

Farm bill may expand climate-saving ‘agroforestry’

By Marc Heller

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Farming that puts crops, trees and sometimes animals all on the same land — and cuts climate emissions in the process — stands to make gains in the next five-year farm bill.

Groups pressing for that practice, called agroforestry, praised the farm bill framework recently proposed by Senate Agriculture Chair Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) and said they’re looking to forthcoming legislation in the House to promote it, too. Indeed, the Republican chair of the House Agriculture Committee seems to be on board to some extent.

Advocates were “floored” by the number of agroforestry provisions Stabenow included in the framework, said Cristel Zoebisch, director of policy at Carbon180, a group promoting carbon-saving farming practices.

The provisions include increasing annual funding for the Agriculture Department’s national agroforestry research center, establishing at least one regional center and giving the practice a bigger role in the Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers to take land out of production for row crops.

Stabenow also proposed \$1 million annually from 2025 to 2029 for a national agroforestry survey, which would be conducted every three years.

Whether the proposals survive the coming give-and-take between the Democratic-led Senate and Republican-led House remains to be seen.

House Agriculture Chairman Glenn “G.T.” Thompson (R-Pa.) will back regional agroforestry research centers, an agroforestry survey every five years and a greater role for the practice in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, said a spokesman, Ben Goldey.

“Chairman Thompson has been adamant about writing a bipartisan bill,” Goldey said, adding that the agroforestry items are priorities for Democrats.

Agroforestry as carbon sinks

Agroforestry covers a range of practices, from planting fruit or nut trees in pastures where animals graze, to growing crop-producing trees along river banks for watershed protection, to planting crops in forests.

It’s been part of farm bills, usually passed every five years, since the establishment of the National Agroforestry Center in the 1990 farm bill, said Ferd Hoefner, a farm policy consultant who specializes in conservation.

Over the years, researchers [have zeroed in](#) on agroforestry as an effective carbon sink and studied its practice worldwide.

“These programs come at a critical time when demand from farmers for support in agroforestry is at an all-time high. The public also benefits from improved soil health, water quality, wildlife habitat, and viability that successful use of trees on farms can provide,” the Agroforestry Coalition said in a statement responding to Stabenow’s framework. The coalition represents more than 90 organizations advocating the practice.

Agroforestry has been used for centuries by Indigenous populations, and has long been practiced in the U.S. by other names. The USDA said nearly 31,000 farms reported using at least one agroforestry practice in 2017.

[An early draft of a World Bank report](#) on reducing agricultural emissions ranks agroforestry high on the list of practices, along with biochar from crop residue and a combination of bioenergy and carbon capture.

In Congress, it's still viewed mainly as a Democratic priority, Zoebisch said. But Republican-heavy states such as Texas and Missouri lead the country in agroforestry, along with Thompson's home state of Pennsylvania.

Milk and sawdust in the veins

It's catching on in the corporate world, too. American Honda Motor Co. said on May 1 that it's planting 85,000 trees on 100 acres of land the company owns near manufacturing plants in Ohio.

About 22 acres of maple trees will be tapped for maple syrup, and thousands of hazelnut trees will provide future nut harvests, the company said. A third-party verifier will measure carbon sequestration on the land, the company said.

In the run-up to the farm bill, Zoebisch said her group has met with House Agriculture staff and noted the likely boost to the agroforestry center in the House version of the farm bill. But the subject has been a tougher sell there, she said.

Asked by E&E News about the issue, Thompson cited his support for both forestry and agriculture and added, "trees are crops," a refrain former Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue often used to promote timber harvesting during the Trump administration.

Thompson added, "When I'm out and about across the country talking agriculture and I'm introducing myself, I always tell folks that through my veins runs milk with sawdust in it."

The provisions lawmakers are considering for agroforestry are a positive move, especially in linking the practice to the Conservation Reserve Program and its long-term contracts of 10 or 15 years, Hoefner said. More could be done, he added, including additional USDA research on agroforestry as well as the use of biochar and other measures.

"These are all game changers for agriculture to be part of the solution to the climate crisis, but lag badly in attention and public investment."