

# ‘Growing Climate Solutions Act’ gives farmers a seat at the carbon market table

By **Guest Column** - September 10, 2020



*The sun sets over a hazy mountain ridge in Highland County. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)*

**By Robert Whitescarver**

At last, farmers and foresters might have a seat at the carbon market table. Bipartisan legislation was introduced in both the U.S. Senate and House to create incentives and remove barriers for farmers and foresters to receive credits for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing soil organic carbon.

The “[Growing Climate Solutions Act](#)” will empower the U.S. Department of Agriculture to create new programs for farmers and foresters that support greenhouse gas reductions and carbon sequestration. The bipartisan legislation was introduced on the House side by U.S. Reps. Abigail Spanberger and Tom Bacon, R-Neb. In the Senate it was introduced by Sens. Mike Braun, R-Ind., and Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I.

As a long-time soil health professional, farmer and an environmentalist who cares about the land, I totally support the legislation and encourage others to study and support it, as well.

If enacted and carried out, it will reduce greenhouse gases, improve soil health, reduce emissions and create jobs who work the land credits and payments for good stewardship — creating a pathway while ensuring more sustainable farms and forests.

Oceans are the largest carbon sink on Earth, followed by our soil and forests. Plants — grasses, corn, soybeans, seaweed, algae — all of them literally take carbon out of the air and store it in their tissue. Yep, good ol' photosynthesis. Plant residues left on the land and land put that carbon into the soil — the second largest carbon sink on earth. Trees of course are a carbon sink, store carbon as wood and roots.

Sustainably raised livestock also play a key role in advancing carbon sequestration. Grass-eating ruminants are essentially mobile carbon sequestration enhancers and fertilizer factories. When they come out the back end they are placing digested grass back on the land, carbon and a

Putting carbon on and in the soil increases soil organic matter. That's a good thing because soil organic matter can retain more moisture, resist erosion more efficiently and recycle nutrients. The higher the soil organic matter, the healthier the soil.

It has been shown that a 1 percent increase in soil organic matter can sequester about 100 pounds of carbon per acre. Using plants to take carbon out of the air and then leaving most of the plant on the land is a great way to do this. For example, a farmer that grows corn for grain can harvest the ear of corn and leave the rest on the land. That dead cornstalk is loaded with carbon. Left on the land it will intercept the sun's rays, helping reduce soil erosion. When the cornstalk decomposes it adds organic matter to the soil. In fact, when we speak this is referred to as plant residue use.

Other plant residue use practices include leaving wheat straw and soybean stubble or harvesting it and feeding hay to cows.

The "Growing Climate Solutions Act" lists the following practices that may qualify for carbon credits or carbon sequestration: plant residue use, emissions reductions derived from energy efficiency, livestock emissions reductions, on-farm energy generation, energy feedstock production, reforestation, forest management, avoidance of forest conversion, grassland rotational grazing and other practices deemed appropriate by a newly formed advisor.

Overall, U.S. farmland soil is capable of sequestering 650 million metric tons of carbon annually, which is 11 percent of America's greenhouse gas emissions, according to a report published by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The soil and forests are the most practical and available carbon sinks. And it makes sense to use the most soil — farmers and foresters — to use plants to capture carbon from the air and

The “Growing Climate Solutions Act” is supported by a wide range of farm, environmental organizations including the Virginia Farm Bureau Federation, the Virginia Agribusiness Cattleman’s Association, The Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation, Virginia Voters, Chesapeake Bay Foundation and many others.

I urge my fellow Virginians who are concerned about the future of agriculture and our representatives in Congress and encourage them to support this commonsense legislation.

*Robert “Bobby” Whitescarver was named “soil health champion” in the National Association of Districts Soil Health Network, author, farmer and educator at James Madison University. You can find more information through his website at <http://www.gettingmoreontheground.com>*

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**Guest Column**

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