

Congress of the United States

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COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051
MINORITY (202) 225-5074

<https://oversight.house.gov>

Opening Statement of Chairman Ro Khanna Hearing on “Regenerative Agriculture: How Farmers and Ranchers are Essential to Solving Climate Change and Increasing Food Production” July 19, 2022

Climate change poses serious threats to food security. As the magnitude and frequency of extreme weather events increases, disruptions threaten our food supply at home and abroad. Elevated temperatures contribute to causing drought, which depletes water reserves, worsens crop yields, and increases fire risks.

The United Nations estimates that global food production must increase by at least 60% to meet the expected rise in the Earth’s population by 2050. Global yields of maize and wheat—by far the world’s two most consumed crops—will decline significantly due to global warming in the coming decades. The resulting higher food prices and food insecurity will disproportionately harm low-income communities and communities of color. Farmers are a key part of the solution.

Regenerative agriculture is a system for food production that puts more back into the ground than it extracts. With regenerative practices, farms provide benefits to their environment. Regenerative farms improve water and air quality, soil health, and ecosystem restoration, all while increasing productivity. It is driven not by Washington, D.C., it is driven by the farmers themselves and their ingenuity.

Regenerative practices can lower carbon emissions, provide clean water, clean air, and rebuild farm communities. It is rooted in millennia of tradition. However, our modern, industrialized food system makes it difficult to practice. The market power exercised by agribusinesses over family farmers leaves little flexibility for regenerative practices. The top four beef packing companies control nearly 85% of the market. The top four pork packers control 71%. Just four companies control 90% of the entire global grain trade. Companies use that market power to dictate how farmers must produce livestock, grains, fruits, and vegetables. Farmers are often prevented from diversifying crops, integrating livestock with crops, or adopting other regenerative practices.

The industrialization of agriculture has had a significant negative impact on rural economies. Consolidation and industrialization have caused nearly 17,000 cattle ranchers to go out of business every year since 1980. Today, family farmers earn just 16 cents on every dollar spent on food at the grocery store. Financial stresses have contributed unfortunately to a suicide rate among farmers that is six times the national average. We should support farmers and invest in rural America.

Farmers providing environmental services through regenerative agricultural must be compensated for those services. For example, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program are two of USDA’s primary working lands conservation programs. They are underfunded. Last year, just USDA granted just 27% of Environmental Quality Incentives Program eligible applicants and just 35% for the Conservation Stewardship Program.

Federal policy supports inherently unsustainable practices. By law, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program must spend 50% of its funds to benefit livestock producers – those same companies who control the vast majority

of the market share. Commodity subsidies and subsidized crop insurance primarily go to crops used for livestock feed. The government-subsidized lower cost primarily benefits the largest producers who often do not use regenerative practices.

Today I am introducing legislation to support regenerative agriculture. We must fully fund the USDA's conservation programs. We must reform them to provide farmers more flexibility to do what they think is best, as opposed to being dictated by corporate executives who may have no actual experience in farming. We must enable farmers to be environmental entrepreneurs on their land. Basically, we must listen to farmers themselves. No one knows what's best for the land better than those who work on it day in and day out. They know better than those of us in D.C. They know better than corporate executives. And the resolution says listen to farmers and pay farmers for the practices that they think are best for their soil.

In addition to our witnesses here today, I want to thank Matt Russell of Iowa for his many years of leadership on this issue. Matt Russell really has pioneered listening to farmers. Finally, I want to thank Secretary Vilsack for his relentless leadership for farmers and rural America and his investment in many programs in regenerative agriculture.

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Contact: Nelly Decker, Communications Director, (202) 226-5181