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Farm Bill Climate Change Policies Could Help Or Hinder Sustainability Efforts



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It wasn't a hurricane that devastated Mark Doyle's apples this year. Rather, an unusually cold and wet spring in the Northeast had already done enough to force [Fishkill Farms](#) in Hopewell Junction, N.Y., to resort to federal crop insurance.

In the years ahead, farmers like Doyle can anticipate more damaging floods, [droughts](#), [heat waves](#) and pest infestations, according to climate scientists. Annual crop productivity, as notoriously unpredictable as it is, will likely become increasingly erratic and volatile.

"Insurance, subsidized by the USDA, is very well worth it," Doyle, head of development management for Fishkill Farms, told HuffPost.

There is consensus in the farm community that risk management is the key to the age-old problem of weathering year-to-year income variations caused by low prices and natural disasters, according to Doyle. And in its 2012 renewal, the [Farm Bill](#) is expected to oblige with beefed-up crop insurance as a replacement for the direct subsidies that farmers have received regardless of crop prices or yields.

"It's really clear that because of the frequency of extreme weather that climate change is creating, farmers are going to need an increased level of risk mitigation," said Julia Olmstead, senior program associate at the [Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy](#). "We are all for getting farmers what they need. But we're concerned that nobody is talking about the root causes of their increased risk. No one seems to be making that connection with climate change."

Olmstead recently co-authored [a report that outlines that connection](#) and warns of the potentially disastrous consequences for both the environment and the economy if the risks of climate change go disregarded.

Agriculture, she writes, is an "undeniably important focus for combating climate change."

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In May 2010, the [USDA's Risk Management Agency published a study](#) on the potential effects of climate change on crop insurance. "This was one of the first efforts to tie the economic model of crop systems with the climate forecast," said Bill Hohenstein, director of the [USDA's Climate Change Program Office](#). The analysis found that effects would vary, with agriculture in Alabama and Arkansas affected more negatively than west coast states, for example. However, as Hohenstein noted, the report only looked at average temperature and precipitation patterns. Extreme weather events were not included.

"We know enough now to know that changes in extreme events with climate change, whether droughts or floods, are costly to agriculture," Hohenstein said.

Some severe climate impacts are less noticeable to those outside of the agriculture industry, including "prolonged droughts followed by heavy rains" that "could reduce important pollinating insects and severely impact soil quality and increase pest infestations," notes the USDA report.

"One of the biggest fears is going to be pest invasion," Olmstead told HuffPost. "Almost all of the models show big increases, including some pests that we haven't seen before that are moving up from warmer climates."

California is already well acquainted with rise of crop-devouring insects, noted Jeanne Merrill, policy director for the [California Climate and Agriculture Network](#). The latest addition to the roster is the [stink bug](#), which arrived on the west coast just a few years ago. "This is certainly making farming a lot tougher," she told HuffPost

Merrill noted other troubling agricultural challenges that her state has experienced in recent years due to changing weather patterns and increasing water scarcity. Changes in California's winter chill, for example, have resulted in losses to fruit and tree nut production. The winter chill is essential for the growth of fruit and nut trees, but these temperature dips are becoming fewer and shallower in the state that has long been the country's largest supplier of both types of commodities.

While the climate can have a strong influence on a farmer's productivity, the farmer can also significantly affect the stability of the climate. Sustainable forms of agriculture may increase carbon sequestration while decreasing greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, an agriculture system that is dependent on fossil fuel-based fertilizers and pesticides, or greenhouse gas-emitting livestock, can further accelerate climate change.

"If you're emitting less, you're doing a big favor there to the climate," said Olmstead.

To achieve a sustainable truce with the planet, she suggests the need for more small- to mid-sized, diversified, [sustainable farms](#) that mix row crops with livestock and perennials. Depending on local conditions, drought-resistant varieties or buffer strips could be included.

Unfortunately, these tend to be the very farms that have a tough time securing crop insurance, according to Roni Neff, research and policy director at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's [Center for a Livable Future](#). As she explained, the insurance is allocated based on formulas that require a substantial history of yields and prices for each particular crop type grown in a particular county. "Those data may not be available for a diversified farm producing 20 types of crops," she said.

In addition, under the current Farm Bill, organic farmers have to pay a [5 percent surcharge](#) on insurance policies for some crops, and are only reimbursed at conventional prices, despite evidence that these sustainable operations are more climate-friendly and more [resilient when faced with climate-related disasters](#).

"If the Farm Bill is going to include an expansion of crop insurance, the only sensible thing to do is to also help farmers really mitigate the risks on their fields," said Olmstead. "If we don't do that, we put our food system at risk and expose U.S. taxpayers to huge outlays."

Currently, there are no limits on the amount of federal dollars that can be spent on crop insurance and no requirement for farmers to maintain [basic conservation practices](#) in order to qualify. "That seems pretty reckless," Olmstead added, "especially in this climate of extreme fiscal austerity."

In her paper, Olmstead compares the situation to providing a home owner with a fire insurance policy without requiring even

basic preventative measures such as smoke alarms or fire extinguishers. (The current Farm Bill offers an array of conservation programs that can help to mitigate climate-related risks, even if climate change isn't actually named as a factor.)

"We're looking at ways farmers can protect themselves against catastrophic risks," said Dale Moore, a farm policy specialist at the [American Farm Bureau Federation](#), the largest farming lobbyist organization. "Mother Nature is full of them and likes to put them in interesting combinations year in and year out."

"But I'm not sure one should be designing farm programs or crop insurance that are tied too much to some kind of climate change process until there's a little more concrete evidence behind it," Moore added. "There have always been extreme weather events. My granddad told me about extreme weather events."

As HuffPost has reported, science is solidifying the link between [climate change and extreme weather events](#). "We do need to come to grips, whether we like it or not, with a changing climate," David Degennaro, legislative and policy analyst at the Environmental Working Group. "We should build it into our policy and thinking."

The USDA's Hohenstein told HuffPost that the agency is continuing to improve its understanding of the physical impacts of climate change on crops -- while developing new strategies to tolerate these events, such as improved water management systems and drought-tolerant seeds.

An unheated, climate-controlled greenhouse called a [high tunnel](#) is another tool that could help farmers mitigate the effects of a changing climate. With the help of federal funds through the Farm Bill, Doyle is working to install a 100-foot-long version at Fishkill Farms.

"I'm anxious to try growing cherries inside," he said. "Because the weather is more erratic in the spring than it used to be, it's harder to get a crop of cherries. But if you put them under cover, there's a far better chance of getting the crop and reducing fungi and the need for spraying. It gets you much closer to producing organically."

"Over the next 50 years, we have to think of a way out -- a different kind of agriculture," added Dan Imhoff, co-founder of [Watershed Media](#). "Maybe we may eat fewer animal products and more foods with higher nutrient values. I think we can work towards solving both [public health](#) and environmental problems at the same time."

The fourth of a series looking at how the next Farm Bill could affect the food system, the environment and public health.

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