

USDA's 5-year research plan includes the words "sustainable" and "climate" but with a spin

When we read that Agriculture's Deputy Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics Scott Hutchins had announced the release of a new 5-year blueprint that included Sustainable Ag Intensification, and Ag Climate Adaptation as two of the 5 program themes, we were interested.

In the last decade we have seen a number of weather-related events that affect agriculture and are consistent with what we would expect as a consequence of global climate change. Crops like corn are being grown further north than ever before. Farmers have faced a greater number of extreme weather events than ever before. Widespread wildfires are now an annual event in some parts of the country.

At the same time many farmers and farm groups have worked to keep global climate change on the back burner or even off the stove at all. They have done so either because they do not believe that humans are playing a significant role in climate change or more likely they are opposed to any regulations that might force them to change their agricultural production practices.

But the announcement that the 5-year blueprint included sections titled "Sustainable Ag Intensification" and "Ag Climate Adaptation" had us hopeful that the USDA was going to address up to one of the most serious issues facing farmers today: a period of rapid climate change that leaves farmers in one area subject to widespread flooding while others are suffering from high temperatures and the lack of water. And these events are occurring more often than in the past.

The wording of two of the sections should have given us a hint of what was to come: nothing about sustainable practices. Not once did the paper give any sense that research in ag sustainability or sustainable practices were given serious attention. There were no items that suggested that sustainable practices might play a role in reducing agriculture's contribution to global climate change.

We would have thought that agriculture's role in climate mitigation would have been mentioned alongside Ag Climate Adaptation. But we were wrong.

We have no doubt that many scientists working at USDA take climate change seriously and are working on the role that ag can play in mitigating global climate change. Likewise, we are sure that most of the scientists who are submitting grant proposals to the agencies under Hutchins believe that their research will make a difference in helping farmers make their operations more sustainable and contribute to climate mitigation.

What troubles us is that this administration's official stance of denying the role of humans in climate change and the need of all of all US citizens to play a role in reducing the risk climate change poses, places conscientious scientists in a bind when they apply for USDA grants. Though the results of their research may play a significant role in mitigating climate change, they need to hide that fact when they write their grant proposals.

Given the recent dismissals of military and diplomatic officials by the White House we are concerned that scientists who acknowledge the impact of their research on climate change could see their consideration for future grants limited. That would not be in the interest of farmers who want to use the latest research to reduce or eliminate the impact of their agricultural

operations on the climate. It would also not be in the best interest of our children, grandchildren and all future generations.

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Dr. Harwood D. Schaffer: Adjunct Research Assistant Professor, Sociology Department, University of Tennessee and Director, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center. Dr. Daryll E. Ray: Emeritus Professor, Institute of Agriculture, University of Tennessee and Retired Director, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center.

Email: hdschaffer@utk.edu and dray@utk.edu; <http://www.agpolicy.org>.

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