Increase Agricultural Productivity by Conserving and Enhancing Soil, Water, and Habitat

**Challenges**

Meet future demand for food
Conserve and enhance water, soil, and habitat
Improve nutrition and public health
Strengthen farms and communities to improve livelihoods

**Strategies**

Increase agricultural productivity
Align U.S. diet with Dietary Guidelines
Encourage diversity and coexistence of farming systems
Attract young people to food and agriculture
Create a stable, legal workforce
Advance landscape-scale management
Provide risk management tools for producers
Reduce post-harvest waste
Strengthen regional food systems
Ensure access to nutritious food
Align production and environmental outcomes
Enable adaption to change
Understand and reduce adverse health impacts
Redirect research, education, and extension on priorities and strengthen institutions

Farmers and ranchers across the U.S. recognize that healthy soils and watersheds are critical to the productivity and profitability of agricultural systems, as well as to rural communities and wildlife. Innovative producers are demonstrating the potential of a diversity of high-performance agricultural ecosystems to produce food, return profits, and conserve and enhance natural resources. Working with partners, they also are pioneering and refining solutions that cut across farm boundaries to address environmental challenges across the landscape. Yet, in too many areas, despite these efforts, loss of nutrients to air and water, depletion of organic matter, mining of groundwater, and production on sensitive lands threaten to undermine the natural systems on which agricultural productivity, communities, and wildlife all depend over the long term.¹

A growing population, increased demand for agriculturally-based fuel and other products, changing climate, increasing water scarcity in many areas, and loss of agriculturally productive lands to development will only increase pressure on natural resources in coming decades.² In order to secure future agricultural productivity, the nation needs both to conserve and enhance soil, water supplies, and other natural resources and to adapt to changing conditions. Addressing these challenges at home also will contribute to agricultural development and resource conservation abroad through knowledge and technology transfer.

**Achieving Transformative Change Over the Long Term**

AGRee believes that the ability of agriculture to maintain and improve productivity, provide ecosystem services, and return profits to producers depends on building healthy soils, managing nutrients wisely, improving water quality and quantity, and supporting biodiversity in agricultural ecosystems.

AGRee is developing a framework and specific recommendations to achieve these results through actions, policies, programs, and investments by government, the food and agriculture supply chain, and civil society. These recommendations will take an integrated approach to production, risk management, conservation, and environmental outcomes. Key components include:

- Developing an integrated national agricultural policy that recognizes the value of and provides comparable opportunities and benefits to all sectors of U.S. agriculture.
- Moving away from “one size fits all” approaches focused on individual operations to collaborative and adaptive management of natural resources on multiple scales, including watersheds across the landscape.
- Establishing goals tailored to each growing region to focus and mobilize action and investing federal and other resources in capacity and infrastructure to assess progress over time.
- Providing support and incentives to ensure all producers adopt basic soil and water conservation practices to address natural resource concerns in their areas.

Although all the individuals formally affiliated with AGRee may not agree completely with every statement noted, they are committed to working together to find solutions to the challenges facing food and agriculture.

For citations, please visit http://foodandagpolicy.org/sites/default/files/AGRee_position_citations.pdf
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- Using best available science to better understand and reduce adverse human and environmental health and safety impacts of agricultural inputs and practices.
- Moving towards a “whole farm approach” in which productivity, environmental, and social concerns are addressed in a holistic and integrated manner.
- Investing in research and development to increase resilience and adaptive capacity of agricultural systems to increasing weather variability and a changing climate.
- Focusing attention and resources on soil health and the benefits it provides for productivity, resilience, land value, and water quality.
- Scaling up successful models of collaborative efforts to reduce release of nutrients into surface and groundwater and to improve water management to address both flooding and scarcity, including groundwater depletion.
- Leveraging markets to drive alignment of productivity and environmental outcomes.
- Considering the effects of U.S. agricultural and environmental policy on vulnerable import-dependent populations and sensitive ecosystems abroad.
- Strengthening and focusing agricultural research, extension, and education on a diversity of high-performance agricultural ecosystems.

AGree’s 2013 Positions

AGree is deeply concerned about policy proposals actively being considered that would undermine rather than build on achievements to date. AGree supports the following currently threatened policies and programs, which are critical building blocks for long-term transformative change:

- Existing conservation requirements for farm program eligibility, which should be re-attached to federal subsidies for crop insurance premiums.*
- Investments in farm bill conservation programs; these programs should target durable environmental quality improvements across the landscape and leverage the investments of producers and other partners.
- Investments in the scientific, research, and extension infrastructure that support agriculture; indeed, strengthening this critical infrastructure will be necessary to successfully meet the challenges the U.S. faces over the long term.

AGree opposes action by Congress that would undermine progress achieved. At the same time, AGree recognizes that moving forward, programs and requirements need to be streamlined, integrated, and implemented in a manner that minimizes bureaucratic processes, incentivizes innovation, and is adaptable to localized conditions and management systems. AGree calls on colleagues across the agriculture and food production value chain, policymakers, and scientists and innovators to work together to identify and implement the policies, programs, and actions necessary to meet the challenges and secure the future of agriculture and the American landscape.

*Specialty crop producers who have not participated in USDA conservation, loan, or disaster programs may be subject to federal conservation standards for the first time. As federal soil conservation standards apply only to annual crops planted on highly erodible lands, few specialty crop producers will likely be affected. Care should be taken to credit existing and equivalent soil conservation practices undertaken to meet state standards where they exist. Producers subject to wetland conservation standards for the first time should not be penalized for activities previously undertaken.