

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 24, 2021

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Congratulations on your return to USDA. We are excited to have you back, and look forward to working closely with you as you stand up for rural America, help mitigate wildfire risk, support nutrition programs, and position agriculture as a central tool in addressing the climate crisis.

We are writing to ask your advice and assistance regarding a highly innovative approach being adopted in Washington State to incentive ranchers, farmers, and forest owners to sequester carbon. This approach aligns with the goals outlined in your administration to identify ways to financially reward good climate practices. Farmers are the leading stewards of our land and on the front lines fighting climate change. As long as they have a seat at the table, most are open and eager to adopt incentivized market-based solutions.

Last year, the Washington State Legislature created the Sustainable Farms and Fields grant program, a voluntary program to support farmers in the implementation of practices that increase agricultural carbon sequestration. This legislation passed with broad bipartisan support and was signed into law in early 2020. The Washington State Department of Agriculture, along with the State Conservation Commission and Washington State University, is working closely with NRCS-Washington to roll out the program on July 1, 2021.

We believe that the Sustainable Farms and Fields program can serve as an excellent demonstration project for future federal programs that incentivize farmers to sequester carbon and improve soil health on their land. The program is particularly suitable for small and medium-sized farms because farmers do not have to enter a carbon market to be compensated for sequestering carbon. This is critical to ensure small and medium farmers are not scale limited, and can fully benefit from the program. Additionally, it supports first-time, low-income, and minority farmers by providing technical and financial assistance through conservation districts. For example, funds can be used for site-specific consultations, the purchase of goods such as seed for cover cropping, the purchase of shared-use equipment such as no-till seed drills, and direct payments for contracted carbon storage. This flexibility will allow the program to adapt to the opportunities and challenges of the farmers it serves.

By incentivizing soil carbon sequestration, the Washington Sustainable Farms and Fields program will provide farmers access to long-term, stable income in the form of carbon credits. The agencies involved in the program are developing a measurement and estimation verification (MEV) system that will be continually optimized. This process could provide insight into the development of a national standard. Moreover, the long-term benefits of soil health and climate resilience can complement or even potentially outweigh gains made through a carbon market.

We request that you consider the Washington Sustainable Farms and Fields program as a demonstration project which could inform how USDA develops plans to incentivize carbon sequestration through climate smart practices.

We look forward to hearing back from your office and working together.

Sincerely,



Kim Schrier, M.D.
Member of Congress



Marilyn Strickland
Member of Congress

Derek Kilmer
Member of Congress



Adam Smith
Member of Congress



Patty Murray
United States Senator



Susan DelBene
Member of Congress