

USDA can fight climate change

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Body

Now that President-elect Joe Biden has selected Tom Vilsack as his secretary of agriculture, it should be incumbent on him to guide the transformation of our food system that so many of us see as way overdue.

There are two issues we hope will be confronted by Vilsack over the next four years. At the top of the agenda should be **climate change** - both agriculture's negative contributions to greenhouse gas emissions and its potential positive effects. Secondly, the Department of Agriculture needs to be at the forefront of a rebirth of the meat industry to allow small, grass-based farmers access to processing.

Having spent the past 20 years as an organic farmer, I have an obvious bias toward the idea that eliminating fossil fuel-based pesticides and fertilizers is the right thing to do, and a growing number of consumers have also put their food money where their proverbial mouths are.

Science is going a step further with evidence that converting to a more biological approach to farming will not only halt greenhouse gas emissions, but also has the potential to reduce the **climate change** effects over a number of years if enough farmland is transitioned to "regenerative" agriculture.

The main concept behind regenerative farming involves maximizing the amount of green plants on every acre throughout the growing season. Those plants take in carbon dioxide for photosynthesis to provide nutrients to grow more roots and leaves. Oxygen is released back into the atmosphere and carbon is tied to decaying plant material, microbes and other soil life.

Well-managed cattle grazing was also included in the study that showed positive environmental benefits despite the argument that cows emit methane, a greenhouse gas. Rodale found that soil carbon sequestered by regular regrowth of plants following grazing more than offsets the methane from the cows, who also add natural nutrients to the soil through their manure.

So, here's how the USDA needs to take the bull by the horns, so to speak.

The current Farm Bill is due to expire halfway through Biden's presidency in 2023. There is a growing coalition of lawmakers that would like to see the USDA direct subsidies away from the largest farms that contribute the most to global warming and instead go to farms that can prove they are reducing greenhouse gases through regenerative farming practices. It's a kind of "kill two birds with one stone" concept.

The USDA should also be encouraging expansion of rotational grazing, especially on land that is not well suited for row crops. There is currently an unmet demand for grass-fed beef in our country. Rotational grazing is already well-established in the dairy industry and demand for grass-based dairy products is growing as well.

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The two critical issues limiting growth in grass-fed animal agriculture are access to land and availability of independent meat processing. The USDA can and should be involved in both issues.

By de-emphasizing traditional subsidies for crops like corn and soybeans, the federal government would also in effect make some of the marginal lands now in crop production available for livestock grazing and winter forage.

But even if we could take advantage of increased availability of land for producing this healthier version of meat, farmers face a near-impossible task of finding safe and humane facilities to have those animals processed. A few small, independent meat lockers still dot the Midwest landscape, but their numbers are dwindling and farmers tell me the few remaining are booked up a year or more in advance.

With Congress, the USDA also needs to create a venue to make independent meat processing a viable and growing industry. Small communities in the Midwest are desperate for this kind of economic development.

I understand this is all a very ambitious agenda. But the positive benefits of progress on climate change and a better understanding between our rural and urban communities require nothing less than all of our best efforts.

Good luck, Secretary Vilsack!

Dean Dickel grew up on a typical small Iowa farm, attending Iowa State University and later Kirkwood Community College, where he studied animal science and communications. Dickel worked at newspapers in Iowa and Illinois before founding New Century Farm Organic Eggs in 1998 near Shullsburg, Wis.

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