

Climate Change and Agriculture

The new Administration has signaled its intent to move quickly and aggressively on climate change issues. The Senate Ag Committee has signaled its intent to exercise its jurisdictional role in developing climate legislation. On March 12th, the House Ag Committee announced it is soliciting the opinions of more than 400 agricultural, environmental, scientific and educational groups and other members of the public, about options to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as they relate to ag and forestry. The questionnaire can be accessed at <http://agriculture.house.gov>. All responses must be on topic, in line with House rules, and include the biographical information sheet.

It is critical agriculture is engaged in the legislative discussions because agriculture can play a significant role in a market based cap and trade system through sequestering carbon on agriculture lands, as well as reducing emissions from farming practices and the raising of livestock. Economic analyses have shown that a robust offset program will reduce the costs of a cap and trade program. U.S. EPA estimates that agricultural and forestry lands can sequester 20% of all annual greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S. A coalition of American Farmland Trust, major program crop associations and cooperatives has put forth the following principles to be part of an offset program in cap and trade greenhouse gas legislation.

USDA should promulgate the rules and administer an agricultural offset program.

USDA has the institutional resources and technical expertise to administer an agricultural offset program – it has worked with farmers to study, model and measure carbon sequestration.

Do not place an artificial cap on the use of domestic offset allowances.

Current estimates predict ag and forest land can help reduce up to 20% of US GHG emissions. It would be unwise and market distorting to place an artificial cap on the amount of domestic offset allowances a covered entity can use to meet its yearly obligation. Artificial caps will prevent legitimate carbon sequestration, livestock methane capture, and manure gasification projects.

Establish carbon sequestration rates based on science.

It has been proven ag soils sequester carbon. Extremely accurate technologies are available to measure soil carbon content. USDA should quickly implement provisions of the 2008 Farm Bill that directs it to develop guidelines and protocols for farm participation in carbon markets.

Recognize early actors

Agriculture is always evolving. As technologies improve, farmers adapt. Producers that have already taken steps to reduce fertilizer rates, convert to no-till/low-till, etc. should not be disadvantaged by being excluded from compensation for future offsets that occur as a result of these ongoing efforts.

Stackable credits – or Recognition of multiple environmental services

Many practices undertaken to reduce GHG emissions will provide additional public benefits, such as clean water, wildlife habitat, and reduced soil erosion. Projects participating in a GHG offset market should not be excluded from also participating in other markets for environmental services that currently exist or may arise in the future. In addition, new climate programs should complement existing conservation programs within the Farm Bill.