

The Need for a Food and Agriculture Platform in the Green New Deal

The Agroecology Research-Action Collective
Executive Summary February 13, 2019

Rural America needs a Green New Deal. This year, farm bankruptcies are at a ten-year high. Less than half of growers in 2018 made *any* income from their farms, and the USDA projects median farm income will soon dip to a *negative* \$1,548.¹ Work in the food system – from packing houses to farm labor, restaurant work to warehouses – does not pay well enough to support a family.

The same food system that is hollowing out rural America is a major contributor to the climate crisis. Globally, the food system is responsible for about a third of greenhouse gas emissions,² and emissions from agriculture and livestock production are projected to nearly double by 2050.³ If all fossil fuel use ended tomorrow, business-as-usual in this sector could still be enough to exceed 2°C global warming.⁴

We need a just transition to a food and agriculture system that works for family farmers, workers, and the climate.

As scientists who work in various fields connected to agriculture, we write this letter in support of fundamental change across our food economy. Our recommendations are based on accumulating evidence from social and biophysical research, and input from organizations advancing farm and food justice.⁵

The good news is that we don't have to look far for solutions. We can apply the principles of ecology to agriculture, developing **ecological and regenerative practices** that rely on biological processes rather than fossil fuels for their key inputs and store carbon in soils. We can ground policy in the ethical frameworks of farm and food justice – frameworks already bringing economic justice to rural America. The Green New Deal is a bold pact to turn our country to an energy-efficient, carbon-capturing, full-employment, living-wage nation by 2030 – we can't afford to leave food and agriculture behind.

*How Do We Get There?
Recommendations for Policymakers*

1. We must re-orient current trade and economic policies to work for sustainable agriculture and rural communities, and to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

These approaches include:

- **A better designed crop and animal agriculture support system:** subsidies, conservation programs, research and extension, and related laws should give priority to resilient, diversified, agroecological, and regenerative agriculture instead of largely favoring a few commodity crops and animals.
- **A reinvigorated anti-trust law regime:** existing laws must be stringently enforced and new laws must be passed to reduce market consolidation so farmers and consumers have access to fair markets.
- **A revived supply management system:** the ‘old’ New Deal used many tools to secure decent livelihoods for farmers including price floors, grain reserves, and parity pricing. We must update these innovations for our contemporary needs with an eye to the ecological imperatives of our time.

2. We must eradicate legacies of discrimination against socially disadvantaged farmers and other food producers from government policies and agency practices. To undo this legacy, Green New Deal policies must introduce (or strengthen) credit lending, land access rights, and equipment aid aimed at socially disadvantaged farmers, fishers, and food systems workers.

3. We must make it easier, attractive, and viable for new sustainable farmers to enter the food and agriculture system. Green New Deal policies must work to secure nationwide access to land, credit, equipment, renewable energy, markets, and know-how, and help meet marketing challenges faced by food producing communities in general.

4. Fair and redesigned immigration policies can help bring new farmers and workers into the food and agriculture system by welcoming currently undocumented immigrants into legal status. Immigrant workers already contribute a large share of labor in farm fields, processing plants, supermarkets, and restaurants – yet are largely invisible and subjected to widespread exploitation. Developing a clear pathway to legal status as part of the Green New Deal will acknowledge their vital role in the food and agriculture system. This must be accompanied with policies that support opportunities for improving immigrants’ economic status, such as programs for incubating immigrant-run farming and food businesses.

5. We must focus on building a new economy through initiatives that offer living-wage jobs and pathways to dignified employment for every member of society.

Low wages, poor working conditions (e.g. erratic hours, harassment, and lack of rest) and strong legal barriers to forming unions and enforcing labor rights also hurt food chain workers. In addition to establishing a federal jobs guarantee, one important step the Green New Deal could make would be strengthening the National Labor Relations Act and including farmworkers in its protections.

6. Corporate interests must be held accountable for their negative externalities in industrial agriculture and food systems, including through strict enforcement of existing federal environmental laws. These industries must be required to pay the environmental and social costs of industrial farms and CAFOs. True cost accounting of such negative externalities must inform policies that deter polluting practices.

7. We must reverse international trade agreements that hold out foreign markets as the solution to our country's oversupply of cheap food, fuel, and feed. The priority when making trade agreements should be put on satisfying local markets, whether in the US or abroad, with production by local farmers. Otherwise, domestic supply measures will be undercut by global commodity crop markets.

8. Publicly funded research institutions must focus on the work of transforming our food system to mitigate agricultural climate emissions, and to become climate resilient, biodiverse and healthy. This research can be grounded in the original mandate of the land-grant university systems for research 'in the public interest.'⁶ This requires federal funding so researchers do not have to depend so heavily on licensing their intellectual property to the private sector, and keeping publicly funded research in the public domain. It means strengthening public access to knowledge and material resources – from libraries to crop varieties – that universities should be developing to support local communities and agroecological conditions of farms across the country.

9. We must reinvigorate public agriculture extension services aimed at supporting agroecology and regenerative agriculture. This requires increasing the familiarity and capacity of agricultural extension services with transitioning to diversified, agroecological farming systems, along with increasing public funding to provide farmers with technical support.

10. The Green New Deal should devote a share of its public investment and market-shaping work into developing regional support for sustainable food systems. The Green New Deal should include policies that support communities that want to build local food systems and collectively held food infrastructures (in which farming, processing, and marketing facilities are financed, owned, and run by cooperatives for communities' benefit, much like proposals for community energy systems). It should resurrect public employment through a federal jobs guarantee to expand on the success of the 'old' New Deal's Works Progress Administration and

Civilian Conservation Corps. The Green New Deal should also re-establish regional networks to allow communities to help decide how to spend federal government funds and to carry out transitions to agroecology.

The Green New Deal will only succeed if it helps rapidly eliminate the fossil-fuel economy, and transforms industrialized agriculture into agroecological, regenerative agriculture, **with special attention to rural communities and inclusion of historically marginalized and socially disadvantaged groups**. This demands an array of social and community initiatives that change the ways in which we currently farm and make food, fuel, fiber, and feed.

We call on Congress, state and local legislatures, social movements, and other advocates for the Green New Deal to put sustainable food and agriculture on an equal footing with renewable energy. Doing so can assure that diverse regions across the country will benefit from the economic and ecological initiatives of a Green New Deal.

A full version of this open letter is available at:
[AgroecologyResearchAction.org/green-new-deal](https://agroecologyresearchaction.org/green-new-deal)

¹ USDA/ERS. 2018. Farm Household Income Forecast: November 2018 Update, USDA Economic Research Service. Available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-household-well-being/farm-household-income-forecast/>

² Garnett, T. 2011. Where are the best opportunities for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the food system (including the food chain)? *Food Policy*, 36, S23-S32; GRAIN and IATP. 2018. “Emissions Impossible”. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Minneapolis, USA <https://www.iatp.org/emissions-impossible>.

³ Bajželj, B., Richards, K. S., Allwood, J. M., Smith, P., Dennis, J. S., Curmi, E., & Gilligan, C. A. (2014). Importance of food-demand management for climate mitigation. *Nature Climate Change*, 4(10), 924; Dooley et al. 2018. Missing Pathways to 1.5°C: The role of the land sector in ambitious climate action. Climate Land Ambition and Rights Alliance. Available from: climatelandambitionrightsalliance.org/report.

⁴ Bajželj, B., Richards, K. S., Allwood, J. M., Smith, P., Dennis, J. S., Curmi, E., & Gilligan, C. A. (2014). Importance of food-demand management for climate mitigation. *Nature Climate Change*, 4(10), 924.

⁵ We thank the following organizations for their input: the National Family Farm Coalition, Pesticide Action Network, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

⁶ Warner, Keith D., Kent M. Daane, Christina M. Getz, Stephen P. Maurano, Sandra Calderon, and Kathleen A. Powers. 2011. ‘The Decline of Public Interest Agricultural Science and the Dubious Future of Crop Biological Control in California.’ *Agriculture and Human Values* 28 (4): 483–96. doi:10.1007/s10460-010-9288-4.