



About Julia Olmstead

Julia Olmstead's work focuses primarily on biofuels, the bioeconomy and domestic climate policy as it relates to agriculture. For much of the last decade, Julia has worked on issues related to sustainable agriculture and biofuels as a journalist and scientist.

About IATP

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. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota with offices in Washington D.C. and Geneva.

A climate-friendly Farm Bill

Climate-friendly agriculture isn't just about cutting carbon emissions.

MINNEAPOLIS, JANUARY 10, 2011* — We're in a rut when it comes to taking action on climate change. Congress has stalled on passing climate legislation. International negotiators failed to agree on binding emission cuts in Cancún late last year. And it's unclear whether the EPA will have the power to regulate greenhouse gases.

Fortunately, we have a tool to help us make a real impact on slowing climate change: the Farm Bill.

The Farm Bill, which Congress passes once every five years or so, is the single most influential piece of legislation affecting agriculture in the United States. It goes a long way in determining not only much of what is grown in the United States (by way of commodity crop programs), but also how farmers grow crops and raise livestock. That's important, because agriculture can be a real winner or a real loser when it comes to climate, depending on how you farm and how much energy you use to do it.

Synthetic fertilizers, manure lagoons and other mainstays of industrial agriculture are why agriculture is the direct source of six percent of America's greenhouse gas emissions and 13 percent worldwide, mostly in the form of nitrous oxide emissions.

Cover crops (quick-growing crops planted between production seasons to protect the soil), well-managed pastures and other mainstays of organic and sustainable agriculture mean not only that those farming systems have much lower direct emissions, but that they also can serve as "sinks" for carbon emitted elsewhere by sequestering it in the soil. These systems have other benefits as well. They're more resilient to the extreme weather climate change is triggering, and less dependent on fossil fuel-based inputs. That means farmers face less risk as energy prices rise.

The Farm Bill is perhaps best known for the billions of dollars in subsidies it provides for commodity crops like corn, soybeans and wheat. For several decades, farm programs have been designed to encourage hyper-production of these few crops, at a serious environmental cost. But the Farm Bill also funds conservation and on-farm energy programs that have already begun to help farmers transition toward more efficient, climate-friendly agriculture systems.

Climate-friendly agriculture isn't just about cutting carbon emissions. It's about designing agricultural systems that provide multiple benefits, including carbon sequestration, clean air and water, wildlife habitat, and, of course, crops for food, fiber or fuel. The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) are two of the best examples of the right path for climate-friendly agriculture. They are working-lands conservation programs, meaning they reward and support farmers not for setting land aside, but for making improvements to productive land and farming practices.

Neither of these programs (nor any other program in the Farm Bill) names slowing the pace of climate change as a specific goal. But many of the practices they support contribute to meaningful emissions reductions and carbon sequestration.

CSP, EQIP and other Farm Bill conservation programs are a good start at moving agriculture in a more climate-friendly direction. But these programs haven't gotten the fiscal support or public fanfare to make them big enough for all farmers to participate. And right now, these programs are at risk of losing significant funding. Although they have a "mandatory" funding status, Congress can raid programs such as these (and indeed, has already threatened to do so) through the appropriations process.

Comprehensive federal climate legislation and binding international agreements on emissions reductions are paramount if we wish to avert disaster from climate change. But the Farm Bill can complement those processes. It's a tool we already possess that can make real, measurable contributions to emissions reductions and carbon sequestration.

As lawmakers get rolling this year on the next Farm Bill, they should recognize the critical role it can play in climate protection. Congress should boost funding for conservation programs including CSP and EQIP, not reduce it. And lawmakers should make climate mitigation an explicit goal of conservation programs, just as water, soil and air quality already are.

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