

Farm organizations are part of an alliance to consider climate solutions

Establishing policies to reduce the impact of climate change on daily life is not only a stated concern of the incoming Biden administration, as we discussed in last week's column (<https://tinyurl.com/y5b3849g>), it is also a concern of a wide range of agricultural and forestry leaders.

Leaders from the American Farm Bureau Federation, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Food Industry Association, the National Alliance of Forest Owners, the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives, the National Farmers Union, and The Nature Conservancy have established the Food and Agricultural Climate Alliance (FACA) so “farmers, ranchers, forest owners, and the food sector can deliver and benefit from climate solutions” (<https://tinyurl.com/yy34mv4n>).

Together they have produced a 51 page booklet titled “Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance Presents Joint Policy Recommendations” in which they identify a number of ways in which they think agriculture can address climate change. This booklet can be downloaded from their website (<https://tinyurl.com/yy34mv4n>).

Given the philosophical diversity represented by the eight groups, the principles they agreed to should gain widespread interest: 1) support voluntary, market-and incentive-based policies, 2) advance science-based outcomes, and 3) promote resilience and help rural economies better adapt to climate change.

In addition, there are six focus areas for which they make specific policy recommendations using their three principles. These include soil health, livestock and dairy, forests and wood products, research, and food loss and waste. The group then makes specific policy recommendations in each of these focus areas.

Because many of the tools that farmers, ranchers, and foresters need to use cannot be purchased at business in nearby towns, but are available in electronic form, FACA calls for “buy-in from the highest levels of USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) leadership and investment in rural broadband to ensure farmers, ranchers and rural communities have access to information, tools, and markets.

This will involve “expanding broadband access, which is necessary for using climate smart precision technologies to reduce emissions from and the overall environmental impact of U.S. agriculture.”

If we were to characterize the approach FACA takes to addressing these issues, we could do no better than to reference the donkey story that we first heard in grade school. If you want to get the donkey to move, it is better to use a carrot than a stick.

In making their proposals, FACA relies on carrots like various tax credits and targeted payments. Their document avoids any mention of regulatory actions.

Incentives work well for many of the issues identified in the FACA proposal but for other issues regulations may be needed, whether to manage program costs or to keep people focused on the goal.

It is often the simple actions we can take that help us address the problems that result in greenhouse emissions and global climate change.

For example: for those who grew up during the Great Depression, the memory of privation that was seared into their souls provided a significant enough incentive for them to reflexively flip off the light switch when they left a room.

However, for those of us in subsequent generations who grew up in an era of growing prosperity, we think nothing of leaving the lights on in a room that we might return to in half an hour. If it takes a carbon tax, for example, to incentivize us to turn the lights off when we leave a room, then we might need to do that.

If we want to leave the world in a better condition than we found it, certain penalties for the wasteful uses of energy, whether it be by agriculture, manufacturing, or the suburban homeowner, may need to be on the table.

There are more non-farmers than farmers in the US. The carrots being offered farmers will not be sufficient to mitigate climate change. There will likely need to be some sticks, in the form of guardrails (regulations), to keep us all on the road.

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