



Farmer Voices on the Value of Climate-Smart Agriculture Funding

Farmers and ranchers are called upon to do so much. We at Solutions from the Land believe they are key to achieving sustainable development goals—feeding the world and providing essential goods and services while improving the environment. But, if we want farmers to do more for the environment, they need the kind of support that won't leave them economically unsustainable.

That's why we were so pleased to see the national investment of \$19.5 billion in climate-smart agriculture funding provided by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) in August 2022.

It's always a good time to elevate farmer voices, but it's especially important right now as the Farm Bill—and whether climate-smart agriculture funds will be protected or reallocated—is up for discussion in Congress. We have been working with farmers to write a series of op-eds to share their testimonies of how and why they have used climate-smart agriculture funds.

Learn more about the farmers below.

Hillery Goodgame, Blue Heron Urban Farms and Sanctuary in Georgia

Hillery Goodgame is a first-generation farmer, or as she says, a generation-and-a-half farmer. Her parents are from the Caribbean, and she grew up working alongside her mother in the community garden she ran in their housing complex in Harlem.

She was working as an IT project manager in New York when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. After seeing how challenged the food chain was, she decided she wanted to do something about it. She decided to become a farmer. By September 2020, she bought her first farm: a 12-acre piece of land that had been used as a farm and nature conservancy in South Fulton County, Georgia. In 2024, she purchased an additional 74 acres of farmland in Chattahoochee.

The farm is home to the Great Georgia Blue Heron and other wildlife species. Goodgame grows mostly vegetables and fruits, using practices that build up soil health and resiliency; plants rye for the wildlife; and stocks the ponds with fish.

“None of this would be possible without help from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Natural Resources Conservation Service,” Goodgame says.

One climate-smart funding project helped Goodgame plant 1,100 trees on their new property—persimmons, apples, pears, and other types of fruit, nut, and hardwood trees. Goodgame has a particular interest in planting longleaf pine to support carbon sequestration.

Funding from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) helped her dig a water well, install drip irrigation, and build a high-top tunnel for vegetable production. Other programs are helping Goodgame reinstate the new farm's organic certification, which lapsed within the last 10 years, as well as conduct soil tests and plant cover crops and pollinator strips.

Part of Goodgame's emphasis is on education and outreach, both in her local community and with farmers across the country. She started mother-son/daughter fishing days on the farm where families from the city learn to fish, and she speaks at conferences about how to work with NRCS and how to adopt climate-smart practices, like low- and no-till and cover crops.

Goodgame summarizes her thoughts:

“We have to continue to support farmers by telling Congress to support NRCS and other USDA programs in providing technical assistance, opportunities to enact climate-smart practice and channels to build capacity. Providing opportunities for farmers to use climate-smart practices enables farmers to provide healthy, nutrient dense, fresh foods to rural and urban communities.

We also must get young people excited about farming and green careers and help them make it a viable career. Otherwise, we're going to lose our experienced farmers without having a new generation skilled and ready to utilize climate-smart practices to innovate and to support agriculture. If we don't, this country is going to lose its farmers—and that will mean access to a healthy food supply will only become more challenging for the American people.”

Will Harris, White Oak Pastures in Georgia

Will Harris returned to his family farm in Bluffton, Georgia, after earning an animal science degree at the University of Georgia in 1976. By the early 1990s, he had grown increasingly dissatisfied with the conventional system of grazing cattle on single-species pastures of bermudagrass and finishing calves on a corn- and soy-based diet before selling and shipping them to a processor.

He learned the principles of biodiversity—nature does not like monocultures—and started adding different types of forage and livestock species to his pastures. He gave up many of the tools he had come to depend on: chemical fertilizers, pesticides,

GMOs, hormone implants, and antibiotics. And, for several years, he gave us his business's profitability.

The greatest challenges of moving to a pasture-based farming system were all economic, Harris says. It requires capital, sufficient capacity at a processing plant, and markets willing to pay more than typical grocery store prices.

He was able to do it because he went in with liquidity. He had inherited 1,000 acres of land and 700 mama cows. He had also saved from previous years.

Harris was able to use EQIP funding from the Natural Sources Conservation Service to help cost-share expenses related to planting more diverse species of forages in his pastures. He also benefited from USDA Rural Development's Value-Added Producers Grant program, which helps agricultural producers enter value-added activities to generate new products, create and expand marketing opportunities, and increase producer income.

Today, White Oak Pastures sells about \$20 million worth of pasture-raised meat and animal products wholesale to grocery stores like Publix, Kroger, and Giant Eagle, as well as directly to consumers online. Beef, pork, poultry, lamb, goat, and rabbit sold from the farm comes from animals born, raised, and processed directly on the farm. The animals move daily from one paddock, or small portion of pasture, to the next during the growing season, about nine months of the year, to give the land a balance of grazing and recovery.

Two of his three daughters, Jenni and Jodi, have returned to the farm as the fifth generation, and White Oak Pastures is the largest private employer in the county, employing 170 people with a payroll of about \$100,000 each week.

"Programs like EQIP helped me convert my farm to a much more holistic production system," Harris says. "Climate-smart funding done right is very, very beneficial."

Climate-smart funding, he adds, should promote biodiversity, where a broad range of plants, animals, and microbes live in symbiotic relationships with one another and understanding farmers' needs to be economically sustainable so they can be environmentally sustainable—and regenerative.

R.C. Hunt in North Carolina

R.C. Hunt grew up on a tobacco farm and entered the livestock business after graduating with an animal science degree from North Carolina State University in 1977. He and a business partner bought a farm in Wilson County, North Carolina. In 1992, they put a 2,000-sow farrow-to-wean swine facility on a 400-acre tract of land on the farm. The swine operation has operated every day since.

When they started designing their animal waste lagoon for the swine operation, they participated in a state share-cost program that brought engineers to the table to make sure they were building the lagoon right.

The land had previously been used for crops, but it was worn out. So they converted it to pasture and used waste from the pigs to fertilize it.

“With rest and nutrition, the land has recharged,” Hunt says. “It’s been amazing to watch.”

The land improved so much that, after 25 years, they put some of it back into crop production. The yields are double what they were before.

The farm has been extremely productive over the last 30 years, but Hunt is approaching retirement. Once again, he wants to be sure he does right by the land.

“We like to say we own the land, but truly we just manage it for a period of time we’re on this earth,” Hunt says. “I’ve done the best I could do generate as much production as I could. Now I am thinking about what happens to it next.”

Particularly, he is thinking about the lagoon as the swine operation is expected to close by the end of December 2024. His plan is to clean it up and convert it to a freshwater pound that can be used as a water hole for future farming or irrigation. It’s going to cost \$300,000, mostly because of the sophisticated equipment needed.

Harris has applied and received cost-share funding assistance from NRCS’s EQIP program, which will require him to follow best management practices in converting the lagoon. The process will take 30 to 60 days and the last of the pig waste will be spread across 900 acres of corn in the area.

As Hunt said during a [recent press conference in North Carolina](#), climate-smart agriculture funding will help farmers “preserve our land and reduce our carbon footprint, ensuring we can continue to operate sustainably for generations to come.” RC is a longtime SfL collaborating partner who co-chaired the [North Carolina Climate Smart Agriculture Work Group](#).

Brad Hunter in Indiana

Brad Hunter started farming full-time 19 years ago when he returned home to the family farm in Porter County, Indiana. He came across no-till in agricultural magazines and attended an annual no-till conference for several years. Finally, he decided he needed to try it.

At the time, his soil and water district offered a cost-share program for buying cover crop seed. He ended up using those funds to help buy wheat seed as a cover between

seasons of corn and soybeans and EQIP funds from NRCS to help buy equipment needed to modify his planter to no-till right into the green, growing cover crop.

It's not easy to step out and do something new on the farm, Hunter says.

"You question whether it will work. Am I wasting my time, my money?" he says. "The equipment you need is expensive, and there's no guarantee you'll like it."

If you operate rented land, like the Hunters, you have to convince your landlords the chance won't negatively affect them. For Hunter, the hardest person to convince was his dad. But he did.

The elder Hunter could see the difference with reduced tillage. The dust didn't blow as bad. But the real clencher came when NRCS came out to the farm with a soil probe.

"They took a sample of the soil from a farm where I had been using cover crops and a sample from his place, where we had not," Hunter recalls. "There was a huge difference in how that soil probe went down into the ground on the land that had covers. My dad became a believer."

Hunter says he loves nature and conservation, which is why he appreciates participating in NRCS programs. In addition to using climate-smart practices on the farm that have improved soil health, he participates in NRCS programs that provide habitat for bats, bees, native flowers, sparrows, and other wildlife.

"As Congress discusses the place of climate-smart funding, I hope they protect it," Hunter says. "The EQIP funding was the stepping stone to get me into being able to no-till. It gave me the ability to take that risk."

Maynard Mallonnee

Maynard Mallonnee is an Organic Valley dairy farmer in Washington. His grandfather purchased land the family still farms today in 1949, and his 23-year-old son, Jack, is in the process of taking over management. He'll be the fourth generation of organic dairy farmers on the farm, where they managed 225 acres and milk about 60 cows.

The Mallonnees' cows graze perennial pastures that, in some places, are made up of more than 35 native species. As Washington's summers get drier and hotter, they have started planting and grazing summer annuals, like sorghum sudangrass and grazing turnips. Their pastures support at least 70% of their cows' dry organic matter intake for 200-plus days out of the year. For context, USDA organic certification only requires 30%. To be successful, they are intentional with grazing and aim to see as much biodiverse life in the soil and pastures as possible.

In the early 2000s, the Mallonnees reached out to NRCS for help putting together a grazing plan after learning their farm was home to some of the 1% of habitat left for Kincaid's lupine, a native plant that hosts the endangered Fender's blue butterfly. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would soon be placing the lupine on the federally threatened list soon, and they needed to prove they were protecting the plant.

NRCS EQIP funding helped the family put in additional water lines and fences so they could keep cattle out of areas with Kincaid's lupine when the butterflies need it most, from April to September. Recently they joined USFWS's Partner for Fish and Wildlife program, which will help them put in even more cross-fencing and water features to ramp up their rotational grazing.

In nearly 14 years, the Mallonnees' efforts increased the Kincaid's lupine population by 33%.

Currently, the Mallonnees are putting in a solid-liquid separator at the dairy as part of their manure management system. Separating solids from liquids will save 70 to 75 metric tons of CO2 equivalent from entering the atmosphere. Composted solids will be strategically used to fertilize the land.

The project is great but costs \$120,000. Mallonnee applied for and received a grant from the Conservation Commission's Sustainable Farms and Field Grant, which provided \$75,000 toward the project with him contributing \$25,000. Organic Valley received USDA Partnership for Climate-Smart Commodities Program funding, which he applied for and received a one-time payment of \$500 per metric ton of CO2 equivalent saved using the new technology, or about \$35,000.

"Climate-smart programs put farmers at an advantage of being able to help themselves, their farms, and the environment all in one package," Mallonnee says. "Most farmers, like myself, can't afford the giant numbers that it costs to do these projects nowadays, which is why it's so important that they have access to funds to help them better manage their farms' soil, water, and air quality."

Read more: [Mallonee's op-ed](#) was referenced by Representative Marie Gluesenkamp Perez (WA-3rd) during the House Ag Committee markup of the Farm Bill.