

[Elevate agriculture, food to a national priority](#)

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Editor's note: This column was written by four co-chairs of AGree, a bipartisan group whose mission is to drive positive change in the food and agricultural system.

As the Florida primary approaches, we, as co-chairs of AGree, are issuing a presidential call to action to elevate food and agriculture as a national priority. Despite Florida's leading role in agriculture, there has been little discussion beyond ethanol about candidates' proposed policies in a sector that contributes roughly 5 percent of gross domestic product and employs more than 12 million people.

Presidential leadership is critical as farmers and ranchers face tremendous uncertainties associated with market volatility, weather, natural disasters, labor availability, and pathogens and pests. The right policies can directly improve the health of America's farms, families, economy and the environment.

Floridians are well aware of the immense impact of agriculture, as 14 percent of the state's jobs are directly connected to food and agriculture. The challenges of food production are faced daily throughout the state. This year's citrus harvest is projected to be 30 percent smaller than last year's harvest because of the fatal bacterial disease citrus greening. The disease will result in the smallest orange crop in 50 years and impact Florida's \$10 billion citrus industry with ripples across the state.

Targeted research and policy reforms that address issues such as citrus greening are needed to help overcome challenges and ensure American agriculture continues to provide healthy, safe and affordable food for America's families and those beyond our borders.

Nutrition, another important aspect of agricultural policy, remains an elusive goal for many. Poor diets put 86 million American adults at risk for [type 2 diabetes](#), a disease that cost \$245 billion in 2012. More than one in 10 Floridians have diabetes. The right policies will help to improve diets and ensure adequate nutrition to improve the health of Florida families and the bottom line when it comes to health expenditures.

Since 2011, AGree, a group with the mission to drive positive change in the food and agriculture system, has engaged more than 2,000 of the best minds in food and agriculture to identify key issues and opportunities. They are not separated by party as Republicans or Democrats, but are united by a common interest in strengthening the policies that support a sector critical to our nation's economy. We have developed consensus recommendations that, if adopted, will drive positive change.

Our recommendations will help to improve Americans' health and reduce health costs through food and nutrition policies and programs. Systemwide changes are also needed to address hunger

and improve nutrition and health outcomes. We can no longer ignore the exploding health-care costs of diet-related disease.

Agriculture is hamstrung by an unreliable labor supply. We must create a system through which undocumented immigrants currently in the U.S can earn citizenship and develop a fair guest-worker program that allows producers to hire seasonal foreign workers.

Laserlike focus on food and agriculture research through more targeted and competitive federal funding is critical. The need is crystal clear to Floridians in the face of citrus greening and water wars. The antiquated federal research enterprise must be modernized to zero-in on the key challenges of our times.

Research and regulations alone cannot ensure the landscape-level actions needed to manage water supplies, sustain soil health, and preserve natural habitat. New models are needed. We must adopt policies that encourage producer-led, watershed-scale efforts that involve the supply chain.

Changing consumer preferences, a greater focus on health outcomes, unprecedented interest in sustainability, as well as a growing world population all require the next president to understand the transformational changes needed in our food and agriculture system.

So, we urge the presidential candidates to take note of our call to action and address important topics that may not grab headlines, but will influence primary voters. The health of our economy, people and environment depend on it.

AGree's co-chairs include former U.S. Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman, former U.S. Agriculture Deputy Secretaries Jim Moseley and Kathleen Merrigan, and former U.S. Agency for International Development Assistant Administrator Emmy Simmons.