



We need a climate plan for agriculture

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A [special report](#) released on Aug. 8 by the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change shines a stark light on how agriculture is both uniquely impacted by and a key driver of climate change, contributing up to [37 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions](#). The report highlights the pressing need to reverse land degradation and forest conversion caused by food, feed and fiber production, as well as the significant climate mitigation opportunities of shifting to [plant-based diets](#), especially in wealthy countries like ours.

The United States depends on its vast [agricultural and forest lands](#) for a host of amenities, including food, fiber, clean water — and mitigating climate change. These working lands, many of which are already [degraded](#), are under unprecedented stress from [rising temperatures](#) and [extreme weather](#). We need a climate plan for agriculture.

The 2020 presidential race is offering a rare political opening to put agriculture and climate squarely on the policy agenda. In a bid to appeal to rural voters and to address rural America's economic and [environmental](#) challenges, the [Democratic presidential candidates](#) are including sustainable agricultural policies in their speeches and platforms. For example, Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.) says he plans to introduce in the Senate the [Climate Stewardship Act](#). The bill envisions a central role for farmers and forest landowners as climate

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stewards by authorizing and funding climate change mitigation on working lands.

Similarly, former Vice President [Joe Biden](#) recently touted farm policies aimed at achieving net-zero emissions, primarily by paying farmers to increase soil carbon storage on their land. Sen. [Bernie Sanders](#) (I-Vt.) likewise proposes to empower farmers to address climate change and protect ecosystems as part of his expansive vision for revitalizing rural America.

This political moment could be leveraged to start a national dialog that drags agriculture policy out of the cellar of the last millennium and into the glare of our climate-changed world. As it stands, agriculture policy consists mainly of [the farm bill](#), a rambling package of various policies and subsidies that Congress renews every five years or so. Although essential, given the breadth of issues the farm bill touches (the nutrition safety net, the farm safety net, conservation and rural development), it has evolved as an accretion of programs.

In other words, the law has no overarching policy framework or purpose and, by design, turns a blind eye to the reality of climate change. As a result, despite spending billions of dollars, we have failed to lay the groundwork for a food-secure future and a climate resilient rural United States. The environmental burden of food and fiber production will only intensify as the global population swells to nearly [10 billion](#) by 2050.

Our inescapable climate reality is that where and how we produce and consume agricultural goods must change in order to preserve our ability to do so at all. Congress should wake up to this reality and seize the political momentum offered by the presidential race to address critical policy voids before it is too late.

Smart policies would heed the warnings of the IPCC report, provide an overarching plan guided by a food security purpose, and base their provisions and implementation on a science-based framework that facilitates rural America's ecological and economic resilience well into the future.

Laurie Ristino is a trustee of the Center for Progressive Reform and founder of the consultancy Strategies for a Sustainable Future. She served as USDA counsel for two decades advising NRCS and the Forest Service.

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