

Opinion: Congress must address the biodiversity and climate crises in the farm bill

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We're in trouble: biodiversity loss and climate change are reshaping the world as we know it. We are losing species at an unprecedented rate, and climate change is causing a myriad of harmful effects that impact everything from Wall Street to Main Street. We need an all of government response to these challenges, and Congress has a key role to play.

Though reauthorization of the farm bill has been significantly delayed, Congress has a window of opportunity right now to further empower and support our nation's hardworking farmers, ranchers, and private foresters — many of whom care deeply about wildlife conservation and are taking proactive steps to combat climate change —

to conserve the invaluable habitats that support productive agriculture operations. This critical opportunity to improve the farm bill only comes about every five years and cannot be missed.

Approximately 70% of lands in the lower 48 states are under private ownership. The diverse landscapes that those lands encompass support more than 70% of the species listed under the Endangered Species Act and one-third of those species are found only on private lands.

For example, the delisting of the black-capped vireo from the Endangered Species Act can be attributed in part to the efforts of private landowners, proving how important an ally they are in the fight to save species.

Sadly, habitat for threatened and endangered species on unprotected private lands is being lost at a terrifying pace and twice as quickly compared to federal lands.

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Thanks to intense studies from leading scientists around the world, we know that biodiversity and climate crises are inextricably interconnected. That means addressing climate mitigation through reducing emissions and sequestering carbon isn't enough on its own to build climate-resilient private lands. Congress needs to allocate sufficient funds for wildlife conservation as well. Healthy, biodiverse habitats are more resistant to climate-related disasters, such as flooding, fire, drought, and sea level rise.

Even though these very real threats are already devastating our landscapes, there is a callous effort by some Members of Congress to remove the climate focus from the funds they established in the Inflation Reduction Act dedicated to climate-smart practices through Farm bill conservation programs. America's farmers and ranchers need those investments to keep habitats thriving while helping to produce the world's food and fiber.

In fact, the farm bill should cover more of the cost of these practices if private land farming and ranching operations are to remain sustainable. At the current 75% reimbursement rate, many private landowners cannot afford to cover the upfront cost of implementing conservation practices under the Farm Bill's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The next Farm Bill should increase the cost share and prioritize applications for those practices that most effectively prioritize the conservation of wildlife and combat impacts of climate change.

In New Mexico, with the help of EQIP, one farmer restored habitat that now supports beavers. Beavers create wetlands by building dams, which provide habitat for many other fish and wildlife species. It's a synergy that is paying dividends, as nearly 50% of North America's threatened or endangered species rely on wetlands for their survival, and those wetlands are also helping keep that farmer's soil nutritious and livestock healthy.

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