



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack's Remarks at the G-20 Open Forum on Sustainable Agriculture Environmental Sustainability Panel

As Prepared for Delivery

FLORENCE, September 16, 2021 – The world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic and its social and economic repercussions. The current global situation underscores the need for us to come together and act urgently and comprehensively to end hunger and poverty, face the challenges of climate change head on, and build more sustainable, equitable, and resilient food systems.

I'm reminded of a saying that goes: *"We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our grandchildren."*

How do we rise to the challenge of simultaneously sustaining our planet, sustaining our people, and sustaining the lives and livelihoods of our agricultural producers? It's time to take a fundamental look at how we grow, distribute, and trade food, fiber, feed, and fuel.

To successfully feed a growing world population, it's clear that we need to scale up production while minimizing impacts on our natural resource base. If we are going to produce more, while using and polluting less, we must commit to developing and deploying new ways of doing things in agriculture.

As we set our sights on sustainable productivity growth, we must continue to invest in agricultural research and development to promote more efficient and climate-smart use of natural resources in agriculture. By leveraging evidence-based innovation and science, including biotechnology, we can expand the toolbox for farmers, fishers, foresters, and other producers to improve sustainability and resilience throughout food systems.

But innovation is about more than just science and technology. It's also about embracing a circular economy and market-focused approaches to sustainability. It's about systems and solutions that are good for farmers, good for consumers, good for our communities, and good for our planet.

At USDA, we are looking at opportunities to expand the voluntary adoption of practices that put agriculture at the heart of tackling climate change and fostering sustainability. We're taking a multi-pronged approach that covers research, outreach and education, conservation incentives for farmers and foresters through existing programs, and support of new markets for environmental benefits generated by the agricultural sector.

Part of the fundamental rethinking of our ag and food systems involves moving from a linear to a circular economy, where we are not just extracting and consuming finite resources but also regenerating them in a sustainable matter. What does that look like?

On the production side, many of our farmers, ranchers, and foresters are already paving the way and demonstrating the benefits of regenerative agricultural practices. Things like improving soil health to enhance carbon retention and reduce nutrient leaching, planting cover crops that help fix nitrogen and establish biomass, reusing and recycling water and wastewater, and converting livestock waste to energy through methane digestion.

We must support and incentivize such practices – not only because this is an environmental opportunity, but because it’s also a market opportunity. It’s what consumers want – and what farmers, and our planet, need.

USDA is working to expand domestic and international markets for commodities produced in climate-friendly, sustainable ways, as well as for bio-based products. We’re looking at markets for carbon benefits generated by the agricultural sector. We’re also working towards green rural infrastructure to scale renewable energy on and from farms, to reduce energy use and costs in rural communities, and to grow the bioeconomy.

While doing so, we are paying special attention to including access by small, disadvantaged, and beginning farmers and ranchers, in addition to those early adopters who have paved the way and demonstrated the agronomic and societal benefits of agricultural conservation.

As we discuss how to balance the environmental, economic, and social aspects of sustainability, we’d be remiss if we didn’t also recognize the importance of open markets and trade. Well-functioning markets at the local, regional, and international levels bolster food security and sustainable food systems. They are also key to expanding income opportunities, stabilizing food supply, ensuring food affordability, minimizing food loss and waste, and improving dietary diversity and nutrition.

We look forward to the day when we have trade agreements that remove unfair barriers to trade and rein in the most distorting – and environmentally damaging – kinds of subsidies.

For right now, we recognize many countries share our goals on sustainable and climate-smart production. It is critical that we encourage the development of markets for these products and guard against trade barriers that discriminate against particular production practices even when the system is delivering positive outcomes.

As I wrap up, I want to highlight two near-term opportunities for all G20 members – and your food systems stakeholders – to demonstrate your commitment to sustainable agricultural production and climate solutions.

First, at the Food Systems Summit next week, the United States will be advancing a new coalition to help elevate sustainable productivity growth as a strategic action priority. We must get together and get behind action for productivity growth that advances social, economic, and environmental objectives – and the new Coalition of Action for Sustainable Productivity Growth for Food Security and Resource Conservation is one way to do that.

I also urge you to join the United States and the United Arab Emirates as part of the Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate, or AIM4C, which will be advanced at the Food Systems Summit next week and launched at the COP26 in November. This is a landmark initiative to accelerate global agricultural innovation through increased investment in research and development, leading to innovative, science-based solutions to help agriculture mitigate and adapt to climate change.

In closing, I want to emphasize again that by embracing and investing in innovation in all its forms, by ensuring that all food systems stakeholders – including agricultural producers – have a say in developing solutions, by facilitating trade, and by forming coalitions to take action on key environmental and climate concerns, we can and will make a difference.

We as Agriculture Ministers have a tremendous opportunity. Let's take it – and let's work together to return the Earth to our children in better condition than we borrowed it.