



THE ADMINISTRATOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

March 18, 2024

Beth Sauerhaft, Ph.D.
Acting President and Chief Executive Officer
American Farmland Trust
1150 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 100
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Dr. Sauerhaft:

I would like to convey my sincere gratitude for your leadership and to the members of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Farm, Ranch and Rural Communities Advisory committee for its work throughout the past 16 months. This committee continues to play an integral role at the EPA, ensuring that agriculture and rural communities can provide meaningful input into the agency's policies and programs.

I appreciate the consolidated recommendations submitted to me by the FRRCC in February 2024, which focus on how the EPA can best support and advance climate adaptation and mitigation goals across U.S. agriculture. I have consulted with senior leaders across the EPA to explore how the FRRCC's policy recommendations are being considered and adopted. While this response letter does not represent the totality of work that has occurred and is underway, it offers a snapshot of several immediate actions we have taken and will take to advance priorities identified by the committee.

Office of Agriculture and Rural Affairs

- The EPA announced March 1, 2024, the creation of a new office to expand engagement opportunities with agricultural and rural stakeholders. The Office of Agriculture and Rural Affairs will serve as a conduit for agriculture at the EPA. Rod Snyder, my senior agriculture advisor, and Dr. Venus Welch-White, the FRRCC designated federal officer, will lead the office.
- The creation of the new office will institutionalize our ongoing work with agricultural stakeholders at the EPA and ensure that farmers' voices will continue to be heard at this agency. The creation of this office will also support expansion of a larger team to work on agriculture policy, federal investment opportunities and collaboration with state and federal partners.

- The EPA appreciates the FRRCC’s strong support for the agency’s network of regional agriculture advisors, who serve in each of our 10 regions. The newly established office will increase the headquarters’ support for these regional staff members, including strengthening outreach opportunities at a local level.
- The recommendations of the FRRCC were a factor in the creation of the Office of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, and I am confident the new office will expand the agency’s ability to implement current and future recommendations of the committee.

Equity for Rural and Underserved Communities

- Through its Equity Task Force the EPA has developed an Equity Action Plan that reflects our unwavering commitment to embed equity, civil rights and environmental justice into all aspects of our work. The thoughtful recommendations of the FRRCC are being considered in implementing this strategy, which aligns with the agency’s Fiscal Year 2022-26 Strategic Plan.
- The EPA’s Equity Action Plan includes eight priority strategies to advance equity, one of which is to “Address Inequitable Access to Information and Resources to Improve Engagement and Health Impacts in Rural Communities.” There is one specific agency commitment that is closely aligned with the FRRCC’s climate recommendations:
 - Implement the agency’s long-term commitment to modernize its financial assistance programs to encourage climate-smart investments in communities across the United States, including rural communities. The EPA has established a Resilient Infrastructure Subgroup on Climate to support the agency’s offices with integrating climate adaptation into their financial assistance programs and to make the EPA’s tools, training, data and technical assistance programs discoverable and accessible to applicants and funding recipients.
- The EPA is an active participant in the Rural Partners Network , an alliance of federal agencies and commissions working directly with rural communities to expand rural prosperity through job creation, infrastructure development and community improvement. The EPA is coordinating with multiple federal agencies to help clarify local priorities, navigate programming, connect to assistance providers and funders and develop strong applications for participating communities.
- The EPA will also support equity and program access through technical assistance via the Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers in partnership with the Department of Energy. Through these centers, the Biden-Harris Administration has invested \$177 million to help underserved and overburdened communities across the country including rural and underserved communities.

Climate Pollution Reduction Grants

- The Climate Pollution Reduction Grants program created under the Inflation Reduction Act — the largest climate investment in history — is enabling community-driven solutions to the climate crisis and helping accelerate America’s clean energy transition. The EPA appreciates the FRRCC’s emphasis on the contribution of the agricultural sector in the Climate Pollution Reduction Grants program and in climate mitigation efforts more broadly.
- The EPA hosted a series of public webinars on the Climate Pollution Reduction Grants, including one in August 2023, which specifically addressed opportunities for the inclusion of agricultural measure in climate plans. The agency also has hosted technical assistance a forum for grantees dedicated to Agriculture and Natural Working Lands.
- Consistent with the FRRCC recommendations, the EPA has additional agricultural-focused webinars planned for 2024. Future topics will cover opportunities to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions from the agriculture and land-use sector, as well as available data and best methodological practices for quantifying the emissions reduction impact of these activities as part of a greenhouse gas inventory.
- The EPA announced March 11, 2024, that 45 states have developed Priority Climate Action Plans as part of the Climate Pollution Reduction Grants program. Of the 45 state plans submitted, approximately two dozen include agriculture within their priority measures, including projects such as cropland and soil management improvements, anaerobic digestion and manure management, and other climate-smart agriculture tools and practices.

Climate Resilience and Adaptation Planning

- The EPA appreciates the recommendation for the FRRCC to collaborate more closely with the Local Government Advisory Committee, a policy-oriented committee comprised of elected and appointed officials from local, state, Tribal and territorial governments. The FRRCC and LGAC will explore the potential for joint guidance to improve local government participation in climate resilience and adaptation initiatives. This collaboration will support local governments having better access to funding opportunities, ensuring local knowledge is integrated into program design and guidance, and benefits to rural communities and agriculture are maximized.
- Additionally, the EPA has recently established a new Office of Climate Adaptation and Sustainability within the Office of Policy. OCAS will coordinate EPA’s intra- and interagency approaches to addressing climate adaptation, mitigation, resiliency and sustainability to address the current and anticipated impacts of climate change on the natural and built environment. This includes integrating climate adaptation planning into EPA programs, policies, rulemaking processes and operations to ensure they are effective even as the climate changes. The Office of Agriculture and Rural Affairs will work with OCAS to explore climate cobenefits of our program across the agency, per the FRRCC’s recommendations.

Anaerobic Digesters and AgSTAR

- The EPA appreciates the FRRCC’s strong endorsement for the mission and work of the AgSTAR program, a partnership between the EPA and USDA that has promoted the use of methane-mitigating technologies and practices to reduce methane emissions from manure management systems since 1993. The AgSTAR program will continue to spur technological innovation on methane emission mitigation in the agriculture sector, including anaerobic digesters and alternative manure management practices.
- The EPA plans to continue its longstanding support for the AgSTAR program and will explore options for increasing resources available to support the program. The EPA will also assess opportunities to leverage the program’s technical resources to optimize outreach and technical assistance provided to key stakeholders, especially farmers, at the national, regional and state level. Additionally, the program will seek to deepen its collaboration with the USDA, to ensure that it is reaching the broadest array of stakeholders in the agriculture community.
- EPA Region 7 partnered with Iowa State University and the University of Iowa to host an Anaerobic Digestion on the Farm Conference in Ames, Iowa, from November 6-8, 2023. The conference brought together 300 attendees from 15 states from both the public and private sectors. The conference shared a holistic perspective on the state of anaerobic digestion, while strengthening regional partnerships, supporting the agriculture community, and promoting environmental justice.
- Among the takeaways of the conference are the need for long-term technical assistance for post-construction implementation of operating systems. The EPA will continue to use available resources through our AgSTAR program, in partnership with extension services and outside organizations to contribute to a sustainable anaerobic digestion industry.
- The Office of Agriculture and Rural Affairs will host a post-conference workshop with federal partners – including the EPA’s regional agriculture advisors, as well as AgSTAR program representatives from the EPA and USDA –to discuss key learnings and next steps from the anaerobic digestion conference.
- Additionally, EPA Region 7 is exploring a second anaerobic digestion conference to continue the dialogue, involve communities and ensure that the agency is contributing to the advancement of this technology.

319 National Nonpoint Source Program

- The EPA appreciates the thorough FRRCC recommendations regarding the Office of Water’s 319 National Nonpoint Source Program. The agency is committed to implementing a holistic Clean Water Act Section 319 program and is finalizing the 2023 Draft Revision Nonpoint Source Program and Grant Guidelines for State and Territories (2023 draft revised program guidelines).

- Due to the diverse needs across the country states and territories develop Nonpoint Source Management Programs and Plans and take the lead in program management, project selection, oversight and water quality monitoring. The EPA approves and ensures that Nonpoint Source Management Programs are consistent with law and current policy by establishing guidelines for the program, articulating national priorities, measuring and reporting success, and developing technical resources to support grantees in executing their programs. The agency has taken the following steps which support the FRRCC’s recommendations.
 - In chapter two of its 2023 draft revised program guidelines, the EPA defined national priorities to advance water quality that include enhancing climate resiliency of agricultural systems and increasing assistance to build capacity in disadvantaged communities for nonpoint source proposal development, planning and implementation efforts. Additionally, the EPA is enhancing tracking environmental results to include these national priorities.
 - The EPA’s national priority for climate resilience through NPS solutions emphasizes the importance of incorporating climate change considerations and nature-based solutions into planning efforts for Nonpoint Source Management Plans, works plans, and watershed-based plans. The 2023 draft revised program guidelines emphasize that nature-based solutions, which include practices on agricultural lands, provide climate resilience and adaptation co-benefits. The EPA will describe the connection between climate resilience and agriculture in the 2023 draft revised program guidelines.
 - The 2023 draft revised program guidelines add new expectations and flexibilities for states to increase support for disadvantaged communities, which can increase assistance to build capacity in the communities.
 - The Nonpoint Source Management Plans annual progress reports now include a discussion of completed, ongoing and planned activities to advance environmental justice in their program. New flexibilities permit watershed project funds to support planning and capacity building in disadvantaged communities, and watershed project funds can be used for state staff time dedicated to watershed plan development and capacity building in a disadvantaged community.
 - Furthermore, Section 11.2.8 of the 2023 draft revised program guidelines provides a list of EPA centers dedicated to providing technical support. States have the flexibility to develop their 319 subgrant program to best support their needs, and some states offer technical assistance to organizations working with disadvantaged communities that is consistent with the FRRCC recommendations.
 - Program grantees are required to report pollutant load reductions from projects. The program develops and supports the web-based pollutant load estimation tool. Grantees and subgrantees may use PLET to estimate a project’s annual load reductions for specific pollutants and report results to the EPA in the Grants Reporting and Tracking System. The EPA uses Grants Reporting and Tracking System to track metrics such as load reductions, BMP implementation and investments at the program level. Environmental results can

include environmental co-benefits, and the EPA is working to enhance PLET's functionality to estimate multiple co-benefits from BMP implementation including climate resilience.

- The 2013 program guidelines and the 2023 draft revised program guidelines exempt states that contribute substantial state or local funding to watershed projects from the requirement to use 50% of their EPA program funding for watershed projects. This flexibility allows those states to use more of their EPA funds for staff, planning and monitoring efforts.
- The EPA appreciates the guidance to the agency on matching funds; however, the Clean Water Act requires states to provide a 40 percent nonfederal match for their Section 319 funds. Recognizing the widespread extent of nonpoint source pollution and limited federal funding, the exemption is an incentive for states to provide more than the minimum nonfederal match. The exemption also is an incentive for states to focus resources toward on-the-ground projects. One option for meeting the 50% leverage exemption is for a state to use "recycled" Clean Water State Revolving Fund dollars, as those funds are nonfederal once they have been loaned and paid back to the state.
- The EPA's 2013 program guidelines and 2023 draft program guidelines establish the EPA's expectations for state and territorial recipients of Section 319 funding. The EPA acknowledges and will consider the FRRCC's recommendations for its internal management of the Section 319 program.

Finally, I am pleased to report that the EPA has rechartered the Farm, Ranch and Rural Communities Federal Advisory Committee for another two years and will soon be soliciting new members. I again thank your service and dedication to support the work of this important committee. I look forward to continuing to engage with you as the agency addresses complex environmental issues facing agriculture and rural communities.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael S. Regan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael S. Regan