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Status quo Farm Bill falters on economic, climate challenges

By sidestepping the issues of economic and climate resilience, Congress is ignoring the transformative changes needed in agriculture

MINNEAPOLIS— The 2018 Farm Bill passed by Congress on Wednesday is largely status quo from the 2014 version and will continue to drive overproduction and low farm income while ignoring the stark realities of climate change, commented the [Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy](#) (IATP).

“Only weeks after a devastating National Climate Assessment outlined the rising risks to agriculture, this Farm Bill remains largely in climate denial,” said [Ben Lilliston](#), IATP’s Director of Rural Strategies and Climate Change. “Climate disruptions are confronting farmers and rural communities on top of rising debt, increased corporate concentration and tariff conflicts with leading trade partners. Our concern is that this Farm Bill makes it likely that emergency payments will be needed in the coming years to keep farmers afloat.”

The new Farm Bill largely maintains commodity crop programs (covering energy-intensive crops like corn, soy, wheat, rice and cotton) that are driving overproduction and often result in below-cost prices. While the new Farm Bill improves risk management tools for dairy farmers, the problem of dairy oversupply is largely unaddressed.

Popular conservation programs that support farmers in responding to climate change continue to be underfunded. The bill does improve the working lands Conservation Stewardship Program to encourage cover cropping, resource-conserving crop rotation, and advanced grazing systems— all practices that help farms adapt to climate change—though the program faces long-term cuts. And while the new Farm Bill expands funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), it leaves loopholes in place that subsidize new and expanded large-scale factory farms. Guaranteed loan programs through the Farm Service Agency also continue to support factory farms that spur overproduction, hurt independent farmers and ranchers, and increase air and water pollution in rural communities around the country.

“More than half of farmer applicants for CSP are turned away each year,” said [Tara Ritter](#), IATP Senior Program Associate. “This highly successful program needs to be accessible for all farmers who need it, given the urgent climate challenges we are facing.”

The new Farm Bill includes important programs that could support climate-resilient agriculture, including a pilot Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP) that

will support farmers in Midwest states growing hay or doing sustainable grazing and expands funding for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program and the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative. Reforms in the crop insurance programs that better support the planting of soil health-building cover crops, and improvements in whole farm protection could aid small or mid-sized diversified farms.

The bill also provides permanent, baseline funding and significant policy improvements to programs that support local food systems and beginning and underserved farmers, including the new Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach (FOTO) program and the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP).

The bill also restores the Undersecretary of Rural Development as a permanent mandatory position, responding to a move by USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue to eliminate the position. A new Undersecretary will be critical to managing rural-focused programs that provide business and cooperative loans and broadband expansion—programs that will help rural economies that are disproportionately affected by climate change.

“By side-stepping the big issues of economic and climate resilience for farmers and rural communities, Congress is putting off the transformative changes in farm policy that will be needed in the near future,” said Lilliston.

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Based in Minneapolis with offices in Washington, D.C., and Berlin, Germany, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems.