

Utilizing Ag Energy Programs to Address Climate Change

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By Lloyd Ritter | November 10, 2017

The realities of climate change are becoming clearer all the time, with extreme weather events like droughts, floods and forest fires touching areas all over the U.S., and around the world. While we can't easily link any one event directly to climate change, we know from recent hurricanes wreaking havoc in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico to the catastrophic wildfires that ravaged California, that the effects of climate change are both visible and devastating.

We clearly need to address climate from a host of angles, in virtually all sectors of the economy. At the federal level, action supporting rural renewables and efficiency is a smart gift to the planet. And believe it or not, despite many high-profile areas of conflict in Congress, there has been some recent progress toward bipartisan clean energy and climate policy solutions.

In a true show of bipartisanship, something we need a lot more of these days, members of the U.S. House of Representatives formed the Climate Solutions Caucus last year, with the goal of achieving bipartisan, economically viable solutions to climate change. The caucus very recently has grown to 60 members and counting, with a 1-to-1 ratio of Republicans and Democrats. Not surprisingly, it is led by two Floridians, Republican Rep. Carlos Curbelo, and Democrat Rep. Ted Deutsch. Members from every region of the country have joined.

The growth of this caucus, which includes several members of the Ag Committee, will hopefully increase consensus that agriculture and rural America have an integral role to play in preparing for and mitigating the effects of climate change. Addressing climate change through thoughtful, targeted investments in rural renewables is good for agriculture and the economy, as well as the environment. It's a proverbial win-win-win.

Many agricultural producers are leading the charge toward renewables, irrespective of the rewards to the climate. They know that innovation increases efficiency while making them more resilient, especially when faced with economic downturns. But doing their part for a healthier planet is certainly a bonus.

And here's the kicker: climate-friendly energy and manufacturing investments in agriculture and rural America pays. According to the USDA, the biobased products industry alone contributed \$369 billion to the U.S. economy in 2013, and created employment opportunities for 4 million workers. Ag energy is providing opportunities for states all across the country. For example, Texas leads the nation in wind and solar generation, while Iowa has the largest share of renewables in total energy production.

But again, the climate benefits are real and quantifiable. The USDA estimates that the use of biobased products displaces 300 million gallons of petroleum every year, and that number is growing. A 2015 Argonne National Laboratory report showed that all biobased products in their research reduced greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, ranging from 27 percent to a staggering 86 percent. Advanced biofuels like cellulotics, for example, provide about an 85 to 86 percent GHG reduction over gasoline.

USDA's popular Rural Energy for America Program has helped 15,000-plus rural small businesses, farmers and ranchers improve their bottom lines by cost-sharing the installation of diverse renewable energy systems and energy efficiency systems. More than 4,000 carbon-free wind and solar projects have generated enough electric energy to power 158,000 homes annually. The GHG emissions savings are equivalent to removing approximately 1.2 million cars from the road every year.

Notably, many of these significant economic and environmental benefits are obtained from a tiny federal investment. Funding for climate-friendly ag energy programs constituted less than 1 percent of the 2014 Farm Bill, and proposals for continued funding are still modest. These innovative efforts help producers and companies deploy climate-friendly technologies, leveraging billions of dollars in economic development. That's the sort of smart, fiscally responsible approach we need more of.

So, despite current trendlines suggesting climate-friendly policy generally is not in vogue (to say the least), there are silver linings to be found, providing an opportunity to make a difference. While virtually nothing in Washington generates uniform approval, ag energy investments—via sensible cost-sharing and public-private partnerships—have growing support. Farmers, ranchers, rural homeowners and communities, sportsmen, clean tech, biotech, and many others support these programs.

Now, we must hope that Congress does its part in the coming months.



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