NURTURING HEALTHY SOILS FOR HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Policy Recommendations for the Make America Healthy Again Commission

FACA
Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance

agclimatealliance.com

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The health of our nation is deeply rooted in the health of our land.

In response to the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) Commission's call to improve the well-being of all Americans, our coalition of farmers, ranchers, forest owners, environmental advocates, and industry leaders offers this report as a roadmap to a healthier future—starting from the ground up.

Healthy soils are more than the foundation of our food system—they are the living infrastructure that supports clean air and water, resilient ecosystems, and the health of our communities. Productive farms and forests depend on these natural resources, just as good stewardship enhances them. To fully realize this cycle, the U.S. government must align investment, practice, and science to scale regenerative production solutions that are voluntary, market-and incentive-based, and advance science-based outcomes.

PILLAR 1: ADVANCING VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION

PILLAR 2: SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT AND RESTORATION

PILLAR 3: DRIVING AGRICULTURAL INNOVATION

This report outlines three pillars to help build resilient and thriving communities across the country:

We urge the MAHA Commission to recognize farmers, ranchers, and forest owners' essential role and ongoing efforts in supporting healthy lands and public health—and to support policies that reward stewardship, invest in innovation, and create lasting, healthy outcomes for all communities, rural and urban alike. Regenerative agriculture practices play an important role in soil health and align with longstanding conservation agriculture techniques discussed in this report. FACA believes regenerative farming should continue in a market-driven manner of voluntary adoption with continued support from USDA.

These recommendations are grounded in the understanding that healthy soils, clean water, and resilient forests promote the health of our farms, forests, and communities.

ABOUT FACA

The Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance (FACA) represents farmers, ranchers, forest owners, agribusinesses, manufacturers, the food and innovation sector, state governments, higher education associations, sportsmen and sportswomen, and environmental advocates.

FACA's unique and first-of-its-kind alliance brings together a diverse group of organizations committed to pragmatic solutions that enhance both environmental and economic outcomes for U.S. agriculture and forestry, and foster the long-term resiliency of our nation's working lands.

FACA members are united in support of federal conservation and environmental policies that:

- Are voluntary, market- and incentive-based.
- Advance science-based outcomes.
- Promote resilience and help rural economies better adapt to climate change.
- Ensure equitable opportunities for all farmers, ranchers, and forest owners.
- Are strongly bipartisan.

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

American Farm Bureau Federation

asta american seed trade association

AEM Association of Equipment Manufacturers

APLU Board on Agriculture Assembly

CropLife America

CIRB Crop Insurance and Reinsurance Bureau, Inc.

Ducks Unlimited

Environmental Defense Fund

Farm Credit

Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund

FMI The Food Industry Association

International Fresh Produce Association

IDFA International Dairy Foods Association

NAFO National Alliance of Forest Owners

NASDA

National Corn Growers Association

National Cotton Council of America

NCFC National Council of Farmer Cooperatives

National Farmers Union

NMPF National Milk Producers Federation

The Nature Conservancy

PILLAR 1: ADVANCING VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR

America's farmers and ranchers are essential partners in conservation, with a direct, long-term stake in maintaining the health of their land and the communities in which they live. Practices like cover crops, no-till, and rotational grazing build soil health over time. Conservation practices like buffers along the edges of crop fields, optimized fertilizer use, and manure management provide cleaner air and water for all Americans.

To support and scale these efforts, the U.S. government's approach to conservation must remain **voluntary, science-based, and incentive-driven**, empowering producers to build on their existing practices.

The following policy recommendations reflect this producer-centered approach:

1. **Support robust funding for financial and technical assistance provided through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).**
   - Producers need financial and technical support to make the adoption and expansion of conservation practices affordable and accessible.
   - FACA supports the recent increased investments in Farm Bill Title II conservation programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, and Regional Conservation Partnership Program. These voluntary and incentive-based programs benefit farmers and ranchers' operations and livelihoods.
   - Establishing a higher baseline for these programs is critical to ensure stable, long-term investment in conservation efforts that support farmers and ranchers as they address a wide range of natural resource concerns aligned with local conservation priorities and focused on improving the quality of our air, water, soil, and wildlife habitat.

2. Strengthen technical expertise and expand capacity to deliver producer-centered conservation support.

- Securing funding is only one challenge producers face when implementing conservation practices. Technical assistance is vital to help farmers identify and apply the most suitable practices or technologies on their operations. USDA-NRCS provides farmers, ranchers, and landowners with expert guidance and support to plan, design, and implement conservation practices that are most effective for their individual operation.
- USDA should ensure sufficient capacity of field staff and conservation professionals to meet producer demand for tailored, science-based technical assistance.
- NRCS should ensure staff are properly trained on emerging technologies and innovative conservation practices to strengthen their capacity to provide producers with up-to-date, effective solutions. Recruitment and training efforts should be focused on areas where technical expertise has been limited, including, but not limited to, nutrient optimization, edge-of-field practices, grazing management, livestock nutrition, and genetics/breeding.
- In some cases, third-party Technical Service Providers (TSPs) can help expand NRCS capacity. FACA encourages NRCS to streamline its certification process for third-party TSPs, including for certified crop advisors, and cooperative-based agricultural staff and scientists. Cooperatives, for example, often serve a critical resource gap for small and limited-resource producers.

3. Provide continued investments for technical assistance through the NRCS Conservation Operations account.

- Conservation technical assistance funding is essential to effective conservation planning, as it provides producers with the expertise and resources needed to implement conservation practices that deliver long-term environmental benefits.
- Roughly 25 percent of mandatory Farm Bill Title II conservation program funding is used for technical assistance. A majority of funding for the early stages of on-farm conservation planning comes from USDA's Conservation Operations account, which is appropriated annually by Congress.
- FACA supports strong funding for the USDA Conservation Operations account, which provides the foundational resources needed to develop customized conservation plans and implement effective stewardship practices on working lands.

4. Streamline a forward-looking approval process for conservation practice standards.

- Funding and cost-share through USDA conservation programs are limited to conservation plans that follow NRCS practice standards; however, these standards historically have not kept pace with on-farm innovation, hindering the adoption of newer and potentially more effective practices and technologies.
- Currently, producers and stakeholders must petition NRCS through the local, state, and then national level to gain interim status for new or modified standards.
- Instead, NRCS should establish a proactive approach to updating standards that recognizes new practices and technologies in a timely manner.
- For instance, innovations in cover crop seed mixes and planting and termination methods often require practice standard updates before they can be eligible for cost-share. Streamlining the years-long update timeline can accelerate progress.

5. Ensure access to conservation programs and technical assistance for all producers.

- FACA believes **all of agriculture**, regardless of commodity, size, or geographic region should have access to financial and technical assistance resources through NRCS to promote conservation and strengthen environmental outcomes in all communities.
- NRCS programs are often challenging for large farmers and specialty crop producers to navigate due to eligibility around Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) and caps on payments. Any additional limitations on AGI would only hinder access to essential risk mitigation tools and vital environmental advancements.
- Additionally, NRCS program eligibility requirements and the temporary nature of rental agreements can discourage conservation participation on rented lands—especially for high-cost water quality and soil health-focused practices that produce results over a longer timeframe than a rental agreement. FACA supports increasing voluntary conservation on rented lands with particular attention to rented tribal lands.

6. Prioritize investments on private grazing lands.

- Properly managed grazing systems are critical for livestock production and can greatly improve soil health, reduce erosion, protect water quality and enhance drought resilience, and support long-term landscape resiliency. USDA's Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI), for instance, supports partnerships that expand the footprint of well-managed grazing systems across the country, addressing unique needs at the local, state, and regional levels. FACA supports robust appropriations funding for the GLCI to provide technical assistance for grazing planning and implementation, facilitate workshops and demonstrations, promote peer-to-peer education, strengthen producer networks, and expand producer outreach.
- FACA also encourages NRCS to provide technical assistance in high-priority regions in coordination with the National Grazing Lands Coalition.

7. Establish a new USDA-NRCS grant program to help states improve soil health and water quality on agricultural lands.

- State and Federal partnerships are often critical to farmer adoption of new technologies and practices. There are currently more than 50 state-led, on-farm programs supporting producers who have adopted or are planning to adopt robust conservation practices.
- These federal grant funds would be supplementary to assist states in expanding their soil health and water quality efforts. Eligibility would be limited to states or tribes that have enacted and are currently funding a state or tribal on-farm conservation program with demonstrated participation from producers.

8. Explore additional incentives to promote key conservation practices such as cover crop adoption.

- Cover crops are an important conservation tool that can help farmers build healthier and more resilient soil on their lands. They are planted to improve and protect the soil between periods of crop production and are not intended for harvest.
- Producers who voluntarily plant cover crops are eligible for financial and technical assistance through NRCS conservation programs; however, there are additional options and models to further scale adoption. For example, some state and private sector programs offer their own cost-share or rebate options.

9. Continue to ensure that soil health practices and crop insurance work in a complementary manner.

- Section 508(h) of the Federal Crop Insurance Act allows private entities to propose innovative insurance products to the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation. This provision should continue to allow for the adoption of new policies that improve soil health and are developed in an actuarial sound manner.
- Where soil health or other conservation practices do not negatively impact productivity, they should be considered good farming practices (GFPs) and should not negate the validity of a crop insurance policy.

10. Promote public-private partnerships to amplify the impact of federal investments in voluntary conservation.

- FACA supports USDA's investments in programs like the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, Advancing Markets for Producers Initiative, and Conservation Innovation Grants.
- These partnerships leverage non-federal funding from private and local partners, extending the reach of federal dollars. They also provide critical support to farmers and ranchers while advancing soil health, biodiversity, water quality, and a range of other ecosystem benefits.

11. Prioritize enhancements to the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

- USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is a partner-driven initiative that provides producers with financial and technical assistance to address natural resource challenges at a regional or watershed scale.
- FACA believes in the success of RCPP and encourages stronger program outcomes by reducing burdensome processes and streamlining administrative barriers.

12. Strengthen the Conservation Reserve Program.

- The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a voluntary and incentive-based program that allows farmers to take highly erodible land out of production in exchange for rental payments—helping to avoid planting when market and environmental conditions are poor, while returning the land to production when necessary. CRP is an effective tool and an important component of the farm safety net. It improves soil health, enhances water quality, and promotes financial stability.
- FACA supports restoring and reassessing cost-share opportunities for mid-contract management during contract periods to support soil health, biodiversity, and plant diversity. Mid-contract management practices include grazing on native grasslands and establishing grazing infrastructure like fencing and water distribution.
- FACA supports investments in CRP to quantify the environmental outcomes of conservation practice implementation, such as measuring soil health metrics like phosphorus and nitrogen consumption over time. Quantification initiatives will strengthen the scientific foundation for conservation policy and investment and improve public and private efforts moving forward.
- FACA recognizes the impact that changes to CRP could have on economic opportunities in rural communities and land access for small and beginning producers. We encourage USDA and Congress to protect the farm safety net and explore innovative approaches that increase conservation implementation while preserving economic viability for farmers and ranchers.

PILLAR 2: SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT AND RESTORATION

Across the country, forests quietly sustain the health and prosperity of our communities. They clean the air we breathe, filter the water we drink, and support vibrant rural economies. Their ecological and economic value touches millions of lives each day.

Sustainable forest management reduces the risk of severe wildfires, curbs the spread of invasive species, and helps restore the ecological balance needed for both environmental and human health. Today, more than 180 million Americans rely on forests for their drinking water—making them the nation's largest source of clean water. Conserving this resource requires investment in forest management resilience, reforestation, monitoring, and research.

By restoring forests and supporting science-based management, we can protect vital natural resources, create good jobs, and ensure forests remain engines of health and prosperity for generations to come.

Recommendations that support sustainable forest management and restoration:

1. **Provide voluntary, incentive-based tools and resources for landowners to enhance resiliency, increase soil building and water filtering capacity, and support the productivity of their forests.**
   - This includes supporting strong forest stewardship and reforestation outcomes through USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Conservation Reserve Program, as well as providing additional technical assistance measures for sustainable, science-based private forest management and reforestation through the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Stewardship Program.

2. Prioritize investment in the Forest Inventory and Analysis Program.

- Landowners must have access to the scientifically rigorous tools and information they need to improve productivity and build the health and resilience of their forests.
- Increased investment in the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Inventory and Analysis Program is critical to improve our understanding of forest soil, belowground biomass, and soil health's impacts on productivity.

3. Support reforestation and revegetation policies that protect air quality and water quantity and restore forest health.

- Encourage post-fire revegetation policies that prioritize the planting of native and adaptable species, including fire-resistant plants such as edible browse, to limit air and water impacts, reduce the spread of invasive species, lower suppression costs, and minimize damage to wildlife and private property.
- Promote livestock grazing as a resource management tool and wildfire deterrent.
- Invest in the U.S. Forest Service's Research Branch, including the Joint Fire Science Program (funded jointly with the Department of the Interior), to improve the science and deepen practical knowledge and implementation of the natural regeneration of forest ecosystems using innovative and dynamic replanting techniques.

4. Invest in the reforestation supply chain through the U.S. Forest Service's Resources, Nurseries, and Genetics Program and the Forest Stewardship Program.

- Address the national shortage of seedlings needed for reforestation through increased technical assistance and training for native seed collection and seedling production and by addressing other workforce issues.
- Augment existing research and technical assistance programs to support natural regeneration through the U.S. Forest Service's Cooperative Forestry programs.

5. Provide funding to enhance monitoring efforts to detect, identify, and evaluate the risks of nonnative insects and diseases on forest soil and belowground biomass, productivity, and overall forest health.

- Invest in improving biosecurity efforts at ports of entry, developing practical tools to improve forest management practices so landowners and managers can respond swiftly, and fund tree improvement efforts that use traditional breeding and informed and appropriate modern biotechnology tools.
- Invest in research on the functional loss of tree species to non-native pests and pathogens.
- Provide funding for prompt post-disturbance forest recovery and restoration activities to prevent the spread of invasive species and protect water quality through the Burned Area Emergency Response and Burned Area Rehabilitation programs at the U.S. Forest Service and Department of Interior.

PILLAR 3:
DRIVING AGRICULTURAL INNOVATION

For farmers to produce more with less while protecting our natural resources and communities, the U.S. government must foster innovation through a strong, science-based risk-benefit regulatory system. At the same time, the agriculture sector must have access to scientifically rigorous tools and data to advance environmental outcomes and boost productivity.

To achieve these goals, FACA recommends the following:

1. **Continue to invest in quantifying the environmental outcomes associated with conservation practice implementation.**
   - USDA can play a critical role in enhancing the trust and confidence in the environmental benefits of conservation practices.
   - FACA supports investments in soil science research, including the development of a national soil monitoring network that reflects a diversity of crops and cropping systems across a variety of geographic regions.
   - Additionally, USDA should continue to update its data infrastructure and tools such as COMET.

2. **Promote the adoption of precision application technologies.**
   - Precision agriculture technologies are critical tools that help American farmers maximize their yields and reduce their environmental footprint. The agricultural sector is actively investing in new, cutting-edge approaches that allow more targeted and precise pesticide applications.
   - FACA supports incentives that would help producers offset costs and encourage the increased adoption of precision application technologies and equipment.

3. Provide full funding for the Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority.

- The Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority (AGARDA) is a USDA pilot program designed to bolster high-risk, high-reward agricultural research and innovation. AGARDA is modeled after successful agencies like DARPA (Defense) and ARPA-E (Energy) to fill a critical R&D gap that exists for projects that are too costly or risky for private industry and traditional USDA research channels.
- AGARDA has the potential to deliver game-changing tools that enhance environmental sustainability, farm productivity, and long-term food security, but it must be funded. FACA supports reauthorization and full funding of AGARDA to allow USDA to drive high-risk and long-term research to support farming operations.

4. Support a robust science- and risk-based regulatory process for evaluation of animal and plant biotechnology products.

- Modern breeding tools are critical to enhance the efficiency and efficacy of agriculture through genetic improvement. These products offer breakthroughs, such as enhancing nutritional properties, extending shelf life, improving quality, safety, and resilience, and other desirable traits to consumers.
- FACA supports streamlining the regulatory approval process for crops developed using modern plant breeding technologies, based on a science-driven, risk-appropriate approach to product regulation.

5. Establish a federal definition and framework for biostimulants.

- Plant biostimulants are emerging and promising tools that can conserve and replenish soil health and improve water quality.
- FACA supports establishing a federal definition for biostimulants, along with a predictable, science- and risk-based framework for their assessment.

6. Support farmers' access to crop protection tools.

- Help ensure farmers have continued access to a broad range of crop protection tools – including insecticides, herbicides, and other inputs – that support conservation goals and a sustainable food system through a responsible regulatory process involving rigorous, science-based risk assessments, including environmental and health reviews.

FACA
Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance

agclimatealliance.com

The Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance consists of organizations representing farmers, ranchers, forest owners, agribusinesses, manufacturers, the food and innovation sector, state governments, higher education associations, sportsmen and sportswomen, and environmental advocates. These groups have broken through historical barriers to develop and promote shared climate policy priorities across the entire agriculture, food, and forestry value chains.