



# Five Point of View Papers on Achieving Productivity, Profitability, and Environmental Outcomes in U.S. Agriculture

## Overview and Abstracts

Meeting the food, feed, fuel, and fiber needs of a growing and increasingly prosperous world, and doing so in a manner that also maintains and improves environmental quality, is one of the grand challenges facing humankind in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Drawing on diverse expertise among landowners and producers, supply chain leaders, and nonprofit organizations, AGree's Productivity, Profitability, and Environmental Outcomes Workgroup is developing a set of consensus strategies and recommendations for policy and action that will drive transformative change in U.S. agriculture to meet this challenge. In addition to intensive deliberation among AGree's Co-Chairs and Advisors and convenings and consultation with diverse stakeholders, the development of Point of View papers on various approaches to simultaneously advancing productivity, profitability, and environmental outcomes has been a significant component of developing consensus recommendations and strategies. While the five papers in this compilation do not represent official AGree policy, they inform AGree's development of policy and action recommendations by stimulating thinking and discussion. Abstracts are included below.

The papers offer diverse and insightful perspectives from leading producers and other practitioners and experts at the intersection of agriculture and conservation in the United States. Although each presents a unique viewpoint, they are united around key themes, including the need for producer-led conservation efforts that are focused on improved long-term productivity and environmental stewardship at a watershed or landscape scale, the critical role of measurement and information in

**AGree represents an unusually diverse group of leaders from across food and agriculture** – commodity producers in the Midwest, organic and conventional fruit and vegetable growers in California, a cattle and sheep rancher in the mountain West, and a hog farmer in Virginia; multinational agricultural input manufacturers and environmental advocates; food processors, retailers, and public health experts; and, agricultural scientists and economists. We have joined together to articulate a new vision for the food and agriculture system in which we all participate, to identify actionable strategies to advance the transformative change necessary to realize our vision, and to work together to implement those strategies through changes both in policy and in practices on the ground.

enabling improved practices and outcomes, and the transformative potential of developing new partnerships and ways of working together among a broader range of stakeholders across the country. While the papers do offer insights that might inform agriculture and conservation internationally, the focus to date of AGree's Productivity, Profitability, and Environmental Outcomes Workgroup has been on understanding and meeting challenges in the United States.

The interconnections among these five Point of View papers reflect the integrated framework for transformative change developed by AGree's Productivity, Profitability, and Environmental Outcomes Work Group (Figure 1). The central components – producers and landowners, the marketplace, the public sector, and science, data and metrics – are the tightly linked sectors that drive the country's food and agriculture system and natural resource stewardship. Collaboration and coordination among these groups is essential to achieve three interconnected goals (outer edges of figure): healthy working landscapes and ecosystems, long-term productivity and affordable nutritious food, and strong and prosperous farms and communities. The papers in this compilation focus on building new partnerships and innovative ways of working together, mutual learning, and trust between the landowners and producers in the center triangle and each of the critical supporting sectors in the outer triangles.

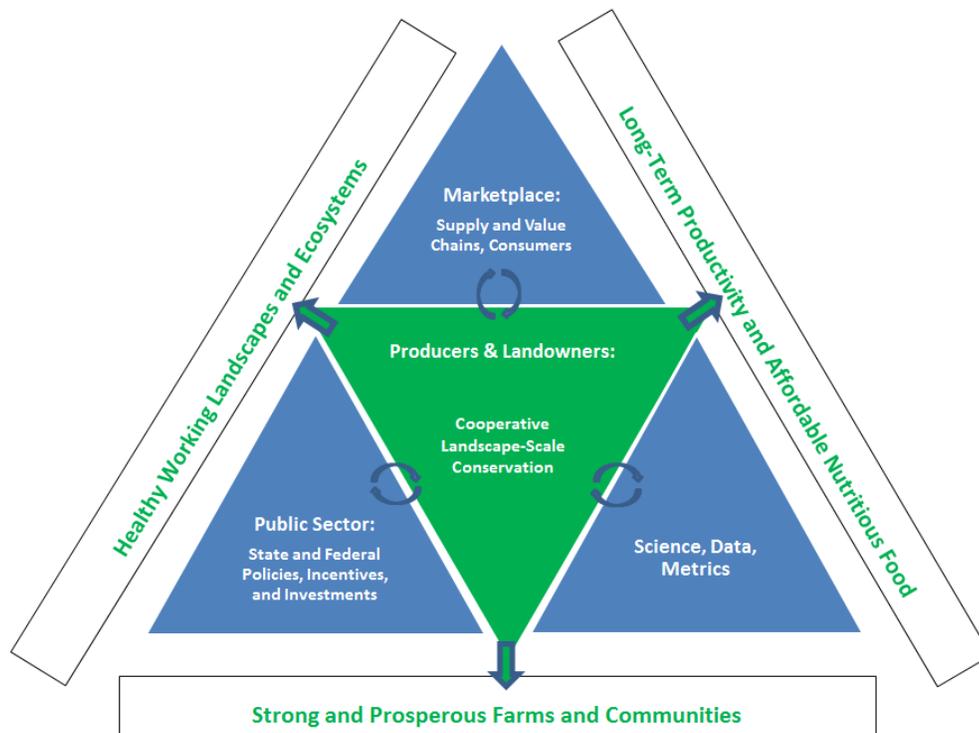


Figure 1. AGree's Productivity, Profitability, and Environmental Outcomes Framework for Transformative Change.

Duncanson, Moseley, and Yoder focus on building these kinds of new relationships among landowners and producers and other stakeholders in watersheds and landscapes across the United States through "Working Lands Conservation Cooperatives." They propose transforming

ways of working together within the center triangle and building new institutions that will be able to connect with the other sectors described in the outer triangles to achieve improved landscape-scale environmental outcomes while maintaining and improving productivity and profitability.

Faulstich, Jester, and Stone highlight the imperative for stronger relationships between farmers and ranchers and the public sector. If landowner- and producer-led stewardship on the ground is to succeed, it must be supported by and coordinated with state and federal officials. O'Toole and Keppen delve further into the policies, incentives, and investments they believe are needed to foster this improved alignment between agencies and policymakers and farmers and ranchers to support locally-driven conservation in the Western United States.

The role of the marketplace is growing and evolving as increased sustainable sourcing initiatives impact the system from farm to fork and fundamentally transform farmers' and ranchers' relationships with companies. Hamilton and Reaves explore how to improve these emerging supply chain programs and altered interactions and the challenge of achieving conservation outcomes beyond the boundaries of an individual operation.

Science, data, and metrics continue to be critical to support all efforts to increase productivity and improve natural resource stewardship. Antle, Capalbo, and Houston focus on how to provide this needed information infrastructure to stakeholders from all sectors to improve decision making while protecting proprietary information.

Taken together, these Point of View papers provide key insights on achieving productivity, profitability, and environmental outcomes in U.S. agriculture. As AGree works to finalize and advance policy and action recommendations in this area, we offer these papers to stimulate thought and discussion among all those interested in and concerned about the future of agriculture and working lands conservation in the United States.

### **Abstracts**

#### **[Working Lands Conservation Cooperatives: A Producer-Led Approach to Achieving Healthy Agricultural Landscapes](#)**

*Authored by Kristin Weeks Duncanson, owner and partner of Duncanson Growers in Minnesota, former Director of the American Soybean Board, and AGree Advisory Committee member; Jim Moseley, former Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Indiana farmer, and AGree Co-Chair; and Fred Yoder, Ohio farmer, past President of the National Corn Growers Association, and AGree Advisory Committee member*

Drawing on decades of farming experience, three Midwestern farmers chart a path forward for agricultural conservation through producer-led, cooperative watershed or landscape-scale efforts focused on achieving measurable agriculture and conservation outcomes. Their proposed approach, "Working Lands Conservation Cooperatives," envisions groups of landowners and producers, supported by robust technical assistance, driving efforts at a watershed or landscape scale to identify and agree on locally-appropriate conservation performance benchmarks to which

all landowners and producers in an area would hold themselves accountable as a group. The Cooperatives would test alternative approaches to meeting these benchmarks while also achieving production goals and assess the productivity and profitability of these practices over the long term. The Cooperatives would be accountable to state and federal agencies for ensuring agriculture's active participation in efforts to meet state and federal environmental standards, and those who actively participate would receive safe harbor from regulatory action. The authors also provide case studies of successful conservation initiatives from across the country that exemplify components of their approach.

### **[Increasing Sustainability of America's Working Landscapes through Improved Public-Private Collaborations at Multiple Scales](#)**

*Authored by Jim Faulstich, Vice Chairman of Partners for Conservation and Daybreak Ranch; Steve Jester, Executive Director, Partners for Conservation; and Jim Stone, Chairman of Partners for Conservation and cattle rancher*

Two Western ranchers and conservation leaders and the Executive Director of Partners for Conservation (PFC) outline a range of strategies and tactics to improve landowner-agency relationships and foster collaborative approaches to natural resource challenges. They draw on lessons from their experience leading PFC, a highly successful national network of landowners working in partnership with agencies, nonprofits, and other stakeholders to achieve conservation outcomes on working lands. The authors suggest that successful efforts need to be regionally calibrated, driven by local leadership and peer-to-peer learning, and supported by public professionals and NGO partners who are skilled in collaborative approaches and understand landowner needs and concerns. Case studies include the Van Duzen Environmental Stewards, which built trust between California cattle ranchers and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency through collaborative data collection and planning and led to improved local water quality, and the Karval Community Alliance, through which Colorado ranchers worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the mountain plover without listing it under the Endangered Species Act.

### **[Towards a Knowledge Infrastructure for Science-Based Policy and Sustainable Management of Agricultural Landscapes](#)**

*Authored by John Antle, Professor, Susan Capalbo, Department Head and Professor, and Laurie Houston, Faculty Research Associate, Department of Applied Economics, Oregon State University*

In this paper, three economists discuss the importance of a knowledge infrastructure for agriculture and its potential to improve on-farm decision making as well as support the sustainable management of working landscapes. The authors probe the challenges and opportunities of linking many streams and sources of data (including private data, such as site-specific biophysical data and land management practices, and public data, such as weather and climate data and market conditions) as well as models into an integrated infrastructure that maintains the privacy of proprietary information while enabling improved decision-making at multiple scales. They conclude that a well-designed voluntary system could provide participants

with data and management tools that demonstrably improve a farm's economic and environmental performance while providing the public, researchers, and policy-makers with the information necessary to more effectively analyze policy tradeoffs and to improve land management policies.

### **Food and Beverage Company Sustainable Sourcing Initiatives in Farming Regions**

*Authored by Hal Hamilton, Co-Director, Sustainable Food Lab and AGree Advisory Committee member and Elizabeth Reaves, Program Associate, Sustainable Food Lab. Portions contributed by Sean McMahon, North American Agriculture Program Director, The Nature Conservancy; Steve Peterson, Director of Sourcing Sustainability, General Mills; and Jan Kees Vis, Sustainable Agriculture Director, Unilever*

Based on interviews with food company executives and farmers, lead authors from the Sustainable Food Lab describe the experiences of food companies to date with sustainable sourcing initiatives involving large-scale commercial agriculture. They summarize six specific domestic and international projects and detail lessons learned from each, focusing mainly on environmental impacts. The authors conclude that sustainable food production is inherently collaborative and requires leaders who are able to work effectively with people across their organizations and in different sectors. Sustainable sourcing leaders need to work with landowners and producers to develop strategies to address key challenges, including the difficulty of measuring and verifying environmental outcomes in complex agricultural systems, a proliferation of metrics and standards, and the need for stronger partnerships among diverse supply chain actors. The public sector should support private sector success through landscape-scale data aggregation, articulation of thresholds for an adequate pace of improvement in each landscape, and incentives for practices with off-site impacts.

### **Securing the Future of Western Agriculture: A Perspective of Western Producers**

*Authored by Pat O'Toole, Owner of Ladder Livestock, Family Farm Alliance President and AGree Advisory Committee member, and Dan Keppen, Executive Director, Family Farm Alliance*

In this paper, leaders of the Family Farm Alliance, which represents irrigators in seventeen Western states, provide insight into the unique challenges and opportunities facing landowners and producers in the Western United States. Flexible, streamlined policies that provide the balance and certainty needed to support collaborative efforts and manage challenges including water scarcity and competition, insufficient water infrastructure, growing populations, endangered species, increasing weather variability and climate change, and energy development are key to maintaining agricultural production and improving conservation and community outcomes in the West. Specific policy recommendations regarding western water issues, the Endangered Species Act, payments for ecosystem services, and other issues such as immigration reform and the Farm Bill are offered to ensure that Western agricultural operations continue to be vibrant and innovative for generations to come.