CLIMATE 21 PROJECT

TRANSITION MEMO

Department of Agriculture

CLIMATE **21** PROJECT Transition Memo

Department of Agriculture

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Contents

This memo is part of the **Climate 21 Project**, which taps the expertise of more than 150 experts with high-level government experience, including nine former cabinet appointees, to deliver actionable advice for a rapid-start, whole-of-government climate response coordinated by the White House and accountable to the President.

The full set of Climate 21 Project memos is available at climate21.org.

Department of Agriculture

Executive Summary

Agriculture and forestry are central to climate mitigation and adaptation. The agriculture sector accounts for about 10% of current overall U.S. emissions, while U.S forests sequester the equivalent of about 15% of carbon dioxide emissions from combustion of U.S. fossil fuels annually. Through actions in both sectors, agriculture and forests can provide 10-20% of the additional sequestration and emissions reductions needed to achieve net zero emissions by 2050.

While the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has not historically been at the center of the public conversation on federal climate policy, the Department has enormous and underappreciated discretionary financial resources and agency expertise. These resources and expertise enable USDA to: (1) partner with farmers, ranchers and forest owners to reduce atmospheric greenhouse gases (GHGs) through carbon sequestration and emissions reductions; (2) reduce GHG emissions from rural energy cooperatives; (3) bolster the resilience of private working lands and public forests and grasslands to the effects of climate change; (4) promote sustainable bioenergy, wood products, and other bio-based materials (5) contribute to the scientific understanding of climate change; and (6) invest in climate-smart economic development in rural communities.

Importantly, given current economic conditions, investments in climate change at USDA can support and create rural jobs in agriculture, forestry, conservation and related businesses, thereby contributing to the economic recovery of rural America. In fact, based on MIT research, investments in agriculture, forestry, and conservation produce 20 to nearly 40 jobs per $1 million in expenditure. Given climate skepticism by many in rural America, it is critical that agriculture, forestry, and other rural stakeholders view themselves as USDA's partners to achieve climate goals. We recommend USDA's initiatives emphasize collaboration, incentives, the historic resiliency and innovation of agriculture and forestry, and the critical role that rural America can play in helping address climate change while creating jobs and economic opportunity.

Issues of diversity, inclusion, and environmental justice are important in all of USDA's work, including climate change. Given USDA's history of past discrimination against minorities, tribes and women in the implementation of farm and other programs, it is vital that USDA's efforts around climate change seek input from diverse stakeholders and that policies are administered such that access to resources and program outreach and delivery to these communities are prioritized.

This memo provides the incoming Secretary of Agriculture, Chief of Staff, and key Department leadership with opportunities to maximize USDA's contributions to an aggressive Administration-wide climate change mitigation and adaptation effort. This memo focuses on measures that can be undertaken within existing budgetary and legal authorities and prioritizes initiatives for the first 100 days that will either generate positive near-term impacts, or set the agency up to develop and implement a broader first-term climate agenda, including medium- and long-term climate policies to support the President's agenda and the United States' obligations under the Paris Agreement.

Department of Agriculture

KEY PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- **Issue a Secretarial Order on Climate Change and Rural Investment** to signal climate change as a top priority of the department, frame USDA's interest in investing in agriculture, forestry, technology, innovation, and rural economies, and to set agendas for policy and programmatic actions needed to act on climate. *(Day 1)*
- **Invest in natural climate solutions** by establishing a Carbon Bank using the Commodity Credit Corporation to finance large-scale investments in climate smart land management practices; prioritizing climate smart practices in implementation of Farm Bill conservation programs; and identifying opportunities to invest in natural infrastructure. *(Day 100)*
- **Incentivize Climate Smart Agriculture and Rural Investment through financial tools** including crop insurance, rural development grants and loans, and USDA procurement. *(Day 100)*
- **Decarbonize rural energy and promote green energy and smart grids** through the vast reach of rural development grants and loans to rural utilities and by dramatically increasing use of methane digesters, biofuels and wood energy, and wood product innovation. *(Day 100)*
- **Prioritize federal investment to address wildfire** by establishing a Wildfire Commission, co-chaired by the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior and a Democratic and Republican governor, to offer recommendations to increase the pace and scale of ecologically-sound forest restoration on federal, state, tribal and private forest lands, modernize firefighting response in the US, address development in the wildland-urban interface, and increase the use of prescribed fire. *(Day 100)*

KEY ORGANIZATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- **Rebuild and restore staff capacity and morale** by re-investing in science capacity, especially in the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and the Economic Research Service (ERS), and addressing workforce and performance protocols that reward staff for climate change innovation. *(Day 1)*
- **Reset the narrative of agriculture and forestry as climate change solutions with rural stakeholders** by emphasizing producers' and landowners' historic commitment to stewardship, and economic opportunities presented by investments in climate mitigation and resilience. *(Day 1)*

1 Management, Budget, and Structure

Incoming USDA leadership will be beset by near-term organizational decisions and budgetary deadlines. The transition period should be used to identify top priority requests for stimulus spending or FY2022 increases in appropriations, given calendar constraints.

The incoming Secretary and leadership team will confront a demoralized workforce that has seen high attrition and large numbers of vacant career positions. From day one, USDA leadership must prioritize communicating to career staff that they and their work are valued, including through internal messages and a Secretarial tour of USDA offices and agencies, and stand up a dedicated hiring team to rebuild a diverse and dedicated career workforce. The leadership team should also review and reconsider recent decisions to reorganize key climate and conservation functions, including the relocation of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the Economic Research Service and the decision to isolate the Forest Service from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and key conservation programs.

In addition to repairing past damages, incoming leadership should consider measures that will improve departmental management of climate initiatives, including moving the Climate Change Program Office into the Secretary's office; standing up a short-term Climate Strike Team to evaluate existing departmental climate policy and implement changes; and setting performance measures for climate and conservation that will help drive accountability across USDA.

USDA is a complex agency with among the broadest set of functions of any federal department. The USDA contains 29 agencies and offices with nearly 100,000 employees who serve the American people at more than 4,500 locations across the country and abroad. More than 40,000 of these employees are in two agencies—the US Forest Service and NRCS—both of which are central to federal efforts to address climate change on farms, ranches and forests. USDA's significant field staffing gives it one of the largest 'boots on the ground' presence of any department, save the Department of Defense. While the majority of USDA's presence and influence plays out in rural America, its portfolio and climate change opportunities are not exclusively rural. For example, trees in cities play an enormous role in helping to slow climate change; urban trees provide almost 20% of forest carbon sequestration in U.S. forests. The only dedicated federal urban forestry program resides in the US Forest Service as the Urban and Community Forestry Program.

USDA's total annual budget is $153 billion, more than 80% of which are mandatory funds devoted to nutrition assistance. Of the $27 billion in annual appropriated funds, about $7 billion support conservation agencies with another $6 billion in mandatory dollars available for conservation. NRCS programs, Rural Development grants and loans, and the Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve Program have substantial flexibility to target billions of dollars to climate-smart practices in rural communities and on working lands.

An ambitious 100-day climate plan will require significant engagement on both budget and personnel matters. This memo deliberately focuses on concrete climate actions the agency can take through existing resources and authorities. Where significant budgetary and personnel resources are needed to achieve policy goals, we seek to identify them and illustrate how these recommendations are achievable using existing budget, authority and personnel. We also identify where significant new budget, authority and personnel are required and how they may be acquired.

Budget resources play a major role in the agencies' ability to implement priorities. USDA should be prepared to include climate-related requests in any COVID-related stimulus packages early in the Administration. Beyond that, three budget deadlines will significantly impact USDA's resources for supporting climate change work within the first calendar year, and agency leaders should be prepared to make concrete appropriations requests as early as March 2021. The three budget deadlines are:

(1) **FY2021 omnibus appropriations.** It is likely that all or some agencies will be on a continuing resolution (CR) as of inauguration day and that current year funding will be completed soon after (1-2 months) through an "omnibus" appropriations law. The spending levels will be largely negotiated by appropriators by this time, so there is very little room for increased spending or change of spending authorities. That said, small accommodations may be made, so a short list of funding and/or authority requests should be identified in the first 1-3 weeks.

(2) **FY2022 budget request.** In the first year of a first term, the President's budget is announced within the first 50 days. President Obama announced his first budget on March 11, 2009 - 37 days into the term. Agency requests are due earlier. Congressional budget and appropriations processes usually start in March when agency heads testify before the appropriating committees to support their budgets. Appropriations committees work with agency staff until the appropriations acts are passed. With such a short window, while focused on other start up issues, the agency has little time to generate and advocate for major initiatives. If USDA leadership seeks to make major climate budget proposals, it is critical to start that work in the transition or prior, so it is ready to go.

(3) **FY2023 budget process.** After submitting the FY2022 budget, agencies will immediately begin work on the FY2023 budget request which is due to the Office of Management and Budget in late July, prior to announcement the following February. This window provides more time for major adjustments and initiatives.

KEY STRUCTURAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Equity, diversity and inclusion (Day 1 and ongoing)

Climate change will have differential impacts on different populations. Climate change policies and programs should explicitly recognize the need to address equity and justice as part of their structure and design. For example, the programs discussed in this memo should be designed so that communities have equitable access to resilience investments, infrastructure improvements, information, technical assistance, and conservation programs. Conscious and unconscious biases in the system should be identified through staff training and policy review. Historically underrepresented communities and voices should be prioritized in agency and stakeholder engagement, such as through the Secretary's listening tour (and senior leadership travel), the climate strike team, and advisory committees. The Secretary and his/her leadership team should make early and repeated statements about USDA's commitment to dismantling structural racism within USDA agencies and programs, acknowledging and addressing past injustices, and addressing organizational cultures that have led to unsafe working conditions for women and minorities.

Boost morale (Day 1 and ongoing)

Across USDA, including within the natural resource and research agencies, career staff are demoralized, having been made to believe by their political leadership that neither their work nor experience is valued. It is critical for the incoming Secretary to quickly reset this narrative and empower and re-energize one of the most dedicated workforces in the federal government. The Secretary should consider reviving a successful tactic from the George W. Bush Administration, when he gave explicit direction to all incoming political appointees that career staff were their most valuable asset. Motivating and supporting career staff will be the engine that powers meaningful and lasting change at USDA. Broadcasting this message should be a Day 1 priority and be regularly reinforced.

In addition to articulating clear and strong messages of support to career staff, the Secretary should take concrete early actions to boost morale. These include: revising the Trump Administration's telework policy that negatively impacted the personal lives of many employees; lifting travel caps that prevent staff from attending training and participating in professional gatherings, like research conferences, that enable their work and professional development; investing in training for skills career staff need to meet performance outcomes; and opening lines of communication between the Secretary's office and senior leadership team and career agency leaders. The new Secretary should demonstrate that he or she understands and values career employees' work by visiting agency offices in DC and in the field as early as possible.

The Secretary should also model and take meaningful steps to prioritize a safe and inclusive workforce environment, and issue early messages communicating a leadership commitment to anti-racism, an acknowledgement of past USDA failures, and specific direction for creating equity in the workforce and in program delivery. The Secretary's team should start these human capital activities on Day 1, have a plan drafted by Day 30, and complete the plan within the first 100 days.

Climate Strike Team (Day 1)

In order to quickly issue and effectively manage implementation of a Climate Change Secretarial Order, described in the following section, the Secretary should create a Climate Strike Team chaired by the Deputy Secretary, reporting directly to the Secretary, and comprised of SES-level career leads from the Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Research, Education, and Economic Resources (REE), Farm Services Agency (FSA), Departmental Administration, other appropriate agencies, and the head of the Office of Climate Change. The Strike Team should be term-limited, perhaps 18 to 36 months, and charged with securing the Secretarial Order's near-term mandates such as review of existing policies and establishing an advisory committee. Upon dissolution of the Strike Team, the Climate Change Program Office would continue to be the lead intra-departmental coordination and execution body within USDA.

Appointing agency leaders (100 Days)

Throughout USDA, state-based political appointees help lead agencies like Rural Development (RD) and FSA. The incoming Administration should use the transition period to identify a dynamic, diverse group of potential appointees for those state-based positions, and move quickly to put those leaders in place so they can help agency staff immediately identify and implement climate-sensitive priorities for state-based funding and program delivery. Notably, the Forest Service has no political positions; the Secretary should maintain that tradition while quickly building an NRE team that can work in conjunction with Forest Service career leadership to implement the Secretary's climate and other priorities.

Hiring team (100 Days)

All of USDA's agencies are facing high rates of retirement and low rates of hiring, leading to a loss in institutional knowledge, capacity, and skills necessary to accomplish the climate priorities of a new Administration. The new Secretary should immediately create a team to work with agencies to identify top priority skills related to climate change, create relevant position descriptions, and stay focused on hiring new talent through an equitable hiring process. The process for non-federal candidates to navigate USA Jobs is extremely difficult and time consuming, creating major disincentives for joining federal service and perpetuating barriers for underrepresented groups. Existing authorities—including direct hire authority for Resource Assistance Program participants and non-competitive hiring authority through the Public Land Service Corps Act—can be used to expedite hiring of career staff, but the Secretary should also work with Congress to pass new authorities, including direct hire authority for Public Land Service Corps participants, to facilitate building a diverse, talented civil workforce. The Secretary should also use existing authorities to temporarily bring external experts on board and to hire back retirees who have key knowledge and skills.

The hiring team should be started within the first 30 days and reach capacity through internal reassignments within 60 days. This team should emphasize reviewing outreach, recruitment, hiring, onboarding and retention approaches to identify and eliminate the impacts of unconscious bias and break down systemic barriers to access for underrepresented groups, and especially for Black, Indigenous and people of color. Additional capacity may be needed to fully implement a plan for equitable hiring: A larger team should be built no later than Oct 1.

The Secretary may also want to consider leading a push to expand youth and veteran jobs and service corps opportunities to engage in climate-related work, building on the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) program launched during the Obama administration, which had bipartisan support in Congress, and any related efforts that may be underway as a response to the pandemic. This direction could be given on Day 1, using existing structures and authorities. Additional support, including targeted funding requests, could be identified in the first 1-3 weeks in anticipation of any omnibus or COVID-related legislation, and included in the FY22 budget proposal. The Secretary should highlight the importance of partnerships to increase agency capacity, and within the first 60 days, should review the Secretary Perdue's direction on partner and cooperative agreements and consider how partners can support implementation of the new Administration's climate priorities.

National Institute of Food and Agriculture/Economic Research Service relocation (Day 1)

A new incoming Secretary will have to repair the damage caused by the 2018-19 decision to relocate the majority of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and the Economic Research Service (ERS) from Washington, DC, to Kansas City, Missouri. Nearly 8 of every 10 NIFA employees have left NIFA rather than move. The forced relocation to Kansas City has also meant dozens of reports and millions in research funding have been delayed or scuttled, setting back critical climate change and other research. To restore NIFA and ERS to their size under the Obama administration, USDA would have to hire more than 400 people. The Secretary's decision process on what to do to resolve this situation should be transparent and inclusive, including consulting with the NAREEE Advisory Board. A report can be mandated on Day 1 and completed in the first 180 days, with operational changes embedded by the end of the year.

Regardless of the decision the incoming Secretary makes regarding maintaining or reversing the mandatory relocation, he or she must take immediate steps to mitigate the research impacts. To ensure NIFA and ERS meet climate change research priorities, an incoming Secretary could request a third-party review and data analysis of research and other activities that have been or will be postponed or discarded because of the relocation.

Mission Area organization for Natural Resources (Day 1)

In 2017, Secretary Perdue reorganized the natural resource mission areas. NRCS was moved out of the Natural Resources & Environment (NRE) Mission Area, leaving only the Forest Service in NRE. A new Farm, Production and Conservation Mission Area (FPAC) that includes NRCS, FSA, and RMA was created. Isolating the Forest Service, which manages 8.5% of land in the U.S. and contains USDA's largest workforce, has damaged opportunities for landscape-scale climate change initiatives across the Department and deepened tendencies towards siloed budgets and policies. While some integrated initiatives, such as the FS-NRCS Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Projects, have continued, an incoming Secretary should reconsider if the Forest Service is best served separated from other USDA agencies, or if NRCS should be moved back into NRE.

Regardless of the Secretary's decision regarding the NRE/FPAC structure, most observers view the FPAC Business Center as a failure in execution. The FPAC Business center was established in 2018 and is intended to provide centralized business operations (financial management, budgeting, human resources, information technology, acquisitions/procurement, customer experience, internal controls, risk management, strategic and annual planning, and other similar activities) within the FPAC Mission Area. To assess the problems with the FPAC Business Center design and implementation, a report can be mandated on Day 1, to be completed in first 180 days, with recommendations that the Secretary can then consider.

Use the power of USDA procurement (100 Days)

USDA has thousands of offices across the country and has a large vehicle fleet. The Secretary should use USDA's significant buying power to bolster markets for climate friendly products such as mass timber, cross-laminated timber, heating systems that use biogas or wood pellets, and green vehicles. A report can be mandated within the first 30 days, changes implemented to grants within the first 180 days, and policy changes embedded in FY2022.

Performance measures (Day 1 and ongoing)

What's measured is what gets done. The Secretary and his or her team should focus early on identifying how to prioritize and measure climate-related outcomes, to ensure sufficient time and resources to coordinate among agency experts, USDA staff including in OBPA, and OMB. Early adoption will also allow 3 years for changed practices and data as a result of new performance measures. Under the Obama administration, the Forest Service adopted a Climate Change Scorecard based on best business practices. The Scorecard was highly successful in increasing the agency's base capacity for understanding and addressing climate change, and continues to influence the agency's current work on sustainability and climate. The incoming Secretary could support USDA-wide direction by updating the Climate Change Scorecard for the Forest Service and creating different versions for other USDA agencies, to build capacity to act and to drive agencies towards climate outcomes. The plan for a scorecard update could be announced Day 1 with the actual updates completed by May 1.

Performance measures and the Secretary's priorities should also be reflected in individual performance plans for SES employees and other senior leaders in USDA agencies. The plan to take this action may be announced Day 1, and SES performance plans should be updated in the 2022 performance cycle.

2 Key Program Opportunities and Recommendations

While USDA has historically not received the sustained political attention of other agencies that play a role in climate policy, the department's national footprint, broad loan and grantmaking authorities, and unrivaled ability to influence decision-making in rural America should make it a lynchpin of the next Administration's climate strategy.

Among other actions, USDA should promote natural climate solutions and build resilience by using existing authorities to create a Carbon Bank to incentivize and reward carbon sequestration activities by farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners; leveraging the nation's crop insurance programs to encourage climate-smart agriculture practices; and establishing a Wildfire Commission to establish and implement a comprehensive approach to addressing the growing threat of wildfires, particularly in Western states.

USDA's Rural Development programs invest $33.5 billion annually in the rural economy. These programs should be retooled to expand clean energy and smart grids in rural America, accelerate the retirement of coal power plants financed by the Rural Utilities Service, and promote methane digesters and low-carbon bioenergy. They can also be used to support restoration and outdoor recreation-related economic development in rural communities, including those transitioning from fossil fuel-based economies.

Finally, USDA is an important climate science agency, conducting important research and educating rural communities on climate impacts and effective solutions. Funding should be increased to USDA's climate science programs, including the regional Climate Hubs and to improve our understanding of carbon sequestration on working lands.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Issue a Secretarial order on climate change and rural investment (Day 1)

USDA staff have enormous potential to assist U.S agriculture, forestry and rural communities in climate mitigation and resilience, and should be directed to prioritize climate policy on day 1. A Secretarial order on climate change and rural investment can both establish climate change as a departmental priority while also framing USDA's interest in investing in agriculture, forestry, technology, innovation, and rural jobs. The order should do several things:

- First, the order should move the Climate Change Program Office out of the Office of the Chief Economist and into the Secretary's office.
- Second, the order should announce the establishment of the USDA Climate Policy and Rural Investment Advisory Board, a federal advisory committee to be comprised of farmers, ranchers, forest landowners, rural county officials, industry partners, tribes, minority landowner groups, and conservation groups, with the purpose of advising the Secretary on climate policy.
- Third, the order should direct all USDA agencies to report to the Secretary within 60 days on existing policies and programs that could be used to help farmers, ranchers, forest landowners, and rural communities address climate change while benefiting rural economic development.

The Secretary should additionally establish a Climate Strike Team (discussed in the previous section) to manage implementation of the Secretarial Order, which will be especially critical while awaiting Senate confirmation of appointees.

Invest in natural climate solutions on working lands (100 Days and ongoing)

Forests and agriculture can provide 10%-20% of the carbon sequestration and emissions reductions needed to meet net zero emissions by 2050. In addition, a range of stewardship practices by farmers, ranchers and forest landowners—including many of the same ones that sequester carbon and reduce GHGs—also improve the resilience of working lands to extreme weather and other consequences of a changing climate, while providing a host of other benefits, like clean water. However, climate smart practices—including conservation tillage, cover crops, improved nutrient management, reforestation, improved forest management, methane digesters for livestock, and others—require upfront capital investment, the ability to withstand a level of financial risk, and reliable information about appropriate agricultural and forestry practices.

USDA can accelerate adoption of climate smart practices, improve climate mitigation and resilience, and better support farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners by using the flexibility in current programs and seeking FY21-23 funds for climate smart agricultural and forest practices on working lands, including:

- **Establish a carbon bank (100 days).** A carbon bank would allow USDA to finance GHG reduction and carbon sequestration activities by producers and forest landowners. In essence, USDA would conduct a reverse carbon credit auction by offering to buy tons of carbon and GHG reductions from producers and forest landowners generated through improved land management practices. USDA can establish a carbon bank through administrative action by using existing authorities under the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), which has broad authorization to support, stabilize and protect farm income and prices and to support conservation, and which has been used in similarly innovative ways in the past.

  A USDA carbon bank would provide a guaranteed price for producers while guaranteeing the environmental integrity of carbon conservation practices. The CCC has up to $30 billion in borrowing capacity, about 60% of which is used annually for ongoing activities. If the CCC allocated even $1 billion annually towards purchasing carbon credits, at $20/ton, this could produce 50 megatons in GHG reductions annually. It will be important to build support for the creation of a carbon bank amongst Senate and House Agriculture Committees and Appropriators; if Congress subsequently passes legislation that creates a national compliance market for carbon offsets, additional legislative authority will be required to allow the USDA carbon bank to sell purchased carbon credits into that market.

  Using the CCC to create a carbon bank and incentivize carbon sequestration will likely be supported by agriculture and forestry stakeholders, and USDA should conduct outreach and seek their input on the design of the bank. USDA might consider piloting the bank in the first year while soliciting input from stakeholders to improve the workability and effectiveness of the approach. The intent to create a carbon bank could be announced in the first 100 days through the FY21 budget or separately. USDA should work with OMB to secure approval for using the CCC to create a carbon bank.

- **Fund climate smart practices through USDA conservation programs (100 days).** Climate smart practices on farms, ranches and forests can also be financed through existing Farm Bill conservation programs in year one. Through this approach, hundreds of millions of dollars could be better targeted to advance climate research and conservation, including through implementation of the Environmental Quality Incentive Program, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, the Conservation Reserve Program and other conservation programs. Because these programs are largely funded through mandatory appropriations, targeting funding for climate smart practices would not need to wait for the FY21 omnibus. For example, there will be room in the Conservation Reserve Program to immediately enroll 4 million acres of marginal cropland into contracts to restore grasslands, wetlands, and forests. A CRP commitment could be announced in the first 100 days and will garner strong support from hunting and fishing, conservation and other organizations.

- **Create incentives for climate smart agriculture through crop insurance policies (100 days).** The Federal Crop Insurance Corporation (FCIC) is a wholly owned government corporation managed by USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA). In 2019, more than 370 million acres of farmland were covered through the FCIC. Fourteen private-sector insurance companies currently sell and service policies through the FCIC, issuing

more than 1.1 million policies in 2019. Despite the growing awareness of the link between soil health practices and risk, RMA does not utilize soil data in designing products, determining rates, or setting guarantees. The 2018 Farm Bill put in place stronger USDA data management systems which give RMA the ability to study how conservation practices impact crop yields, farm and ranch profitability, and environmental outcomes. It also allows for performance-based discounts that could be used to incentivize conservation practices that mitigate GHGs. The AGree Coalition has worked to develop new insurance products that would promote soil health and benefit the climate and the first such products are available in Iowa. Far more can be done.

The incoming Secretary can direct the RMA Administrator to prioritize development of policy that will enable FCIC/RMA to incentivize climate-smart agriculture practices through crop insurance rates and policies. Given the importance of crop insurance to agriculture, care should be taken to ensure that commodity groups view this move as increasing options and incentives for producers. A report can be mandated within the first 30 days and completed in the first 180 days, with policy changes embedded during FY22. Measuring the potential GHG impact of this approach is very difficult, but it has the potential to influence management practices across tens of millions of acres, if not more.

WILDFIRE AND FOREST RESTORATION

America's wildfire problem is going to continue to get worse, resulting in loss of lives, homes, and natural resources—and thrusting USDA and the Forest Service into the national spotlight nearly every summer and fall. The wildfire problem has three causes: increased fuels in forests and grasslands due to past management practices, housing development in the "wildland-urban interface," which is leading to new and expanded settlements in previously uninhabited areas at risk of fire, and climate change. An incoming Secretary must be prepared to address wildfire emergencies in the short term and have a long-term plan to address the systemic threat, including through accelerated restoration of forests and grasslands, improved fire response, efforts to address the safety of people and firefighters, and sustained initiatives to engage Western governors productively in fire prevention and response and development in the wildland-urban interface which is inherently a state and local issue.

The Forest Service accounts for 70% of federal wildfire response spending, while Department of Interior agencies account for the remainder. Fire response is coordinated through an interagency team that also works with state forestry agencies. The Secretary will have at his or her disposal the best wildland fire-fighting force in the world and should rely on the skill and expertise of the Forest Service to manage the immediate needs of large-scale wildfire. At the same time, the Secretary should immediately work to develop a mid- and long-term strategy within the first 100 days that he or she can refer to and highlight when questions are raised about plans to reduce future wildfires.

- **Establish a Wildfire Commission (100 days).** The Wildfire Commission should be co-chaired by the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Interior, and a Democratic and a Republican Governor, and offer recommendations within four months to dramatically increase the pace and scale of forest restoration on federal, state, tribal and private forest lands, and to modernize firefighting response in the U.S., including improving firefighter safety and ensuring inclusive work environments. The Wildfire Commission should focus its recommendations on how to prioritize restoration of the highest risk acres that are most likely to result in high firefighting costs, and address the need for additional resources from Congress. On an ongoing basis, the Commission should work with governors and local communities on addressing new development in the wildland-urban interface and how to improve the ability of existing houses and other buildings there to withstand fire.
- **Set broad forest restoration targets (100 days).** The Secretary should establish concrete, outcome-based targets for restoring forests, moving beyond the current administration's sole focus on forest timber targets to more holistic performance measures for reducing risks to people and property, improving watershed health, maintaining long-term carbon sequestration on Forest Service lands, and significantly increasing the use of prescribed fire to reduce fuels and improve forest health. The Secretary should consider how best to move the agency from output targets to more integrated, outcome-based targets in this process; the

Climate Change Scorecard created by the Obama-Biden Administration is one approach to consider. Setting targets for landscape-scale restoration will motivate the Forest Service, in partnership with NRCS, Interior agencies and state agencies, to work towards meaningful forest restoration to lower the fire threat. In the first 100 days, the Secretary should also ask the Forest Service for a report, due by Oct 1, 2021, on how climate smart management should inform planning and project analysis, science prioritization, reforestation efforts, priority watershed work, conserving intact landscapes for biodiversity and connectivity, fire response, and supporting community resilience.

- **Work with Congress to enhance agency funding (100 Days and ongoing).** In 2018, Congress passed and the previous administration signed the "fire funding fix" first developed and proposed by the Obama Administration. The fix was intended to free up hundreds of millions of dollars for forest restoration. The previous administration then failed to add those dollars to the Forest Service budget, and Congress has not intervened to make the funding available.

  The Secretary should take three steps to address fire and forest management funding. First, he or she should immediately work to increase Congressional funding for forest restoration and resilience activities on the National Forests in any interim budget bill. Second, he or she should work with OMB to build a plan for full implementation of the fire funding fix into the President's first budget proposal. Specifically, the Secretary should identify Forest Service budget line items to be targeted for additional funding in the President's first budget proposal with a focus on those accounts that advance forest restoration and climate priorities. Third, in the FY2023 budget, using the above restoration outcome targets as a guide, he or she should work with the US Forest Service to develop a funding request to OMB and then Congress designed to hit these targets.

- **Promote markets for wood (100 days).** Markets for wood products can support restoration on federal lands and provide climate benefits. Wood is a climate friendly building material and, with appropriate safeguards, energy source. USDA should promote wood products, including new wood technologies used in tall buildings, wood pellets, and biofuels, as an environmentally friendly means to support healthy forests. As will be discussed later, USDA procurement policies are one means to do this.

LEVERAGE RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS TO DECARBONIZE RURAL ENERGY, PROMOTE LOW-CARBON BIOENERGY, AND MAKE CLIMATE SMART INVESTMENTS

Rural Development (RD) programs invest $33.5 billion annually into rural communities through loans, loan guarantees, and grants. The Secretary should incorporate climate criteria into relevant programs to advance clean energy, bioenergy, community resilience and other climate smart investments. The following ideas would provide enormous climate benefits while supporting rural jobs and economies.

- **Promote green energy and smart grids through the Rural Utilities Service.** Agencies within RD, including the Rural Utilities Service and Rural Housing Services, oversee a loan portfolio totaling more than $224 billion. USDA-RD can leverage those loans and more than 50 loan, grant, and loan guarantee programs to promote clean energy and energy efficiency in rural America.

- **Develop a plan to retire coal-fired power plants (100 Days).** USDA's loan portfolio has tens of billions of dollars in outstanding loans and loan guarantees to rural cooperatives for coal-fired power plants. Given the price competitiveness of renewables, USDA should look for ways to speed the retirement of coal plants in exchange for investments in renewable capacity. Doing so could reduce rates for rural customers, bolster rural economic development, and benefit the climate. The Secretary should ask RD to develop a plan to reduce rural utilities' debt in exchange for commitments to install renewable electricity. A report can be mandated within the first 100 days, with changes implemented to the loans beginning in FY2022.

- **Deploy distributed solar through the Rural Energy Savings Program (RESP).** The RESP provides incentives for distributed generation, including solar, but the statute requires a 10-year payback. USDA should ask Congress to provide more flexibility to improve the profitability of distributed solar power by adding language to either the FY23 appropriations bill or 2023 Farm Bill.

- **Expand smart grid technology.** Smart grids face challenges in rural areas because of insufficient broadband infrastructure to improve data on electricity usage. Some rural electric co-ops have begun providing broadband, which both increases their business opportunities and allows for the deployment of smart grid technology. The Secretary should task RD with developing a plan to combine broadband investments with smart grid technology by mandating a report within the first 100 days, with changes recommended to be implemented in FY2022 and beyond.
- **Accelerate renewable energy deployment.** The popular Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) and similar initiatives have significant climate benefits and receive mandatory farm bill funding, but are rarely funded at authorized discretionary levels by appropriators, despite the fact that REAP typically receives more applications than it can fund. The new administration should push for Congress to fully fund these programs and ask for more resources in their first budget submission to Congress.
- **Dramatically increase the adoption of methane digesters for livestock.** Methane digesters can capture livestock methane, turn it into energy, and help reduce nutrient run-off from agriculture. The National Renewable Energy Lab suggests that the U.S. could capture 1.9 million metric tons of methane per year from livestock waste by installing anaerobic digesters. USDA should develop a budget proposal in the FY2022 budget to help farmers install digesters.
- **Promote low-carbon bioenergy.** According to USDA research, the carbon footprint of corn ethanol is 30-40% better than gasoline, but it can be improved further. The Secretary should task NRCS with looking for ways to improve the environmental footprint of biofuels through climate smart agricultural practices. In addition, RD should explore ways to provide loan guarantees for ethanol plants that sequester CO2 emissions deep underground. A report can be mandated within the first 100 days, with changes recommended by the end of the year and implemented in 2022.
- **Continue investment and innovation in wood energy and DoD biofuels.** USDA should expand efforts to create demand for bioenergy.
    - **DoD biofuels.** Started during the Obama Administration, USDA has worked with other departments such as Defense and Energy to support clean energy, including next generation defense biofuels and aviation fuels.
    - **Wood energy.** Biomass energy has enormous potential to help address the challenge of finding markets for hazardous fuels in the west. Nationally, biomass energy can provide markets for low value timber and wood residues across all forest lands, thereby encouraging private landowners to invest in and maintain forests. While subject to external market forces such as the price and availability of natural gas, an incoming Secretary should consider pathways to support biomass energy.
    - **Buy bioenergy for USDA operations.** The Secretary could look for ways that USDA's facilities and vehicle fleet can purchase bioenergy.
- **Climate smart business and infrastructure.** The Secretary should task rural development staff to provide a report within 180 days on other ways that RD programs could support climate smart businesses and infrastructure in rural communities, including coal-mining dependent communities. For example, RD programs can support restoration and resilience businesses and resilient community infrastructure. The report should also build on direction from the 2018 Farm Bill Conference Report, which asked the Secretary to identify ways for RD programs to support the outdoor recreation economy, including through investments in outdoor recreation businesses, facilities, infrastructure, planning, and marketing.

REBUILD AND REFOCUS SCIENCE RESOURCES

USDA invests approximately $3.5 billion annually in research, data collection, technology and information dissemination. Authorities and capacities lie mainly within the Research, Education and Economics (REE) mission area with approximately 50 percent of that science and research funding flows to external research and education entities. The Forest Service and NRCS also make significant investments in natural resource research science. USDA's research mandate and business model should be updated to meet the challenges of climate change.

- **Increase Climate Hub funding.** USDA should seek significant increased resources for the Climate Hubs ($20-$40 million) in FY22 or FY23. The Climate Hubs provide regionally-specific research to farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to improve agricultural and forestry resilience and mitigation potential. This funding would support expanded staffing in the 10 regional hubs and improve state and local partnerships.
- **Use the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR) to help set the climate-related science agenda.** FFAR was created in the 2014 Farm Bill as a mechanism to increase investment in cutting-edge agricultural and climate change research through public-private partnerships. The Secretary should task REE staff to work with FFAR to prepare a report within 100 days that identifies gaps in climate change science and economic research relating to climate mitigation and resilience of agriculture and food systems, including food waste. The reports' recommendations may be implemented in 2021 and subsequent years.
- **Develop new technologies and tools through AGARDA.** The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill) established the Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority (AGARDA) pilot authority, with $50 million in annual appropriations authorized for FY2019-FY2023, to develop technologies, research tools, and products through advanced research on long-term and high-risk challenges for food and agriculture. Modeled after the successful ARPA-E program implemented by DOE, AGARDA focuses on R&D that private industry is unlikely to undertake. AGARDA can hire outside of U.S. Code competitive hiring provisions and can receive money from contributions or royalty payments. The Secretary should engage agricultural leaders on Capitol Hill to develop an FY23 or Farm Bill proposal to expand and continue funding AGARDA. A proposal can be developed by August 1 for inclusion in the FY23 budget request (announced February 2022) and implemented through successful passage in 2023.
- **Improve collection and analysis of data on carbon on U.S. lands.** While USDA already plays the central role among federal agencies in collecting and analyzing climate data on US lands, it can improve data on (1) carbon stores and sequestration on U.S. forests, cropland, pastureland, and rangeland, and (2) the link between conservation practices, climate resilience, and profitability, including by improving carbon data collection in the Forest Service's Forest Inventory and Analysis and NRCS's Natural Resources Inventory. The Agricultural Data Act included in the 2018 Farm Bill provides an opportunity, if fully implemented, to increase the knowledge of how conservation practices impact farm and ranch profitability (such as crop yields, soil health, and other risk-reducing factors) by improving collection, review, and analysis of data by USDA and by making those data available to land grant universities and other researchers. The Secretary should task staff from REE, the Forest Service and NRCS to prepare a report within 100 days that identifies steps to improve climate change inventory and conservation practice data across USDA. Implementation may occur beginning in FY2023.
- **Reinvest in funding and staff for Forest Service and NRCS research programs.** At least $50-$100 million in increased annual funding will be required to build science-based capacity to track and assess changing conditions, inform public land management and voluntary conservation practices, and to support the resilience of communities and businesses that rely on public and private land assets. Rebuilding workforce capacity and morale will also be critical for climate mitigation and adaptation, as discussed in more detail in the following section. A proposal can be developed by August 1 for inclusion in the FY23 budget request and implemented through successful passage in 2023.

3 Cross-Cutting Priorities and Relationships

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

- **Calibrate the climate message for maximum impact.** While agriculture leaders generally, if often quietly, acknowledge that climate change is impacting their livelihoods and communities, there is still resistance to climate science and policy in rural America. Polling and focus groups on rural attitudes on climate change show that (1) negative perceptions about government oversight of conservation and environment is highly correlated with opposition to climate action, and (2) many rural voters are repelled by hyperbolic language on both extremes of the climate debate. Climate messaging from USDA and leaders across the Administration should respect the values and contributions of USDA's stakeholders, and focus on increasing their capacity to be part of the climate solution.

  The Secretary should immediately organize listening sessions in partnership with agricultural and forestry groups on how climate policy can be designed to support the productivity of working lands and the economic resilience of rural communities. Key industry leaders, including in the recreation industry, and partners from the conservation community should also be included. In addition to holding DC-based listening sessions, the Secretary should immediately plan a rural community tour to engage stakeholders and USDA staff across the country. The incoming administration has an opportunity to advance the narrative of agriculture, forestry and rural communities as leaders in providing climate change solutions: providing early, meaningful, and ongoing opportunities for input and getting the messaging right will be key.

  Secretary Perdue has limited approval of members to existing federal advisory committees, and has not acted to create new advisory committees that could provide ongoing support and recommendations. The new Secretary should direct expedited review and approval of members to populate existing and relevant advisory committees, and should consider creating a new national federal advisory committee with broad representation among USDA's stakeholders to provide advice and support for climate priorities. The Secretary's team should start advisory review on Day 1 and complete the plan within the first 100 days.

- **Work with partners.** Under Secretary Perdue, USDA's relationship with partners who supplement USDA's workforce has suffered, including from a 2019 temporary freeze on cooperative agreements and new limits on internships. There are more than 15,000 partners who help agencies across USDA accomplish mission-critical work. The Secretary should make clear that USDA values work with partners and should restore the ability of USDA agencies to use existing authorities to work with partners and leverage federal dollars and staff. This message could be included in the Day 1 secretarial order. Because of the pandemic, many of these partners may currently be struggling to meet match requirements. The Secretary should consider using his or her authority on Day 1 to temporarily reduce or waive match requirements, and to support similar authorities in any legislation under consideration.

  The new Secretary should also consider how to build on prior and current work with partners on climate and sustainability initiatives. There may be work that has been done under this Administration that has value and stakeholder buy-in, and that would be beneficial to recognize and carry forward in some way that both reflects the new Administration's priorities, and values ongoing work and partner relationships.

  The Secretary will also be well served by building strong internal partnerships including with other Cabinet Secretaries and Administrators. In particular, a strong relationship with EPA is critical on a range of must-address issues, including water (quality, quantity, navigability, restoration); air (smoke from wildfire and prescribed burns); and biomass and bioenergy. Likewise, DOI and USDA are closely linked on a host of

landscape-scale conservation and restoration issues including, invasive species, carbon sequestration in trees and soil, wildlife conservation, and oil and gas production and mineral production on public lands, including national forests.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL COOPERATION ON NATURAL DISASTERS

Climate-related natural disasters, including extreme drought, flooding, and wildfires, are now occurring with regularity, and USDA is often at the center of these crises. It is critical to set up effective interdepartmental processes, relationships, and communications channels early, before a crisis strikes. For example, wildfires have significant air quality impacts, and close coordination with EPA can facilitate not only the polices needed to facilitate prescribed burns to aid in wildfire prevention but ensure health impacts are taken into effect. Fortunately, there is strong past precedent for natural-disaster based partnerships and coordination between agencies.

Following several years of extreme drought, President Obama initiated the National Drought Resilience Partnership, comprised of nine federal agencies, at USDA's urging. The NDRP model was considered a watershed success in inter-agency coordination and should be replicated. NDRP succeed due to several characteristics: (1) two tiers of leadership—political and career experts; (2) active sense of urgency, with EOP asking for products on a regular basis; (3) the right agencies around the table, including NSC, DOD and DHS; (4) clarity of mission (e.g., identification of how to best and most creatively use individual agency resources and align where applicable); (5) successful processes to hand off implementation to career staff.

The Secretary should also recreate and strengthen the USDA Water Team that existed under Secretary Vilsack, either as a complement to or under the leadership of the Office of Climate Change. This team should coordinate to address USDA's impact on water quality and availability across the country, informed by climate science.

4 Miscellaneous Recommendations

CLIMATE-RELATED PROGRAMS AND ISSUES DESERVING OF EARLY ATTENTION

USDA has existing programs and responsibilities that deserve early attention due to their sensitive nature or high profile. The Secretary should evaluate carefully which issues should be prioritized within the first 18 months and which issues, because of their political or administrative complexity, are better addressed mid-term or later.

The following abridged list of projects/programs include:

- **Roadless Rule application.** The Alaska Roadless Rule adopted by the current Administration exempts the Tongass National Forest from the 2001 Roadless Rule, thereby opening up more than 9 million acres to road-building. The Secretary should immediately issue an order requiring all projects in roadless areas receive sign-off by the Chief of the Forest Service before proceeding, and then reopen and revise the Alaska decision. The Tongass accounts for 2% of total U.S. forest acres but an estimated 6% or more of U.S. carbon stored in forests.
- **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).** Both the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and the Forest Service have NEPA revisions in process. The Secretary should revisit any decisions or pending proposals under USDA's authority, and provide USDA's perspective in any CEQ conversations on this topic. New direction should explicitly direct climate considerations and provide for public input.
- **Commenting on renewable fuel standard and low carbon fuel standards.** Renewable fuels are a critical issue to many in agriculture and offer an important opportunity to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through low carbon bioenergy. In addition to reflecting the President's position on the RFS, the Secretary may also be asked about issues related to the GHG footprint of ethanol and other renewable fuels relative to oil and gas. In addition, the question of the advisability of a low carbon fuel standard (that measures the carbon content of various fuels) will also likely be a topic that an incoming Secretary is pressed on.
- **Food security.** The current Administration has reduced food aid across a number of programs. Food insecurity is only going to increase as a result of climate change. The new Secretary will need to address many of the current Administration's changes to food-related programs, and should include consideration of how climate change will impact food security.

Appendix A: USDA Organization and Budget

- USDA is managed by 14 Senate-confirmed political appointees. Of those, the following are particularly important to climate change policy:
    - The Secretary of Agriculture, Deputy Secretary, Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation, Under Secretary for Trade and Foreign Agriculture Affairs, Under Secretary for Research Education and Economics, Under Secretary for Rural Development, General Counsel, Inspector General, and Chief Financial Officer.
    - In addition, the Secretary appoints several agency chiefs, administrators and executives that are not Senate-confirmed, including the Chief of NRCS, and multiple deputy undersecretaries. The Chief of the Forest Service, while appointed by the Secretary, is typically a career professional and can be carried over from prior administrations.
- USDA's Forest Service has the largest wildfire fighting agency in the federal government, with about $3 billion annually devoted to firefighting, including wildland firefighters, firefighting equipment, engines, helicopters and airtankers. Wildfires have grown dramatically in extent and severity over the last two decades as a result of climate change and increasing fuel loads. The Forest Service also leads the world in forestry research and manages 8.5% of US lands.
- USDA's Climate Change Program Office (CCPO) currently operates within the Office of the Chief Economist and functions as the Department-wide coordinator of agricultural, rural, and forestry-related climate change program and policy issues.
- USDA plays an important role in international climate talks in helping negotiate provisions affecting agriculture and forestry, and in providing inventory data on carbon sequestration and emissions in U.S. agricultural and forest lands. The Forest Service and the Foreign Agricultural Service also work directly with communities overseas, including on climate-related projects and assistance.
- In 2014, USDA established 10 regional "Climate Hubs." The Hubs are led by NRCS, ARS and Forest Service senior staff with contributions from many other programs including FSA, APHIS and RMA. However, they do not have sufficient or dedicated funding. The Climate Hubs link USDA research and program agencies in their regional delivery of tools and information to agricultural producers and professionals.
- USDA's Rural Development mission area, including the Rural Utilities Service, has provided loans to rural cooperatives to build power plants in rural areas and has the potential to provide incentives for more sustainable energy choices, invest in green infrastructure, and support more climate-resilient traditional infrastructure in rural communities.

Appendix B: High-Level Timeline

DAY 1

- Issue a Secretarial Order on Climate Change and Rural Investment to signal climate change as a top priority of the department, frame USDA's interest in investing in agriculture, forestry, technology, innovation, and rural economies, and to set agendas for policy and programmatic actions needed to act on climate. Move the Climate Change Program Office to sit within the Office of the Secretary.
- Work immediately with OMB and Congress to increase funding for USDA Climate Hubs in the FY21 budget and beyond.
- Create a USDA team to identify priority hires related to climate change at USDA.
- Mandate a report to examine the NIFA/ERA relocation and a second report examining the Trump Administration's removal of NRCS from the Natural Resources and Environment program area.
- Task Departmental Administration with creating USDA performance measures to track progress on actions to address climate change and providing a report in 100 days.
- Issue a Secretarial order requiring the Chief of the Forest Service to sign off on all roadless projects in Alaska National Forests and task a team to initiate planning a different direction for the Tongass National Forest.
- Address equity and morale by sending a clear message to USDA staff about the new Administration's appreciation for civil servants, and commitment to the principles of justice, equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility.

FIRST 100 DAYS (JANUARY 20–APRIL 30)

- Announce intent to create a carbon bank using the Commodity Credit Corporation to finance large-scale climate smart agriculture and forestry.
- Announce effort to fund climate smart practices through USDA conservation programs. Consider announcing a general sign-up under the Conservation Reserve Program.
- Request a report from RMA on potential to incentivize climate smart agriculture through the crop insurance program due in 180 days.
- Establish a bipartisan Wildfire Commission to offer recommendations to accelerate forest restoration, improve firefighter safety, modernize wildfire response and address development in the wildland urban interface.
- Request report from Forest Service on climate smart management of national forests.
- Promote green energy by asking RD to produce a plan in 100 days to address coal-fired power plants and encourage renewable energy.
- To advance smart-grid technology, ask RD to develop a plan to combine broadband investments with efforts to expand smart grids in rural areas.
- Ask RD, with assistance from NRCS, to develop recommendations in 100 days to dramatically increase deployment of methane digesters in the livestock industry.
- Ask RD for a report in 180 days on ways RD loans and grants can support climate smart business and infrastructure, including through investments in restoration and recreation economies.

- Task REE to work with FFAR to prepare a report within 100 days identifying gaps in climate change science and research.
- Task Forest Service, REE and NRCS to prepare a report within 100 days to improve carbon inventory data and conservation practice data for US forest and agricultural lands.
- Task Departmental Administration with producing a report in 180 days on how USDA procurement practices can support climate smart agriculture and forestry, renewable energy, wood markets, and other climate beneficial activities.
- Re-engage with international climate diplomacy through Forest Service and Foreign Agricultural Service, including by conducting foreign visits, welcoming foreign visitors, sending cables to overseas foreign-based staff.

YEAR ONE REMAINDER (MAY 1–DECEMBER 31)

- Work with Congress to enhance Forest Service funding to address wildfire.
- Work with Congress to increase flexibility in Rural Energy Savings Program to encourage distributed renewable energy.
- Work with Congress to fully fund the Rural Energy for America Program.
- Continue investment and innovation in wood energy and biofuels through USDA and other government procurement.
- Work with Congress to develop a proposal to fund and expand the Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority.
- Work with Congress to expand funding for Forest Service and NRCS research programs, particularly related to climate change.
- Work with other federal agencies and the White House on natural disaster response.