Oppose Carbon Offset Scams Like the Growing Climate Solutions Act

April 14, 2021

Dear Members of Congress:

We, the undersigned organizations, encourage you to oppose the Growing Climate Solutions Act of 2021. While agriculture and land management can play key roles in addressing the warming climate, this legislation would allow greenhouse gas emissions to continue unchecked and would undermine efforts to build a healthy, sustainable, and resilient food system.

The Growing Climate Solutions Act would require the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to help agricultural entities generate carbon credits by certifying third-party verifiers and creating a “one stop shop” to educate and enroll farmers in third-party carbon markets. Power plants, refineries, and other polluters could purchase these carbon credits to offset their emissions, or even increase them, instead of actually reducing and eliminating them. Third-party verifiers have inherent conflicts of interest that would create a system ripe for fraud.

This legislation aims to build a framework for broad-scale development of carbon markets and to pave the way for a national cap-and-trade program. We oppose these carbon schemes for the reasons discussed below. Instead, Congress should invest in existing conservation programs to help transition farmers to more ecologically regenerative and resilient agricultural practices and systems — ones that do not facilitate more carbon offsets or carbon banks or rely on expensive and harmful chemical inputs, many of which are fossil fuel derivatives. Congress must also enact policies that require polluters to reduce and eliminate pollution at the source by stopping the expansion of oil and gas production and infrastructure, while investing resources to ensure environmental justice and a just transition to healthier, more sustainable communities.

**Agricultural and forest offsets are an ineffective policy for addressing the climate crisis**

These carbon offset schemes allow utilities, fossil fuel companies and other polluters to continue releasing greenhouse gases, instead of actually reducing and eliminating their emissions. This is because fossil fuel based carbon extracted from where it has been sequestered underground for millions of years, safely trapped in the slow carbon cycle cannot be offset by temporary actions in the short carbon cycle.

- The majority of the earth’s carbon is stored in geological formations in the form of fossil fuels. Carbon locked in these “slow-exchange” reservoirs take tens of thousands to millions of years to cycle back into the atmosphere — unless interrupted by volcanic eruptions or fossil fuel extraction and combustion.¹
- “Fast-exchange” reservoirs like soil and biomass have limited storage capacity and may re-release carbon in a matter of decades — or sooner from land conversion, unmitigated erosion due to flood episodes, or wildfires.²
- The fast carbon cycle (oceans, soil, forests) cannot absorb and sequester fossil fuel carbon pollution, as proposed through soil offsets, on the timescale of fossil fuels either

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prior to or after extraction. The Earth is not an endless sponge to absorb fossil fuel carbon. If it was, we would not have climate change.

- Methods for measuring soil carbon sequestration remain underdeveloped, inconsistent, and influenced by specific climates and geographies. There is simply no way to accurately estimate carbon sequestration because the fast carbon cycle does not function this way. Establishing a price for offsets consistent with integrity principles, including “permanent” and “quantifiable,” perpetuates a myth that agriculture can sequester fossil carbon quickly and definitively.

**Carbon offset programs are incompatible with sustainable agriculture and may drive further consolidation of farms and agribusinesses**

Carbon offsets allow fossil fuel polluters to continue polluting the climate, while undermining sustainable farming. In addition, differences between carbon reservoirs, lack of leverage for farmers, and potential for disproportionate benefits all demonstrate that carbon banks are not good for agriculture:

- Market-based carbon credit programs give additional leverage to already powerful corporations, including agribusinesses, that have long squeezed farm income and drained rural economies. Companies may continue to capture the majority of profits and valuable on-farm data at the expense of farmers.
- Carbon credit programs will likely be most feasible for larger operations, potentially leaving out smaller farms, farmers of color — including Black and Indigenous farmers and Tribal Nations — who are already underserved by USDA programs and Commodity Credit Corporation payments.
- Benefits of carbon payments would not extend to organic and other operations that have already invested in regenerative and/or agroecological practices.

**Carbon credit programs are ineffective at reducing emissions and pollute environmental justice communities**

Due to issues of flawed concepts of earth’s pollution absorbing capacity, impermanence, additionality, corruption, and market forces, carbon offset programs can increase emissions — of not just greenhouse gases, but also harmful co-pollutants like hazardous air pollutants, PM 2.5, and ozone precursors. This can be particularly acute in environmental justice communities when major sources of pollution rely on offsets instead of direct emissions reductions. Below are a few examples of such failures:

- A Stockholm Environment Institute report found that around 75% of offsets issued under the Kyoto Protocol were non-additional, meaning they would have occurred even

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without the program in place. Similarly, a USDA study looking at conservation tillage practices found that only about 50% were additional.\(^7\)

- A California Air Resources Board’s US Forest analysis found 82% of the credits reviewed “likely do not represent true emissions reductions” due to lenient accounting rules for leakage, resulting in an additional 80 million tons of CO2 emissions from over-crediting.\(^8\) The states in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, a multistate carbon offset program, increased gas generation by 11.2% during the first seven years of the offset program instead of accomplishing reductions, while renewables only increased by 2.1% over the same time period.\(^9\)

- A Food & Water Watch analysis found that states with carbon credit programs saw emissions of CO2 and PM 2.5 increase in environmental justice communities, while emissions went down in more affluent communities.\(^10\) For example, when carbon offsets subsidize manure digesters at factory farms, they incentivize the creation of methane — a far more powerful greenhouse gas than CO2 — along with other harmful pollutants including ozone-forming volatile organic compounds, nitrates, ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, and harmful air pollutants emitted when the factory farm gas is combusted, all of which disproportionately impact environmental justice communities.\(^11\)

- Researchers analyzing California’s cap-and-trade program found that 52% of facilities increased emissions of greenhouse gases and co-pollutants, while cap-and-trade sources were disproportionately located in communities of color.\(^12\)

- Carbon markets are open to fraud. A study in Nature identifies hundreds of millions of dollars in profits made by Ukrainian and Russian companies selling fraudulent credits into the EU Emissions Trading System.\(^13\)

Building Back Better in agriculture means building healthier food systems and rural communities

USDA has the necessary tools to build soil health, protect water quality, and avoid greenhouse gas emissions while boosting farm income:

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\(^10\) FWW. “Cap and Trade Hurts Environmental Justice.” December 2019 at 2.

\(^11\) FWW. “Biogas From Factory Farm Waste Has No Place in a Clean Energy Future.” July 2019 at 3.


- The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) pays farmers for practices that can build soil health and make farmland more resilient to a changing climate. Yet up to 85% of farmers vying for EQIP funding are turned away in a given year.\textsuperscript{14}
- USDA can close loopholes that enable unsustainable factory farms to capture conservation funding for use in other false solutions, such as building manure lagoons and creating factory farm gas operations.
- The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is an example that pays farmers to increase conservation in farming practices.
- Rather than funding ad-hoc practices, incentives can activate a comprehensive strategy promoting widespread shifts to organic, regenerative, and agroecological farming systems. Simply encouraging farmers to practice no-till agriculture, dependent upon fossil-fuel derived herbicides like glyphosate, for example, will not meaningfully reduce emissions or build healthy, resilient soil.

Instead of continuing the legacy of pollution through carbon markets, we encourage policies that eliminate pollution at the source and support local food economies, better living wages for farmers and farmworkers, and pathways for sustainable practices of food and energy production.

Congress needs to transition away from factory farming and large agricultural interests by increasing funding for conservation programs, and supporting farms in adopting regenerative practices that enhance soil health, protect biodiversity, and help make our food system more resilient to the climate crisis -- all without the use of counter-productive carbon pricing systems including offsets and banks. Black, Indigenous, Tribal, family farmers and ranchers need structural reforms that ensure fair markets and prices, and infrastructure that supports transitions to and sustainable continuance of regenerative farming. Ecologically regenerative farming should be incentivized in addition to, and not instead of, carbon reductions in the energy and transportation sectors. We urge you to oppose the Growing Climate Solutions Act of 2021 and support policies that will halt greenhouse gas emissions and empower rapid transition to a more just, healthy and sustainable future for all.

Sincerely,

Original Signatories:

Biofuelwatch
Businesses for a Livable Climate
Call to Action Colorado
CatholicNetwork.US
Family Farm Defenders
Food & Water Watch
Friends of the Earth

Indigenous Environmental Network
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
Loretto Earth Network
Organic Consumers Association
Progressive Democrats of America
Public Justice
Rapid Shift Network

Additional Signatories

198 methods
350 Butte County

\textsuperscript{14} Congressional Research Service. “Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): Status and Issues.” R40197. May 9, 2011 at Table 3 on page 8.
A Stone's Throw Bed & Breakfast
Agroecology Research-Action Collective
All Our Energy
Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE)
Animal Legal Defense Fund
Ashtabula, Geauga, Lake Counties Farmers Union (Ohio)
Athens County's Future Action Network, acfan.org
Benedictine Sisters of Erie
Beyond Pesticides
Beyond Plastics
Big Reuse
Brighter Green
Bronx Climate Justice North
Buffalo River Watershed Alliance
Campaign for Renewable Energy
Center for Food Safety
Central Jersey Environmental Defenders
Chemung County Mother's Out Front
Church Women United in New York State
CleanAirNow
Climate Hawks Vote
Coalition Against Pilgrim Pipeline - NJ
Coalition for Outreach, Policy, and Education
Coalition to Protect New York
Colorbrightongreen
CWA Local 1081
divinAmerica, llc
Don't Gas the Meadowlands Coalition
Earth Ethics, Inc.
Earthworks
Endangered Species Coalition
Environmental Justice Taskforce of the WNY Peace Center
Environmental Stewardship Committee of the New York Society for Ethical Culture
Environmentalists Against War
Erie Benedictines for Peace
Factory Farming Awareness Coalition
Fossil Free Tompkins
Fox Valley Citizens for Peace & Justice
Franciscan Action Network
FreshWater Accountability Project
Future Coalition
GAIA
Gas Free Seneca
GBC Sustainability Team
Global Justice Ecology Project
Green Delaware
Green Party of Nassau County
Green Party US EcoAction Committee
Green State Solutions
Greenpeace USA
GreenRoots
Hartford County Climate Action
Hilton Head for Peace
Hoosier Environmental Council
Howard County Climate Action
iEat Green, LLC
Indivisible Nation BK
Indivisible Ulster
Inner-City Neighborhood Art House
Institute for Policy Studies Climate Policy Program
John Muir Project of Earth Island Institute
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
Kickapoo Peace Circle
L&R Manufacturing
Labor Network for Sustainability
Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network
Long Island Progressive Coalition
MADRE
Milwaukee Riverkeeper
Morningside Gardens Green Committee for Environmental Sustainability
Mothers Out Front
Mothers Out Front - Long Island Team
Mothers Out Front, Croton Hudson, NY
Movement Rights
MoveOn.org Hoboken
Nassau Hiking & Outdoor Club
National Black Environmental Justice Network
National Family Farm Coalition
NC Council of Churches
New Jersey Tenants Organization
New York Communities for Change
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest
NOFA-NH
North American Climate, Conservation and Environment (NACCE)
Northeast Organic Farming Association - Interstate Council
Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont
Northern Plains Resource Council
Nuclear Age Peace Foundation
Nuclear Information and Resource Service
NY Climate Advocacy Project
NYCD16 Indivisible
Occupy Bergen County
Ocean Conservation Research
Orange Residents Against Pilgrim Pipelines
Organic & Regenerative Investment Cooperative
People Demanding Action
People for a Healthy Environment
People Over Pipelines
Peoples Climate Movement-NY
Pesticide Action Network North America (PANNA)
Physicians for Social Responsibility
Physicians for Social Responsibility FL
Plymouth Friends for Clean Water
Princeton Student Climate Initiative
Protecting Our Waters
Physicians for Social Responsibility AZ - Director
Putnam Progressives
Rachel Carson Council
Ramapough Lunaape Nation
Reach Out America
Regional Farm and Food Project
Residents Allied for the Future of Tioga (RAFT)
River Guardian Foundation
Rural Vermont
SCNY Office of Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation
Seneca Lake Guardian
Show Up LI
Sisters of Charity Federation
Sisters of St. Dominic of Blauvelt, New York
Slow Food North Shore
Slow Food USA
Socially Responsible Agriculture Project
SOMA Action
Stop the Algonquin Pipeline Expansion
Sustainable Tompkins, Inc.
Tampa Heights Acupuncture
The Banner
The Climate Mobilization North Jersey
The Corner House
The Wei LLC
Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue
Three Parks Independent Democrats
Thrive_At_Life: Working Solutions
Toxic Free North Carolina
Toxics Information Project (TIP)
United Native Americans
Wall of Women
Water Climate Trust
WESPAC Foundation, Inc.
www.Eco-Poetry.org
Zero Hour