



About Julia Olmstead

Julia Olmstead is a Senior Program Associate in the Rural Communities program at IATP. Her work focuses primarily on biofuels and the bioeconomy. Julia has spent much of the last ten years working both domestically and internationally on issues related to sustainable agriculture and the bioeconomy as a journalist and scientist, as well as in industry. Her writing on agriculture and biofuels has appeared in magazines and newspapers nationwide including the Los Angeles Times, Des Moines Register, and Smithsonian Magazine.

About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with an office in Geneva.

Why agriculture and the climate bill don't mix

MINNEAPOLIS, SEPTEMBER 18, 2009 — It seems everyone is in a tizzy over agriculture and the climate change bill. Environmentalists are mad about concessions given to farm-state legislators to get the bill—known as “Waxman-Markey,” after its two principal sponsors—through the House last July. The industrial farm lobby is mad about the climate bill generally, worried it will raise energy costs. And farmers are unsure how, if at all, they will benefit from the offset credits they could receive, and what they would need to do to get them.

It is high time we took steps as a nation to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Tackling climate change is perhaps one of the most important and difficult challenges we have faced as a society; but including agriculture in the Waxman-Markey bill is bad for farmers, eaters and the planet.

For the bulk of human history, we've grown food, fiber and energy without reconfiguring the atmosphere, but the industrial revolution made the bulk of agriculture highly dependent on fossil fuels. Today in the U.S., agriculture accounts for about 13 percent of our nation's total greenhouse gas emissions, and it also contributes heavily to soil erosion, water contamination and the loss of biodiversity—but it doesn't have to be this way.

Waxman-Markey has recognized agriculture's enormous potential to not only mitigate the ills it has caused, but to also act as a carbon sink. This is the basis for the bill's carbon offsets program for agriculture, where farmers would receive government credits for doing things like tilling their soil less and planting trees on cropland. Polluting industries and investors could buy these credits, in theory helping fund these on-farm carbon-sequestering activities.

This program is troubling for several reasons. Technically, carbon offset projects are notoriously difficult to measure and verify—making the incentive for change subject to the whims of a speculative market dominated by Wall Street banks, making it awfully difficult to ensure that offsets will be a long-term, reliable solution to climate change. Falling carbon offset prices would be poor incentives for farmers to switch to climate-friendly agriculture practices. It is hard to envision this having much of a positive impact—for farmers or the planet.

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Agriculture is among our greatest achievements and one of our most precious resources. It gives us season after season of food and fiber. Done right, it builds healthy soils, helps purify our drinking water, provides wildlife habitat, and yes, even helps mitigate climate change. With support, agriculture creates livelihoods for farmers, helps preserve the culture and knowledge of food production, and promotes an ethic of land stewardship and preservation. And let's be clear, good farming has been the basis for a sustainable planet for centuries. Agriculture should in no way be given a free pass when it comes to climate change mitigation, but it is not the source of the climate change problem.

Making Waxman-Markey a primary vehicle for debating agricultural sustainability schemes distracts from making real progress toward more climate-friendly, sustainable agriculture, and takes away much needed resources.

We should not aim to define agriculture's role in our society through a climate bill. Instead, we should begin a separate, equally urgent process to decide how best to promote agricultural systems that provide us with the kind of farms, rivers, livelihoods, and climate we value as a society. The USDA's Conservation Stewardship Program, which pays farmers for sustainable practices on working, productive lands, provides one good place to start such conversations. Expanding such programs should be a clear priority for policymakers and the public, but ultimately, agriculture policy will have to reach much further, to a vision and scale that match the historic challenges we face.

Let's push forward with strong climate policies, but let's not use agriculture to circumvent the source of the problem. Our food system is too precious. We already know that agriculture can benefit us all; let's find a way to make certain that it does.

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