

AREAS OF MOMENTUM FOR THE FARM BILL AND BEYOND: ADVANCING A JUST TRANSITION TO REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE SYSTEMS

A guide to emerging public policy initiatives that cultivate inclusive incentives, enable farm-level adoption, and invest in producer-centric climate solutions, while also driving social equity and access for all farmers and ranchers.

Areas of momentum for the Farm Bill and beyond: A policy education toolkit to advance a just transition to regenerative agriculture systems

About this toolkit

This toolkit was crafted by the Growing our Future initiative to harness the momentum around – and increasing interest in – shifting public policy to enable a just transition to a regenerative agriculture system. The toolkit highlights three key areas of high momentum in federal legislation and a deep dive into each, showcasing potential pathways for engagement. Organizations, especially corporate government affairs teams, may use this tool to expand their knowledge on current policy advocacy efforts that pave the way for regenerative practices to scale across value networks.

The tool also provides a road map for organizations to understand what current and proposed legislation can achieve some of the most vital priorities set forth by coalitions who represent historically underserved farming and ranching communities. It can serve as an asset for organizations to make the case across departments for devoting resources to policy that advances both equity and regeneration, to help them meet ambitious targets around scaling adoption of regenerative practices in an inclusive manner. The document provides an overview of learnings and action areas across five sections:

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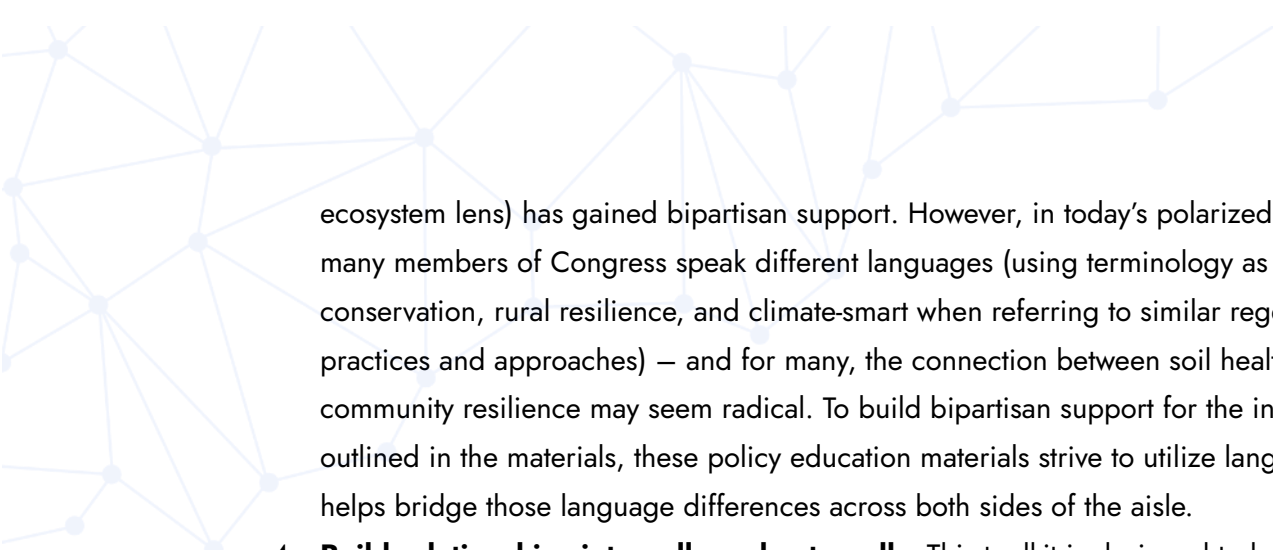
The context: Agriculture policy as a lever of change for food system transformation

Within the Growing our Future initiative, the Shifting Policy workstream emerged out of a collective identification of U.S. policy as a primary “lever of change” – or an area where focused action could lead to seismic shifts towards a more just and regenerative agriculture system. As detailed in the 2022 report, [‘What’s next for regenerative agriculture in the US? From incremental change to deep transformation to create a just and regenerative future’](#), US agriculture policy holds immense influence over the agriculture system. The [Farm Bill](#), the largest single piece of legislation in the country, is responsible for many of the incentives that govern the current agriculture system. This bill, and the subsequent appropriations process, also hold the key to establishing the enabling conditions for a system that prioritizes both resilient ecosystems **and** thriving communities.

With the Farm Bill up for its five-year renewal in 2023, there exists an unprecedented opportunity to fuse two often disparate policy priority areas: the protection of **ecosystems and climate**, and the impact of agriculture policy on the **people and communities** who grow the nation’s food. Such holistic attention in policy can achieve multiple outcomes: transforming current extractive agricultural practices towards ones that protect and restore ecosystems, addressing the deep disparities in who benefits from agriculture in this country, and ensuring that a transition to regenerative agriculture systems includes everyone.

How to use this toolkit

1. **Use the tools as a launching pad.** The aim of this toolkit is to provide guideposts for organizations – especially corporate government affairs teams – to familiarize themselves with the political milieu, as well as better understand how the needs of actors across their supply networks can be met with policy solutions. The policy education materials represent a small glimpse into the rapidly developing policy landscape in advance of the 2023 Farm Bill reauthorization, and should serve as an entry point to sifting through the vast array of available resources to support your organization’s policy strategy.
2. **Focus on the areas of momentum that work for you.** The materials are modular in nature; each of these sections seeks to elevate the most salient and feasible policy areas to advance programs that promote regenerative approaches, as well as advance equity for the farmers and ranchers who adopt them. If your organization gravitates towards a particular area, you may choose to focus your efforts and available resources on just one or two of the sections that make sense for your strategic direction and reach.
3. **Model regenerative mindsets, while acknowledging what’s feasible.** In the past several years, the term “regenerative agriculture” (defined through a soil health and



ecosystem lens) has gained bipartisan support. However, in today's polarized landscape, many members of Congress speak different languages (using terminology as diverse as conservation, rural resilience, and climate-smart when referring to similar regenerative practices and approaches) – and for many, the connection between soil health and community resilience may seem radical. To build bipartisan support for the initiatives outlined in the materials, these policy education materials strive to utilize language that helps bridge those language differences across both sides of the aisle.

4. **Build relationships internally and externally.** This toolkit is designed to help organizations understand the overlap of policies that promote ecosystem health with ones that ensure community resilience for all farm communities. [Land Core's web-based Bill Tracker](#) is an integral tool for understanding and analyzing the legislation cited in our education materials, as well as the legislators who introduced them. As you build your strategy, you may also choose to reach out to our network to join gatherings organized by Growing our Future participants, and learn about collective efforts to support legislation that matters for farmers and ranchers.

Note: Language in this document includes references to identities such as “socially disadvantaged” producers and “historically underserved” farm communities. These are terms used in previous Farm Bills that encompass intersecting gender, ethnic, and racial identities and socio-economic status. Whenever possible, individuals or groups are referred to by their preferred identifier that respects their unique background and cultural experience; where statistics are referenced or recommendations made, the relevant policy terms are used.

Part 1 | Areas of momentum for public policy to advance a just transition to regenerative systems

The approach: Developing the areas of momentum in public policy

Through a [collaborative “diagnosis” process in 2020](#), the Growing our Future initiative identified that while many corporations and mainstream organizations in the agriculture space are engaged in policy advocacy, some stakeholders lack an understanding of the public policy proposals that support a just transition to regenerative agriculture — or struggle to align internally on which of these policies to prioritize.

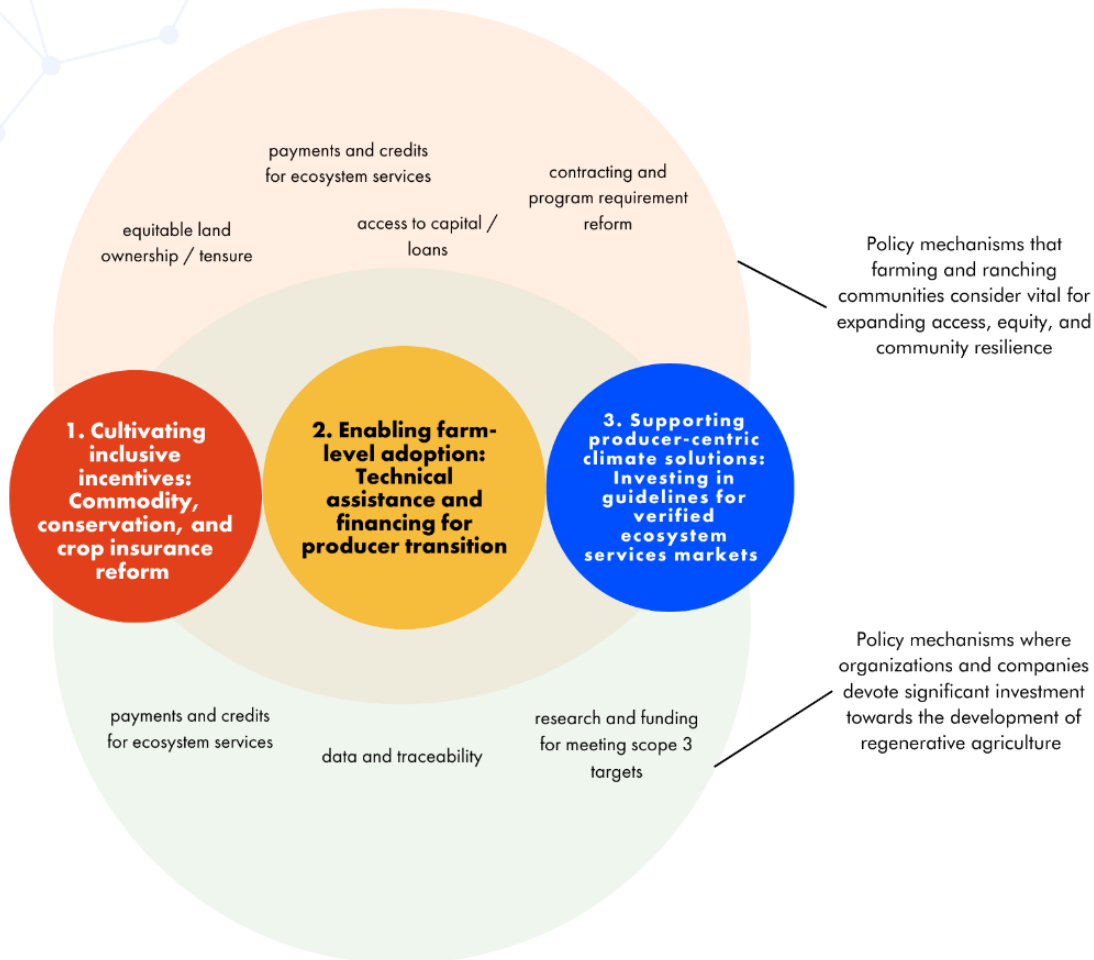
These advocacy efforts risk leaving behind farmers and historically underserved farm communities that form the backbone of our agricultural system—if policy advocacy does not appropriately address equity issues, it could actually undermine efforts to create the resilient system envisioned by stakeholders. As such, workstream participants explored, ***“What if companies and coalitions leveraged their collective resources to advance policy that prioritizes ecosystem health, community well-being, and climate solutions?”***

Growing our Future participants cultivated a unified vision for how policy could support a just and regenerative agriculture system: **that legislation enables more regenerative approaches for producers, while simultaneously addressing inequities in the current agriculture system to support a just transition.**

Within that vision, participants generated consensus around three *areas of momentum* for organizations to focus their attention. These areas lie in the intersection between 1) where there is significant investment from mainstream and incumbent organizations, and 2) considered vital by farming and ranching coalitions as areas ripe for improvement to expand access, equity, and resilience for their communities. The following diagram illustrates how these areas emerged from a larger discussion across stakeholder groups.

Emerging areas of momentum

Collective policy priorities that emerged from our work with stakeholders and participants are shown in the diagram below. Focused attention in these areas can catalyze a just transition to regenerative agriculture adoption for the Farm Bill and beyond.



The opportunity: Mobilizing around the areas of momentum

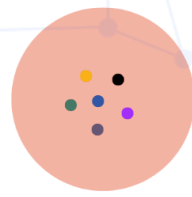
Farm Bill-authorized programs and other state and federal legislation are fertile ground for moving the needle on regenerative agriculture, as well as promoting equity and access for underserved producers. To help organizations understand the overlapping policy recommendations of coalitions across the system, Growing our Future [coalesced the agendas of leading coalitions advocating for policies at the intersection of regenerative agriculture and equity](#). A living document at the time of publication, **the matrix highlights some of the key legislative recommendations and priorities of these coalitions as they overlap with the three areas of momentum** collectively defined in 2021-22, and shown in the diagrams above and below.

'Heat Map' of coalitions' policy priorities that overlap with the three areas of momentum

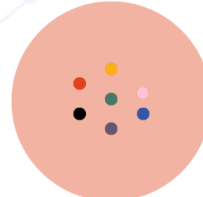


Area of Momentum #1

Cultivating inclusive incentives: Commodity, conservation, and crop insurance reform



Expanding the farm safety net: RMA-administered federal crop insurance programs, FSA administered commodity price-support programs



Expanding Whole Farm Revenue Program, Micro Farm Program



Incentivizing the adoption of cover crops and diversified cropping systems

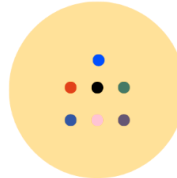


Area of Momentum #2

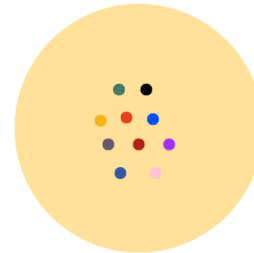
Enabling farm-level adoption: Technical assistance and financing for producer transition



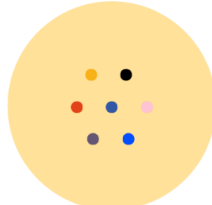
Cultivating cohesion between regenerative approaches and National Organic Program / Organic Transitions Program



Investing in marketplace infrastructure and innovative producer support systems



Improving and Expanding Conservation programs (EQIP & CSP)



Prioritizing outreach and assistance for socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers and ranchers (as stipulated in [Section 2501 priority areas](#))



Engaging and supporting land grant universities, cooperative agreements



Engaging Farm Service Agency in technical assistance provisions through collateral + lending equity



Prioritizing heirs property lending program (Section 5104)



Area of Momentum #3

Supporting producer-centric climate solutions: Investing in guidelines for verified ecosystem services markets



Prioritizing oversight and implementation



Data collection: streamlining and standardization of measurement and data collection



Expanding public-private partnerships to implement guidelines and conduct outreach



Equitable and transparent payment structure

KEY			
● Ceres Climate Smart Agriculture & Healthy Soils Working Group	● Midwest Row Crop Collaborative	● Federation of Southern Cooperatives / Land Assistance Fund	● Rural Coalition
● Regenerate America	● National Young Farmers Coalition	● Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance	● Latino Farmers and Ranchers International
			● ASBN Regenerative Agriculture & Justice Working Group

Note: Because the policies listed focus specifically on the three areas of momentum, the policy priorities cited in the above graphic and our [living policy priority matrix](#) represent just a small subset of the policy agendas put forth by each coalition. To explore the full policy priorities and agendas of the coalitions further, use the links provided within the [matrix](#).

Part 2 | Policy Education Materials

As anticipation mounts in advance of the 2023 Farm Bill, organizations have increased their advocacy efforts: in 2022 alone, an unprecedented [\\$165 million was spent by agriculture industry groups and agribusinesses](#) to lobby Congress. Through the efforts of broad-based coalitions and advocacy groups, many integral bills have been introduced to pave a path towards incentivizing large-scale transitions in the way farms and ranches operate, and the programs that support them. The following sections provide a brief overview of the progress made, priority programs and marker bills (which are used to form the basis of legislative text for a larger bill). They also provide a glimpse into policy guidance sourced from farming and ranching communities – serving as a “launching pad” for organizations to understand some of the advancements made by these coalitions.

To effectively promote the transition to regenerative systems in agriculture, organizations play a crucial role in advocating for policies that reach all producers across their supply networks. This means prioritizing — and advancing — equity as a core pillar in their policy priorities, which will necessitate cross-departmental outreach to generate support for these efforts internally. Cultivating external relationships outside of conventional networks to build support will be critical in this process as well.

While the upcoming Farm Bill is an immediate rallying point for advocacy efforts, its passage is just the start of a larger process for authorizing programs that could impact the proliferation of regenerative approaches. Organizations can use these tools well beyond the upcoming Farm Bill negotiation: from state and local legislation, to [Farm Bill appropriations and discretionary spending](#), and beyond.

Note: *The following sections are centered around the three **areas of momentum** defined above, to help organizations better understand the policy milieu and the areas that could catalyze larger systemic shifts in the agriculture system. They are meant to provide a research-focused analysis of the available resources in policy to support organizations in making their own decisions about the unique policy avenues that suit their needs, as they develop advocacy strategies that satisfy both environmental and social outcomes.*

Area of Momentum #1 – Cultivating inclusive incentives: Commodity, conservation, and crop insurance reform

Through the 2023 Farm Bill, there are many emerging opportunities to develop and support programs that reduce on-farm risk associated with adopting practices that benefit long term soil and ecosystem health for all.

One of the hallmarks of regenerative systems includes diversified cropping systems. Farm Bill Title I: Crop Insurance authorizes the Federal Crop Insurance Program (FCIP) and other risk management incentives administered by the Risk Management Agency, many of which present barriers for producers to implement diversified cropping systems. Emerging programs, detailed in this section, can reduce these barriers. Access to – and outreach for – these programs remains a top priority for many coalitions who represent historically underserved and socially disadvantaged farming and ranching communities.

1. Background: How can changes in the farm safety net and crop insurance play a role in advancing regenerative systems in agriculture?

As described by witnesses in the House Agriculture Committee’s hearing on [regenerative agriculture and soil health](#), **regenerative practices** care for long term soil health and natural resources, provide more nutritious food for communities, and generate new revenue sources to improve farmers’ livelihoods and increase profitability of farms.¹

What are diversified cropping systems? These can include:

1. Cover crops that reduce soil erosion, put carbon from the atmosphere back into the soil, allow for more resilient farming system² to withstand drought and other ecosystem disruptions, and may allow farmers access to [market incentive programs](#)
2. A perennial groundcover that provides erosion control, reduces nitrate leaching, controls weeds, and in some cases increases yield of commodity crops
3. Crop rotations that add value to farmer’s harvests, increase soil microbes and enhancing biodiversity of the soil substrate
4. Livestock / crop rotations that integrate animal grazing with cropland to add nutrients to the soil and reduce farmer dependence on expensive soil amendments

¹ LaCanne CE, Lundgren JG. Regenerative agriculture: merging farming and natural resource conservation profitably. PeerJ. 2018 Feb 26.

² [SARE Outreach: Diversifying Cropping Systems](#). Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education, 2004.

If expanded to prioritize diverse cropping systems, crop insurance (just one part of the US farm safety net) can provide a necessary cushion for farmers implementing regenerative systems for long term success, as they may need to wait [one or more years to begin to see a return on their investments](#) in diversified systems.

The Challenge

Diversified cropping systems are just one of many entry points for farmers to begin implementing regenerative practices that are shown to be successful and profitable on farms and lead to more resilient ecosystems.³ However, 94% of crop insurance payouts serviced only six major commodities in 2018, and “large” and “very large” farms received 43% of all crop insurance indemnities.⁴ While this distribution helps finance the farm operations that produce the inputs for food, animal feed, and biofuel, it leaves out crops that can help make farms and farmers more resilient.

These **limitations make the current crop insurance program a primary barrier** for adopting diversified crop systems, and can hinder farmer innovation to make their operations more resilient in the face of inflation and extreme weather events.⁵

“The existing requirements are far too high to meet the needs of our producers. There are too many hoops to jump through to prove that you [producers] need payouts; it’s not worth the time for small acre farms.”

– Rudy Arredondo, President + Executive Director of Latino Farmers and Ranchers International

2. Priority Programs and Primary Marker Bills: Learnings from the broader Growing our Future community

Through convenings and meetings with grassroots farm community coalitions and food producers, as well as research on the top priorities of coalitions advocating for regenerative approaches, several opportunity areas in public policy emerged through focus on the 2023 Farm Bill and beyond:

- **Prioritizing premiums and discounts** within federal crop insurance and commodity programs for producers who adopt regenerative approaches and practices on their farms and rangelands
 - ◆ [Marker Bill] The [COVER Act](#), introduced in July 2022, adds a \$5/acre premium discount to crop insurance programs to incentivize cover crop systems, effectively making the highly successful [Pandemic Cover Crop Program](#) permanent

³ LaCanne CE, Lundgren JG. [Regenerative agriculture: merging farming and natural resource conservation profitably](#). PeerJ. 2018 Feb 26

⁴ [The Case for Crop Insurance Reform](#). Conservation Finance Network, 2020.

⁵ [Regenerative Agriculture: Farm Policy for the 21st Century](#). National Resources Defense Council, 2022.

- ◆ [Marker bill] The Agriculture Resilience Act of 2023 (introduced in March 2023 in both the [House of Representatives](#) and the [Senate](#)) stipulates a provision to provide discounted crop insurance to farmers and ranchers that adopt risk-reducing practices, thereby providing a pathway to incentivizing practices that promote soil health.
- ◆ [Evidence] A poll conducted for the National Wildlife Federation showed that [78 percent of U.S. row crop farmers support discounted crop insurance premiums](#) for producers who utilize in-field conservation practices, such as planting cover crops, to reduce risk of crop failure.

Increasing Implementation for [Whole Farm Revenue Protection Program](#), which expands crop insurance beyond the top commodities, to provide coverage for crops grown utilizing diversified cropping systems.

- ◆ → [Marker bill] The Food and Farm Act (introduced in March 2023 in the [House of Representatives](#)) includes a section that directs Congress to authorize the commodity and subsidy programming to increase access to farmers who plant more than one crop, potentially enabling adoption of diversified cropping systems.
- **Promoting and Funding** the [Micro Farm Program](#): Introduced in 2022 by Risk Management Agency (RMA) to extend crop insurance to small family farms, [which represent 88% of all US farms](#)

3. Guidance from farming and ranching community coalitions: Accessibility, outreach, and inclusive incentives

According to representatives from farming and ranching communities, how can public policy ensure that crop insurance is accessible to all farmers and ranchers, especially socially disadvantaged producers?

- **Increasing outreach and access** for the above programs to historically underserved and discriminated against producers through cost share programs and the [Risk Management Education Partnership Program](#)
 - ◆ Allocate quotas and/or set-asides for funding to reach historically underserved farmers and ranchers to ensure that all producers can access programs.
 - ◆ Continue supporting training programs for crop insurance agents and adjusters who represent underserved / socially disadvantaged producers.
- **Continuing funding for** innovative collaborations, such as [RMA's Building Resiliency Program](#)
 - ◆ Cross-sector partnership highlight → A [new \\$3.3 investment by USDA](#) to fund a partnership that unites the Risk Management Agency, The Southern Risk Management Education Center at the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, and Intertribal Agriculture Council aims to strengthen outreach and technical assistance to underserved farmers and ranchers through the development of risk management program navigators. These navigators will be program specialists trained by project

collaborators to provide strategic outreach about federal crop insurance and “establish a pipeline of crop insurance agents and adjusters within underserved agricultural communities.”

- **Subsidizing** crop insurance to young and beginning farmers, especially first-time tribal producers and young farmers, to ensure widespread access
 - ◆ These producers, as stipulated in the National Young Farmers Coalition 2022 survey, are **more likely to [implement regenerative farming principles](#)** that protect and rebuild soils.
- **Expanding [Agriculture Management Assistance](#)** program presence to all 50 states, prioritizing outreach in socially disadvantaged farm communities with low FCIC engagement
 - ◆ → This initiative is commonly referred to as Farm Bill Section 2501
- **Incentivizing** the emergence of local/regional markets for the variety of products would allow for diversified cropping systems to proliferate
 - ◆ → The [Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program](#) supports states, tribes and territories to “procure and distribute local and regional foods and beverages that are healthy, nutritious, unique to their geographic areas and that meet the needs of the population.”

Area of Momentum #2 – Enabling farm level adoption: Technical assistance and finance for producer transition

Through the 2023 Farm Bill and subsequent legislation, there's immense potential for organizations to support programs that enable farm-level adoption and mitigate risk for transition within existing conservation programs on federal and local levels, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), within Title II: [Conservation](#) of the Farm Bill.

To increase equity and access, a growing number of coalitions recommend that the Farm Bill allocate program funds specifically for socially disadvantaged farm communities; and invest in outreach that actively seeks applicants from socially disadvantaged farm communities by partnering with existing support systems such as land grant universities and cooperative extension networks.

1. Background: Why expand access to technical assistance through USDA Conservation programs?

Access to **high quality technical assistance** is integral to the success factors for producers beginning the transition to regenerative approaches. USDA Conservation programs, which help enable shifts on farms through programs authorized by the Farm Bill and allocated through the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) the Farm Service Agency (FSA), among others. This section focuses primarily on programs administered through NRCS, which have served as a powerful mechanism for many farms and ranches to shift their operations to regenerative systems. With unprecedented attention on the opportunities regenerative approaches can provide, and the crucial role of technical assistance in their proliferation, many mainstream organizations and businesses – from American Farmland Trust and 140 signatories – have [voiced their support for technical assistance to drive adoption](#).

The Challenge

As indicated in Part 1 of this toolkit, many Growing our Future participants – which include coalitions, farm community organizations, corporations, and non-profit organizations – **support policy initiatives that improve and expand upon Conservation programs authorized by the Farm Bill's [Conservation Title](#)** – which advance rural resilience and ecosystem-level outcomes. But these programs are [chronically oversubscribed](#) (currently rejecting 57% of applicants), and even more so for underserved communities. Only around 2.1% and 15% of socially disadvantaged producers were awarded funding through the CSP and EQIP programs, respectively, according to [NRCS data](#).

Within the challenge lies a solution: as almost half of agricultural land is predicted to change ownership over the next two decades, National Young Farmers Coalition reports that **young farmers, especially those who identify as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are more likely to [implement regenerative farming practices](#)**. Thus, there is immense opportunity for Conservation programs that prioritize transition to regenerative practices for historically underserved farm communities to influence the pace of adoption of regenerative approaches. Not only are historically underserved farm communities proportionally under-enrolled in Conservation programs, they are often the originators and/or early adopters of the approaches themselves that are espoused by the programs.

The policy priorities of many grassroots coalitions representing farming and ranching communities often focus on addressing needs associated with the deeply systemic disparities in farmland ownership, distribution, and access. These priorities, such as increasing land tenure and addressing heirs property rights, are therefore complements to expanding technical assistance for farmers. For example, to combat drastic declines of Black land ownership in the 20th century,⁶ the [Federation of Southern Cooperatives / Land Assistance Fund](#) advocates for “Support targeted Conservation Program funding incentives to achieve loan forgiveness within the Heir Property Relending Program.” This policy proposal at the intersection of regeneration and equity is indicative of the upcoming opportunities for organizations to address these systemic inequities as they build upon their strategies for public policy.

2. Priority Programs and Primary Marker Bills: Learnings from the broader Growing our Future community

Through convenings and meetings with grassroots farm community coalitions and food producers, as well as research on the top priorities of coalitions advocating for regenerative approaches, several opportunity areas in public policy emerged for how public policy that could impact technical assistance for producers to transition to regenerative approaches:

- **Promoting and increasing funding** for core programming that focuses on local and regional approaches to producer adoption of practices that advance soil health
- **Prioritizing programming** that enables farmers and ranchers to incorporate practices such as rotational grazing, and acquire financing for the necessary equipment for transitioning
- **Extending funding, implementation, and access** to programs that create opportunities for producers to participate in regionalized markets for regeneratively produced goods

⁶ Black land ownership declined drastically in the 20th century. In the US, white farmers own 96.1% of total farmland and 94% of total farm operations, according to the National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) [2017 US Agricultural Census](#). An [analysis](#) of that same census estimated that the present, compounded value of the Black land loss from 1920 to 1997 is roughly \$326 billion.

See also: Davy, Dãnia. [What Would a Pro-Black Farmer Policy Regime Look Like?](#) Nonprofit Quarterly, Oct 20, 2021.

- ◆ → Examples of programs that many coalitions prioritize to advance equity for farmers that would enable regenerative approaches: Farmer Opportunities Training and Outreach, Technical Assistance Investment Program, Value-Added Producer Grant Program, Conservation Reserve Program & Transition Incentives Program
- **Expanding** existing programs such as the National Organic Program and Organic Transitions Program to integrate regenerative practices adoption and identify farmers already changing practices towards sustainable land management.
- **Protecting** the funding allocated through the [Inflation Reduction Act](#) to EQIP and CSP programs to ensure that it reaches producers
 - ◆ **Increasing** opportunities for inter-agency collaboration and prioritize public-private partnerships that allow for community-based organizations to serve as outreach partners for NRCS programs

3. Guidance from farming and ranching community coalitions: Accessibility, outreach, and inclusive incentives

According to representatives from farming and ranching communities, how can public policy ensure that technical assistance and finance for adopting regenerative approaches are accessible to all farmers and ranchers, especially socially disadvantaged producers?

- **Increasing funding and promote programs** that serve – and are led by – socially disadvantaged, veteran, and beginning farmers and ranchers
 - ◆ → [Marker Bill] The Increased TSP Access Act of 2023 (introduced May 2023 in both the [House of Representatives](#) and the [Senate](#)) proposes a streamlined process for certified crop advisors (and community based institutions) to deliver technical assistance to producers – to fill the outreach gap for producers who apply for Conservation programs allocated through this Farm Bill’s Conservation Title by increasing NRCS staff capacity.⁷

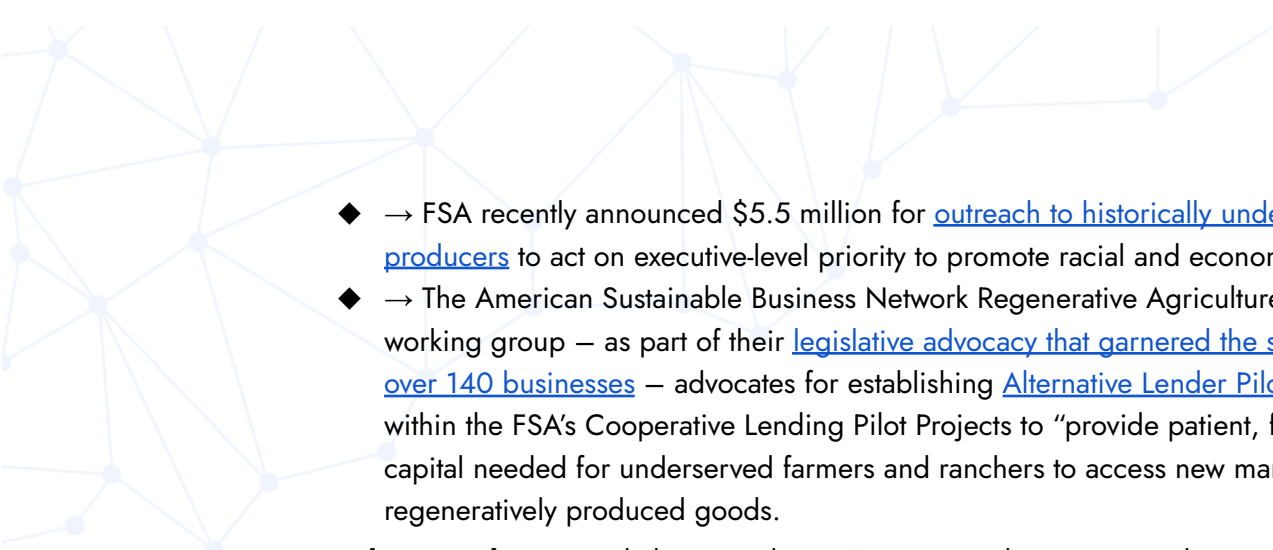
⁷ **Note:** There is a lack of consensus about this legislation at the time of publication. Many coalitions in favor of streamlining the process of distributing the unprecedented funding allocated to Conservation programs through the Inflation Reduction Act have advocated for this bill on the grounds that it would enable community-based institutions to more easily become technical services providers. Conversely, groups advocating for regenerative approaches that advance soil health have expressed concerns about this Act, indicating that streamlining this process could enable certification of service providers whose background is conventional farming practices – which could promote chemical pest management practices and synthetic fertilizer usage, putting both ecosystems and farmers and farmworkers who apply and handle them at risk.

As an alternative, [Regenerate America coalition proposed more stringent guidance](#) and stipulations for programs to provide outreach and technical assistance to enable technical service providers to become certified through NRCS.

Conservation Leadership in Action: The Conservation District of Oklahoma's [Conservation and Agriculture Reach Everyone \(CARE\)](#) Project is a collaborative effort led by the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts (OACD) with the Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project, Texas Agroforestry Small Farmers & Ranchers, and Association of Texas Soil & Water Conservation Districts. The purpose is to increase the number of producers participating in conservation planning and programs in order to improve soil health, water quality, and the viability of working lands.

→ [Marker bill] The [Conservation Opportunity and Voluntary Environment Resilience Program \(COVER\) Act](#), in addition to providing a \$5 per acre premium subsidy to producers who adopt cover cropping practices, also directs the National Resource Conservation Service and the Farm Service Agency to **conduct outreach via cooperative agreements** with Soil and Water Conservation Districts and other community based initiatives.

- **Increasing** set-asides within the **EQIP program** for beginning and socially disadvantaged producers, and continued option for advance payments will support adoption of regenerative practices
 - ◆ → Example: A set-aside of 5% for EQIP was established in the 2014 Farm Bill and retained in the 2018 Farm Bill
- **Continuing support for** innovative collaborations such as cooperative agreements and partnerships with land grant universities, prioritizing organizations with deep and robust farm community relationships and established trust
 - ◆ → [Marker bill] Conservation and Innovative Climate Partnership Act (Introduced in both the [Senate](#) and [House of Representatives](#) in 2023) lays the groundwork for Congress to authorize funds directly to land grant universities for innovative conservation programs, including associated outreach and research. See the analysis by [Land Core's Bill Tracker for more information and analysis](#) on the broad-based support for these bills.
- **Amending** programming that [prioritizes applicants from tribal entities](#) and tribal governments including beginning farmers and ranchers seeking to establish or reestablish working land activities on tribal land
 - ◆ → Example: Farm Bill 2018 Section 2001 indicates priority areas for Conservation Program implementation to expand eligibility for collective, cooperative, and communal non-family entities
- **Supporting** continued budget allocations to build on the Farm Service Agency (FSA)'s 2023 budget increases to increase farm loans, enabling farmers' and ranchers' financial resilience, a necessary first step to enable adoption of new regenerative approaches

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- ◆ → FSA recently announced \$5.5 million for [outreach to historically underserved producers](#) to act on executive-level priority to promote racial and economic equity
 - ◆ → The American Sustainable Business Network Regenerative Agriculture and Justice working group – as part of their [legislative advocacy that garnered the support of over 140 businesses](#) – advocates for establishing [Alternative Lender Pilot Projects](#) within the FSA’s Cooperative Lending Pilot Projects to “provide patient, flexible capital needed for underserved farmers and ranchers to access new markets” for regeneratively produced goods.
- **Providing stipulations** and clear mandate to NRCS to reduce paperwork requirements and streamline the process for applications associated with EQIP, CSP, and other Conservation programming to alleviate accounting burden on small acreage and beginning farms.
- ◆ → Growing our Future participant Ceres Climate Smart Agriculture and Healthy Soils Working group released a [letter signed by seven major corporations](#) in support of this recommendation

Area of Momentum #3 – Supporting producer-centric climate solutions: Investing in guidelines for verified Ecosystem Services Markets

Through the 2023 Farm Bill, there are many opportunities for organizations to support programs that enable farm communities to be a part of ecosystem solutions by investing in the creation, oversight, and management of Ecosystem Services Markets (ESMs) – or markets for biodiversity and resilient ecosystems. ESMs are just one financial tool of many that serve to de-risk adoption of regenerative practices.

1. Background: What are ecosystem services markets (ESM) and what guidance is needed to ensure they enable producers to adopt regenerative agriculture methods and practices for rural resilience?

The transition to regenerative systems for farmers involves significant financial investment to accommodate new timelines and recognize the inherent risks in changing their practices from conventional growing.

In 2022, USDA invested more than \$3.1 billion for 141 agriculture projects to collaboratively combat extreme weather events through the Partnerships for Climate Smart Commodities program, many of which include ESM stakeholders for research and development of emerging markets; recipients of funding were required to prove meaningful involvement of small and underserved producers.⁸

- Specifically, within the Inflation Reduction Act allocation in 2022, [\\$300 million was provided via USDA to quantify carbon sequestration and greenhouse gasses](#) (GHG) through the collection and use of field-based data to assess conservation outcomes

The Challenge

Many agriculture stakeholders, especially historically underserved farm communities, lack an understanding of ESMs and how these emerging markets intersect with the other financial tools (such as Conservation programs) available to them.

- Though efforts to include historically underserved farming and ranching communities in ESMs are emerging, these markets historically have not been designed in a way that includes stewards of smaller acreage farms and historically underserved communities.
- Socially disadvantaged farming and ranching communities on average operate on small acreage farms and rangelands; further guidelines from federal agencies are needed for ESMs operating with per-acreage compensation models to proportionally compensate producers for adoption of new practices.

⁸ [Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities](#). United States Department of Agriculture, Accessed 11 Jan 2022.

Initial findings from a [Growing our Future pilot program](#) (in partnership with Ecosystem Services Market Consortium and cotton producers in the South and Southeastern regions of the US) suggest: Opportunities to attract mainstream private and public finance and to tap into new financial flows around ecosystem service markets need to be developed in ways that work for food producers.

- The increased capital flows provided by private ESMs may assist the adoption of regenerative approaches, but requires significant education on the part of the producer about the risks and burdens of practice adoption. The development of ecosystem services markets offers an alternative business model to reward sustainable and regenerative practices, and enables them to be scaled – though at the time of publication these emerging markets do not necessarily reflect the needs of the diverse array of producers across the US.
- These markets often operate by providing a per-acre subsidy to producers for adopting new practices that sequester carbon or perform other “ecosystem services,” which often fall into the Conservation practices outlined by NRCS programs such as EQIP and CSP under the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill.

2. Priority Programs and Primary Marker Bills: Learnings from the broader Growing our Future community

Through convenings and meetings with grassroots farm community coalitions and food producers, as well as research on the top priorities of coalitions advocating for regenerative approaches, several opportunity areas in public policy emerged that indicate the need for policies and guidelines for emerging ecosystems services markets in agriculture at the federal level to support producer-centric climate solutions:

- **Prioritizing** a streamlining and standardization of measurement and data collection:
 - ◆ Develop USDA MRV (Measurement Reporting & Verification) infrastructure and standards, including, lab calibration standards for soil sampling and remote sensed practice verification to facilitate the development of new markets.
 - ◆ Include estimation and planning tools such as the COMET Planner, which can be used in a variety of farming systems to estimate baseline levels and outcomes of practice adoption.
 - ◆ → [Marker Bill] The [Agriculture Innovation Act of 2023](#) establishes guidance for major investments in on-farm soil-related data collection and support that could increase the availability of standardized, USDA-housed data centers, augmenting opportunities for ESMs to ground their claims in standardized measurement practices.
 - ◆ → [Marker bill] [North American Grasslands Conservation Act](#), through a voluntary programming directed towards landowners to incentivize conservation, including

through rotational grazing (which helps regenerate soils) also aims to “drive voluntary, science-based efforts to conserve these ecosystems while supporting working lands conservation in order to sequester carbon.”

- **Providing** clear avenues for emerging ESMs to advocate as an outreach mechanism for NRCS Conservation Programs (eg. EQIP and CSP, and other programs that promote soil health, biodiversity, and resilient ecosystems) to assist with new practice adoption that requires significant technical assistance.
- **Promoting and funding** programs that prioritize education and outreach for farm communities to better understand the benefits, costs, and risks associated with ESMs.
- **Extending funding and implementation** of future projects and partnerships that advance research on the intersection of climate solutions, ESMs, and rural development through emergent marketplaces.
 - ◆ → [Marker bill] The [Agriculture Resilience Act](#) (introduced in both the [House](#) and the [Senate](#)) sets forth clear additions that can promote much-needed research on science-based initiatives for agriculture to support climate solutions and farmer livelihoods.

What is Measurement, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) and why is it important for the 2023 Farm Bill to address?


- Lack of access to quality data, particularly for historically disadvantaged farm communities, alongside concerns about data ownership prevents farmers from understanding the risks – and/or reaping the benefits – of emergent ESMs

3. Guidance from farming and ranching community coalitions: Accessibility, outreach, and inclusive incentives

How can public policy ensure that emerging climate solutions in agriculture are inclusive of the unique needs of farmers and ranchers, especially socially disadvantaged producers?⁹

- **Ensuring** historically disadvantaged producers, should they choose to engage in ESMs, have a fair stake in marketplace compensation structure and contracting, and that prerequisites for scalable solutions in USDA grants do not exclude smaller pilot innovations.
- **Facilitating** innovative partnerships (through cooperative agreements, investment in conservation districts, and funding and engagement with land grant universities) so that institutions with established relationships and trust with historically farm communities can engage in ESM program development, allowing producers to make informed decisions about adopting programming or entering agreements.

⁹ It is important to recognize that many farmers and ranchers are hesitant about, if not actively opposed to, the development of ESMs. Efforts to include historically underserved producers in such programs should not assume that participating in ESMs is the right financing tool for all farmers, but rather develop an equitable program model that includes and centers producer feedback from initial stages of development.

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- **Establishing** regulatory or institutional oversight to ensure rigor of programs and accessibility; include diverse farm community representatives from historically socially disadvantaged farm communities on oversight task forces.
 - **Proactively reaching** socially disadvantaged farmers through an education program specifically designed for and by farm communities with extensive peer outreach.
 - **Providing** guidance and oversight (through agencies such as National Resource Conservation Service or state and local Soil and Water Conservation Districts) for partnerships between socially disadvantaged farm communities and mainstream institutions to educate producers on the contracting process and ensure that fair and equitable agreements are cultivated.
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What next?

Prioritizing equity in the transition to regenerative systems is not a “nice to have” in public policy — it is integral for the survival of the farming and ranching communities. If organizations and businesses work more collaboratively to mobilize resources and join forces with grassroots coalitions, the food system will be one step closer to aligning to goals that are centered on just and regenerative outcomes.

Immediate action can shift public policy to enable a more just and regenerative agriculture system.

This toolkit was developed by the **Growing our Future** initiative in 2023. For more information, guidance on how to use this toolkit, or to join our work on Shifting Policy, led by Michelle Stearn, please [contact Michelle](#).

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