

USDA announces new steps to meet climate change challenges

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Calling it "one of the greatest threats facing our planet," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that USDA is taking action to meet the challenge of climate change. Speaking at the United Nations Climate Change Conference, the Secretary said USDA continues to take steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions "by helping farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to be even better conservationists."

"We remain focused on steps to advance clean energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions while growing our economy," said Vilsack. "Farmers, ranchers and forest owners have a great deal to contribute to mitigating climate change, while also ensuring that farms adapt to climate change, and they can benefit by embracing a range of conservation practices."

Vilsack said USDA will demonstrate ways landowners can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase carbon sequestration while improving their financial bottom line. The effort includes providing opportunities to leverage private sector demand for greenhouse gas mitigation services, evaluating how emerging greenhouse gas markets can work in concert with USDA programs to protect the environment, and building capacity within USDA to understand voluntary greenhouse gas markets and to explore improved approaches for greenhouse gas accounting systems.

Among the steps announced today, Vilsack said USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will provide \$15 million in Conservation Innovation Grant funds and other assistance to support large-scale demonstration projects to accelerate the adoption of new approaches to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and promote carbon sequestration on private lands. As part of this, NRCS will provide financial assistance to support eligible producers as they implement conservation practices associated with these selected GHG projects.

Additionally, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) will implement a project to provide information to landowners who enroll in certain tree planting conservation practices under the Conservation Reserve Program and who voluntarily request an estimate of the amount of carbon stored as a result of these practices. FSA will develop a communications tool to link companies, organizations and participants in carbon storage activities and information sharing. The project will begin next year.

Vilsack also announced the release of USDA's Climate Change Science Plan. The plan's objective is to incorporate management of the challenges created by climate change into the scientific missions of USDA. It provides a guide for the Department on scientific priorities to better serve USDA stakeholders by providing them with information about the impact of climate change and it outlines options to mitigate emissions and help producers adapt to expected change.

In addition, the Secretary announced that institutions in seven states were awarded Federal funding for research on the economics of reducing agricultural greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. USDA will fund studies to examine the economics of agricultural participation in proposed greenhouse gas markets, including the potential impacts on GHG reduction. The projects will help identify cost-effective ways farmers can reduce emissions and also help design the incentives for their participation in greenhouse gas markets or other agricultural programs.

He also noted that the U.S. Forest Service, which manages 193 million acres of forest and grasslands, has taken a number of steps over the last year to integrate climate change considerations into day-to-day operations. A

scorecard has been developed to measure the progress of each of the National Forests and Grasslands in integrating climate change considerations into forest management. Also, the Forest Service has developed a National Roadmap for Responding to Climate Change to make forests more resilient to climate change impacts, manage greenhouse gas emissions and increase carbon storage. As part of the scorecard and the roadmap development, the Forest Service is integrating climate change into a new National Planning Rule that will govern the way management plans are written for all National Forests.

Vilsack underscored USDA's commitment to working with international partners through the Global Research Alliance on Agricultural Greenhouse Gases, which was launched a year ago at the Copenhagen Climate Change meeting. The alliance is focused on identifying ways to sustain and improve food production systems, while reducing greenhouse gas emissions.