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How to Build a Climate-Friendly Food System Sustainable Agriculture is Key, New Report Finds

Minneapolis – Sustainable practices in agriculture, combined with the development of local food systems, can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S. food system, finds a new paper by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

The paper, "Identifying our Climate `Foodprint,'" by Jennifer Edwards, Jim Kleinschmit and Heather Schoonover (iatp.org), looks at the entire food chain and identifies opportunities to shift toward a more climate-friendly system. The paper concludes that U.S. industrial farming systems that depend on massive resource inputs for crops and livestock are by far the largest emitter of greenhouse gas emissions throughout the food chain.

"Agriculture is in a special situation when it comes to climate change. It is significant both as a source of emissions and as a sector already feeling the effects of global warming," said Jim Kleinschmit, director of IATP's Rural Communities program. "The good news is that by transitioning toward more sustainable practices on the farm, we can better adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change."

The paper outlines recommendations for climate-friendly practices in agriculture production, food processing, food transportation, and food consumption and disposal, including:

- agriculture production: reduce external inputs, especially synthetic and fossil fuel-based chemicals and energy, minimize on-farm energy requirements and compost animal manure;
- processing: minimize packaging, increase energy efficient processing facilities;
- transportation: minimize distance transported and create regional distribution systems;
- food consumption: consider low-impact food options, avoid food waste and spoilage, and keep food waste and scraps out of landfills.

"Many farmers, food companies and consumers are already implementing climate-friendly practices," said Kleinschmit. "Now we need smarter public policy to make the larger systemic changes we need."

Policy discussions are currently taking place at the local, national and international levels to address climate change. Many U.S. cities, states and regions have put forth strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The U.S. Congress is debating climate legislation this year, and President Obama has expressed his commitment to a climate plan. And in December, governments from around the world will meet in Copenhagen to discuss a global agreement on climate change.

IATP works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems.