resilience in the face of climate disaster and storms as well as provide partnerships among communities often divided by infrastructure, economics, and social differences.
- Invest in localized programs that improve the health and safety of local rural communities and avoid investing in large scale manure anaerobic digester projects. Digesters' long-term efficiency is unknown and their emissions create considerable negative impacts on local air quality.
- Dismantle the AgSTAR Program: AgSTAR is a collaborative program sponsored by the EPA and USDA that promotes the use of biogas recovery systems to reduce methane emissions from livestock waste. As a recently filed petition to the EPA demonstrates,

biogas does *not* reduce methane emissions from industrial hog and dairy operations but rather entrenches oil and gas, and increases environmental and public health risks in rural, BIPOC communities. The USDA should shift the focus of this program to promoting pasture-based practices and carbon sequestration, particularly in BIPOC communities, who experience a disproportionate concentration of pollution.

We recommend that the USDA draw on the policy recommendations from the Rural Electric Cooperative Democracy, a coalition of farmers, frontline communities, rural community leaders, and energy democracy advocates. Their policies reflect the coalition's principles of self-determination, justice, environmental stewardship, as well as civil and human rights. Key points include:

- Increase funding for the USDA Rural Utilities Service programs that support rural electric cooperatives and energy efficiency loans programs as well as the Rural Energy for America Program, which provides grants to rural businesses and farms for energy audits, energy efficiency, and renewable energy projects.
- To speed their transition to clean power sources, forgive rural electric cooperatives' debt for fossil fuel plants on the condition that future funding from the Rural Utilities Service is dedicated to investments in energy efficiency and clean energy.
- Increase funding for the Weatherization Assistance Program to reduce energy costs for low-income families' by improving the energy efficiency of their homes.
- Enforce an immediate moratorium on utility shutoffs, deposits, customer late fees, and negative credit reporting during extreme climate events and natural disasters. Assure flexible, budget billing arrangements on electricity and broadband service, so that debt is not accruing for member-owners who cannot afford it.
- Provide sufficient appropriations for federally insured Hardship Loans from the Rural Utilities Service along with conditions for loan forgiveness akin to those offered in the CARES Act through the Small Business Administration. These conditions would facilitate the retirement of all coal plants currently in operation and potentially all outstanding electric cooperative debt in exchange for new investment in clean energy, distributed energy resources, energy efficiency, high speed broadband, storage, and electric transportation with new loans at U.S. Treasury rates.
- Treat electric cooperatives fairly during reform of renewable energy tax credits so that they receive the same vital option for direct payment that is afforded to every other type of utility in The Moving Forward Act passed by the House.
- Higher authorization for the Rural Utilities Service Treasury Rate Loan program, which also capitalizes the Energy Efficiency & Conservation Loan Program (EECLP).

- A large increase in appropriated funding for the Rural Cooperative Development Grants (RCDG), Rural Economic Development Loans and Grants (RED L&G), Rural Energy Savings Program (RESP).
- Require national implementation of inclusive tariffs for site-specific utility investments that also provide a path to ownership for participating customers, such as Pay As You Save financing programs already demonstrated by more than a dozen electric cooperatives in Kansas, Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

3. Addressing Catastrophic Wildfire Questions

A. How should USDA utilize programs, funding and financing capacities, and other authorities to decrease wildfire risk fueled by climate change?

- Coordinate with the **Department of Energy** to examine and regulate energy corporations' role in causing climate catastrophes like massive wildfires.
- Adequately fund state forestry departments to take precautionary measures to manage forests to prevent wildfires, including prescribed burns aligned with traditional indigenous ecological practices.
- Draw learnings from the **Conservation Stewardship Program** and lean on traditional Indigenous wisdom like prescribed burns to ensure forest management.
- Incentivize on-farm water conservation practices, including agroecological practices like cover cropping, biological integrated farming, and orchard systems that increase healthy soil and its capacity to retain water and create buffers from catastrophic wildfires.
- Privatize, decentralize, and democratize the energy grid, as outlined in our response to the above question by supporting community choice energy systems that allow a more adaptive and nimble response in the face of uncertainty and crisis.
- Do not provide any subsidy, insurance, or other support for farming practices with excess soil and water runoff, particularly in regions susceptible to drought, flood, and other climate disasters. Rather, provide subsidy and other incentives for water conservation measures.
- Healthy soil retains more water and is a crucial component of decreasing risk of catastrophic wildfire. The USDA should prioritize financial and technical resources to encourage practices like cover-cropping; introducing resource-conserving crop rotations; planting prairie strips²¹ and other perennials; agroforestry²²; improving grazing systems²³, and reintegrating crops and livestock²⁴.

²¹ <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/alternativeag/info/Small%20Changes%20Big%20Impacts.pdf>

²² <https://www.fs.usda.gov/treesearch/pubs/55775>

²³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308521X17310338>

²⁴ <https://www.ucsus.org/resources/reintegrating-land-and-livestock>

B. How can the various USDA agencies work more cohesively across programs to advance climate-smart forestry practices and reduce the risk of wildfire on all lands?

C. What additional data, tools and research are needed for USDA to effectively reduce wildfire risk and manage Federal lands for carbon?

USDA must mimic CA AB 434, which would provide the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California State Parks, and the State Lands Commission greater flexibility to issue livestock grazing leases on state lands to improve our state's wildfire resilience. AB 434 also seeks to ensure the ecological health of California's state lands by incentivizing good stewardship through long-term leases and requiring that grazing, including for fire fuels reduction, be practiced in accordance with any site-specific management plan for the leased lands.

D. What role should partners and stakeholders play, including State, local and Tribal governments, related to addressing wildfires?

- The USDA can and should learn from traditional ecological knowledge, including prescribed burns, to prevent further catastrophic wildfires.
- The USDA should partner with local clinics and community centers to provide disaster relief for frontline communities, including farmworker and undocumented communities, in the face of wildfires.
- The USDA should partner with local governments to fund resilience hubs that provide personal protective equipment and shelter to wildfire refugees and/or vulnerable populations affected by wildfire smoke.
- USDA should ensure that all incarcerated firefighters receive fair wages & certification that makes them eligible for employment in local fire departments upon release.

4. Environmental Justice and Disadvantaged Communities Questions

A. How can USDA ensure that programs, funding and financing capacities, and other authorities used to advance climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices are available to all landowners, producers, and communities?

- Forests can be sustainably managed to optimize provision of ecosystem services like carbon storage, water quality, and biodiversity, while still yielding renewable resources. The USDA can and should support the reforestation of tens of millions of acres of marginal and ecologically vulnerable public and private land in ways that increase biodiversity and retain water and retain carbon. The USDA should work with Indigenous

communities and farmers to amplify and adopt culturally and ecologically-appropriate practices to manage federal forest land and water,^{25 26}.

- Wild reserves and lightly-managed natural areas add carbon storage, water protection, biodiversity habitat, and beauty to every bioregion. The USDA can and should support these natural reserves within ecoregions through restoration and expansion of native grasslands, forests, and wetlands.
- USDA must increase funding transparency and accountability to ensure that federal funds are going to independent BIPOC farmers. For example, USDA's FSA Farm Loan Program does not currently disclose any information about individual funding recipients, making it impossible to determine whether federal funds are going to small, underrepresented farmers who use regenerative, pasture-based farms or to propping up a corporate-controlled industrial model of agriculture that disproportionately harms BIPOC workers and communities.

B. How can USDA provide technical assistance, outreach, and other assistance necessary to ensure that all producers, landowners, and communities can participate in USDA programs, funding, and other authorities related to climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices?

The USDA has a legacy of not serving the needs of all producers, particularly BIPOC producers. There are a number of things that the USDA can do to help ensure that BIPOC producers and communities can thrive. These include:

- Providing grants, subsidies, and incentives to make it easier to finance and own land. These should include mechanisms facilitating land ownership transitions, as well as reparations to return appropriated land and to reverse land-grabs.
- Providing legal aid to help Black people access and retain land. For example, grants from USDA could fund law schools to offer legal clinics providing free or low-cost, culturally competent legal services tailored to Black farmers. Given evidence of ongoing discrimination, the USDA should also require an independent review of drivers and preventive measures prior to foreclosures of Black-owned farmland.²⁷ The government should fund increased legal support for the formation of cooperative ownership structures that help Black people access and retain farmland.²⁸

²⁵ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/indigenous-people-manage-one-quarter-globe-which-good-news-conservation-180969689/>

²⁶ <https://unu.edu/publications/articles/land-use-climate-change-adaptation-and-indigenous-peoples.html>

²⁷ <https://thecounter.org/usda-black-farmers-discrimination-tom-vilsack-reparations-civil-rights/>

²⁸ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12111-018-9394-8>

- Reforming heirs' property laws that can protect Black landowners from involuntary land loss²⁹. The USDA must implement the planned changes in the 2018 farm bill to expand and regularize the types of documentation that can be used by heirs' property owners to qualify for USDA credit and conservation program eligibility.³⁰
- Generating land-focused reinvestment, for true community self-determined economic development.

The USDA can help BIPOC farmers who are practicing regenerative agriculture, or want to practice regenerative agriculture, achieve financial security and resilience by:

- Expanding financial supports, including within key USDA programs that offer technical assistance (for example, the Conservation Stewardship Program) and grants for capacity building, such as the Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach program, the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, and the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program. The USDA should identify and eliminate barriers to participation by recognizing traditional best management practices and ecological knowledge in the evaluation of applications and proposals.
- Ending discriminatory lending practices and other mechanisms of land seizure.
- Promoting community-led and -centered programming to promote and financially facilitate sustainable business ownership among economically marginalized populations.
- Improved access to loans, including low-interest and micro-loans, as well as loans not requiring collateral. The USDA's Farm Service Agency launched a micro-loan program in 2013 to better meet the needs of underserved farmers³¹, but the USDA must raise the limit on annual funding available³².
- Implement financial safety nets, such as insurance and relief programs. Since the USDA does not currently publish rates of and utilization of federal crop insurance or disaster payments across racial and ethnic groups, transparency is needed to help guide improvements.
- Support fair, sustainable markets that support Black farmers and reward social and ecological wellbeing. Direct marketing, farm-to-institution arrangements, food hubs, and market diversification can raise incomes and financial viability and can be strengthened through grants, initiatives, and institutional procurement commitments that are

²⁹ Mitchell, Thomas. 2016. "Restoring Hope for Heirs Property Owners: The Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act." *State and Local Law News* 40 (1): 6–15.

³⁰<https://www.ruralco.org/press-releases/2018/8/31/federation-of-southern-coops-leads-research-and-advocacy-on-heirs-property-august-2-2018>

³¹ <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/farm-loan-programs/microloans/index>

³² <https://sustainableagriculture.net/publications/grassrootsguide/credit-crop-insurance/microloans/>

inclusive of and accessible to these communities^{33 34 35}. Developing markets for ethnic specialty crops and culturally relevant fruits and vegetables can leverage skills while also contributing to local economies³⁶.

USDA can also advance the quality and equity of infrastructure and information. Currently, BIPOC producers have less access to, ownership of, and control over several key resources related to infrastructure and information that are pivotal in establishing successful, resilient, and sustainable farms. For example, fewer BIPOC farmers have access to internet service relative to white farmers³⁷. Public research institutions have not served BIPOC farmers equitably and have, in some cases, been used as mechanisms for exclusion^{38 39 40}.

USDA programs can help level the playing field through the following:

- Infrastructure investments—such as targeted grants and incentives—are needed to fund BIPOC-led improvements on-farm (such as washing, packing, storage and processing facilities) and in communities (funding such things as internet access, kitchen equipment in school cafeterias to enable local sourcing from BIPOC farmers).
- Technical assistance and outreach that serve BIPOC farmers, including by recognizing traditional ecological knowledge and management as best practices. Such programs should hire culturally competent community representatives and service providers, (e.g., lenders, insurance agents, extension agents, educators) who are linguistically accessible. Language accessibility and trusted information providers are essential to reaching and engaging BIPOC producers.
- Research and education that includes and engages directly with BIPOC farmers and communities. For example, land-grant institutions should be accountable to a revitalized public mission supporting such work, including sharing resources with community-based organizations. Additional resources should be directed to the 1890 land-grant

³³<https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2010/december/local-food-supply-chains-use-diverse-business-models-to-satisfy-demand/>

³⁴<https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2016/march/local-foods-and-farm-business-survival-and-growth>

³⁵https://www.raceforward.org/system/files/pdf/reports/RaceForwardCSI_ReframingFoodHubsFullReport_2018.pdf

³⁶<https://www.worldfarmers.org/about/#mission>

³⁷ USDA (US Department of Agriculture). 2019. 2017 Census of Agriculture. Washington, DC.

<https://quickstats.nass.usda.gov/>

³⁸<https://www.aplu.org/library/land-grant-but-unequal-state-one-to-one-match-funding-for-1890-land-grant-universities/file>

³⁹<https://asi.ucdavis.edu/programs/infas/a-deeper-challenge-of-change-the-role-of-land-grant-universities-in-assessing-and-ending-structural-racism-in-the-us-food-system>

⁴⁰<https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities>

institutions (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), to ensure they have the same services and support as the land-grant institutions originally chartered in 1862⁴¹.

Perhaps most critically, the USDA must ensure diverse representation and leadership across agricultural decision-making, including grant panels, advisory boards, and committees.

Removing discriminatory barriers to BIPOC farmers and their networks, and supporting their leadership in sustainable and community-driven farming, will advance the equity and resilience of the nation's food systems^{42 43}.

C. How can USDA ensure that programs, funding and financing capabilities, and other authorities related to climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices are implemented equitably?

- Conduct Equitable Climate Action Planning which uses racial justice impacts as a metric as much as GHG emissions/sequestration
- Center frontline communities in decision making processes by ensuring representation from impacted communities, especially BIPOC communities, in groups that are responsible for framing climate and disaster policy and legislation. The USDA should also Compensate these frontline community representatives for their time and expertise.
- Conduct a Civil Rights Impact Assessment – as outlined in Departmental Regulation 4300-004 – to ensure that new programs and policies to encourage specific agricultural practices and systems do not adversely affect BIPOC or other socially disadvantaged farmers or communities.
- In accordance with Title VI, ensure that no federal contracts, subsidies, or other federal monies are being granted or given to companies with civil rights abuses, including labor abuses.
- Strengthen worker protection standards and expand protections to include guestworkers
 - Support legislation that grants heat protection to farmworkers, like SB 513 in Florida, which requires employers to provide laborers working in the heat with water, breaks and ample shade.
- Create opportunities for regional food chain initiatives by expanding public financing, technical assistance, and procurement support for community-owned operations and socially disadvantaged farmers, fishermen, and ranchers.

⁴¹<https://www.aplu.org/library/land-grant-but-unequal-state-one-to-one-match-funding-for-1890-land-grant-universities/file>

⁴² <https://healfoodalliance.org/platformforrealfood/>

⁴³<https://online.ucpress.edu/elementa/article/doi/10.1525/elementa.356/112494/Securing-the-future-of-US-agriculture-The-case-for>

- Ensure democratic community-based governance of regional food systems by promoting and funding farmer- fisherman- and worker-owned food and agriculture cooperatives.
- Frontline communities in rural, agricultural areas are at extreme risk of chemical contamination - of drinking water, food supply, housing, public spaces, and more, because of the prevalence of agricultural chemicals on farms and ranches that can be accidentally released into the environment during a natural disaster. In the short-term, there must be stronger storage and containment regulations for these chemicals. In the long-term, the use of these chemicals must be phased out and eliminated.
- Ensure that the federally subsidized crop insurance program meets the emergency needs for socially disadvantaged farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers in the face of disasters and climate events; and provide credit, loans, and other financial assistance to support socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers experiencing yield loss or who were unable to plant due to extreme weather conditions.
- Disaster Assistance
 - Ensure that that is a safe process for undocumented people to avail federal aid in the face of a natural disaster⁴⁴.
 - Ensure Disaster Unemployment Assistance to all farmworkers - documented and undocumented - in the aftermath of work stoppage and wage loss due to crop damage from climate-related disasters. The USDA must administer the disaster unemployment assistance in a timely manner, so that farmworkers do not go hungry or become homeless while waiting for the next harvest season after a disaster. Growers need workers to harvest their crops once a new crop is planted after a disaster.
 - Enact policies that require improved and adequate housing for farmworkers that will reduce the impacts of climate disasters on workers' housing and reduce the overall cost of recovery. This will only work if the USDA also implements a strong enforcement mechanism.
 - Foster and fund, and establish disaster trainings in underserved communities. These trainings should be conducted in the languages of the community.
 - Give communities the tools they need to set up their own disaster response networks. This can include partnering with and contracting with community-based organizations to implement culturally competent disaster response teams to meet the needs of frontline communities.

⁴⁴ <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Some-immigrant-fire-victims-forgo-aid-fearing-12306830.php>