**Headline:** How California’s Farmers and Ranchers Could Lead the Way to Climate Resilience

**Teaser:** A platform of California Climate and Agriculture Network would move billions of dollars into the hands of farmers and ranchers willing to adopt regenerative food and farming systems.

By April M. Short

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**[Article Body:]**

When it comes to climate change contributors—like [greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions](https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2019/12/farming-food-and-climate-change-batini#:~:text=As%20a%20result%20of%20all,according%20to%20the%20IPCC's%202019) and [water pollution](https://www.unwater.org/news/water-pollution-agriculture-global-review)—large-scale farmers and ranchers are among the [worst culprits](https://investigatemidwest.org/2019/09/27/agriculture-is-one-of-the-biggest-contributors-to-climate-change-but-it-can-also-be-a-part-of-the-solution/) in the U.S. and worldwide. However, these very farmers and ranchers could wind up leading the way out of the ecological [nightmare](https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2019/2/22/18188562/climate-change-david-wallace-wells-the-uninhabitable-earth) humans have created, and toward an equitable, livable future.

“Farmers and ranchers—with policies and funding that help them take risks and try new approaches—can make the transition to climate resilience,” says Renata Brillinger. She is co-founder and executive director of the California Climate and Agriculture Network (CalCAN), a coalition working since 2009 to advance state and federal policies that support sustainable and organic agriculture to catalyze climate solutions.

“These are ‘no-regrets’ solutions that offer many environmental benefits while improving the health and profitability of farmers and rural communities,” she says. “Investments made now will return huge dividends over time.”

Brillinger is referencing the solutions proposed by the report, “[A Climate Platform for California Agriculture](https://caagricultureclimateplatform.org/),” comprising two parts—[State of the State](https://caagricultureclimateplatform.org/state-of-the-state) and [Tools for Transformation](https://caagricultureclimateplatform.org/tools-for-transformation). CalCAN compiled the platform to outline the current ecological issues being faced by agriculture, the enormous potential of the industry to bring about the changes and solutions needed to combat the impacts of agriculture on climate change, and the specific channels of funding necessary for these solutions. The report calls for $1 billion to be invested per year in sustainable, regenerative agriculture in the state.

The platform, guided by a panel of 16 multidisciplinary reviewers, is the result of “a tremendous amount of consultation and listening,” Brillinger says. More than 60 farmers, researchers, agriculture professionals, and advocates weighed in with creative solutions and insights. She says the most rewarding part of the project has been this “community of thought leaders working on multi-beneficial, nature-based approaches to growing food.”

At its outset, the platform’s website [invites](https://caagricultureclimateplatform.org/) the state’s “policymakers, journalists and stakeholders” to get involved to support climate-resilient agriculture systems, stating that the platform “is a call to action to work together towards a climate-resilient future.”

**A Call for Urgency**

As demonstrated by the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020, our globalized food systems are already [fragile and frayed](https://observatory.wiki/Here%E2%80%99s_How_We_Can_Localize_Our_Increasingly_Fragile_Food_Systems). Scientists agree that climate change will only continue to worsen, which will cause significant additional [strain](https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/climate-change-and-the-future-of-food/) on our food systems. Experts at the World Economic Forum [predict](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/03/polycrisis-adam-tooze-historian-explains/) that climate change and the problems it creates, including food system collapse, will be the number one crisis humanity faces in the coming decade.

Brillinger says climate change is already “creating widespread disruptions in our food and farming system.”

“Farmers and ranchers face unprecedented challenges with increasingly scarce water, extreme heat, flooding and wildfire events, and unpredictable weather and pest patterns. Even experienced farmers are struggling to stay in business and new farmers face not only climate-related challenges but also a lack of access to affordable, secure land,” she says, noting that this combined with ongoing structural and discriminatory barriers, most heavily impacts farmers of color and communities that are already struggling the most.

“Climate-related crop losses are on the rise, driving up food prices and contributing to an increase in the number of people who are food insecure and hungry,” she says. “Farmworkers are on the front lines, exposed to unhealthy air and facing the reality of working on more dangerously hot days. They and their families and communities are among California’s most economically vulnerable people and also often lack access to healthy food, safe drinking water, and homes that are affordable, air-conditioned, and energy efficient.”

The high stakes of the moment, she says, call for prioritizing an urgent reenvisioning of the way we grow food.

Brillinger says while California has made some relatively significant progress to incentivize farmers and ranchers to adopt practices that benefit the environment, “there is a long way to go to reach the state’s various 2030 climate goals. The [platform] is a call to act with more urgency and ambition.”

About 15 years ago, CalCAN came about as a result of the state’s Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 ([AB 32](https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/resources/fact-sheets/ab-32-global-warming-solutions-act-2006)), a landmark piece of legislation that established a 2020 greenhouse gas reduction target.

Brillinger says much of the money invested in green solutions following AB 32 focused on solutions in “renewable energy, electric vehicles, and projects in urban areas,” explaining that CalCAN came together as a coalition to make the case for public investments in sustainable agriculture.

Over the years, CalCAN has had notable success; Brillinger notes that since 2009 California has developed various grant programs to fund healthy soils and water conservation practices, alternative manure management technologies that reduce methane emissions from dairies, and a farmland conservation program to limit greenhouse gas-intensive urban sprawl.

Brillinger says that between 2017 and 2023, California invested about $800 million in sustainable agriculture, which she notes is “a good start but insufficient.” She says to date, the money to support sustainable agriculture in California has come from the state’s cap-and-trade program, the general fund, and some from a natural resources bond measure.

In 2023, under the Biden administration, “the federal government finally started to fund agricultural climate solutions, notably through the Inflation Reduction Act that includes $20 billion over five years,” Brillinger says.

In one of the sections of the platform called, “[Funding the Transition](https://calclimateag.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CalCAN_Tools-for-Transformation-8-Funding-the-Transition-2023.pdf),” CalCAN delves into the funding sources mentioned above, as well as additional sources that could make up the $1 billion per year the organization has determined necessary to implement strategies outlined in the platform’s report.

“This may sound like a lot of money, so as a reference, consider that California spends about $1.1 billion per year on residential energy efficiency, $3.7 billion on wildfire resilience, and $2 billion on drought and flood management,” Brillinger points out. “We see the money coming from a variety of public, private, and philanthropic sources, including the sources described above that are already being tapped.”

Brillinger shared three examples of the potential funding sources:

1. The state legislature is in the final stages of deliberating over a multi-billion dollar climate bond measure that will likely be on the November 2024 ballot—for three years, we have been part of a [coalition](https://resilientfoodsystem.org/) advocating that it should include $3.7 billion for climate-smart agriculture, farmworker housing, and regional food infrastructure.
2. The state legislature should assess levying additional fees on fossil fuel-based pesticides and fertilizers to support research, technical assistance, and incentives that transition our farming system away from these GHG-producing inputs.
3. The [federal Farm Bill](https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/Farm_Bill/) reauthorization process currently underway presents opportunities to increase federal investments that benefit all farmers in the country. CalCAN is [co-leading](https://calclimateag.org/currentcampaigns/) an effort to include $1.5 billion in the Farm Bill to fund alternative manure management practices, modeled on California’s successful program (more on the COWS Act [here](https://calclimateag.org/currentcampaigns/cows-act/)).

She says the biggest challenge in creating the platform was deciding which recommendations to include.

To “narrow the options,” Brillinger says, CalCAN used the following principles to zero in on the most effective paths to agricultural climate resilience:

Climate Health—Farms and ranches adapt to and recover from climate shocks and are net sinks for GHGs rather than net sources.

Ecological Health—Food is produced in balance with natural resources while maximizing biological diversity.

Economic Health—Farmers and ranchers are profitable and productive, and the economies of rural communities are thriving.

Farmland Health—Productive agricultural land is permanently protected and there is abundant access to land for new and racially and culturally diverse farmers.

Human Health—The people who grow our food have safe working and living conditions and adequate wages and affordable housing, and rural communities have clean air and water and healthy food.

**Addressing Inequity**

The platform includes more than 50 policy recommendations, a summary of which is provided by an “[at-a-glance](https://calclimateag.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CalCAN_Rec-Glance-All.pdf)” sheet. An [executive summary](https://calclimateag.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ExecSummary_CalCAN_Tools-for-Transformation-full-report-2023.pdf) of the report lists the “Tools for Transformation” required to develop these policy recommendations, including a section on “Addressing Systemic Inequity.” This part, Brillinger says, is essential to the larger goal of climate resilience in agriculture because we all fare better when the poorest and most vulnerable communities are taken care of.

“In California agriculture, there can be no resilient food production without investing in the health and well-being of the predominantly low-income Latino immigrant farmworkers who plant, tend, harvest, and process our food,” she says. “A truly resilient future must be centered on farming strategies that not only have climate benefits but also improve air and water quality and the health of farmworkers, their families, and rural communities.”

Brillinger adds that it is also the government’s responsibility to “redress past harms.”

“In agriculture as in all other aspects of our society, the current realities such as who owns land and who has rights to water are the result of a historic pattern of systemic racial injustice that includes the genocide of Indigenous peoples, the exploitation of various groups of immigrant laborers, and discriminatory laws that made it difficult or impossible for farmers of color to own farmland,” she says.

“The impact of these injustices continues to this day and has resulted in a vast consolidation of land and water resources that severely limits the ability of farmers of color, farmworkers, and the next generation of small family farmers to thrive and scale up agricultural climate solutions. Our ability to address these constraints and the continued pattern of racial discrimination will determine how meaningfully and quickly we will be able to move toward a future that includes a truly equitable, healthy, and resilient food and farming system.”

**Weaving Existing Solutions**

Much of what the platform recommends involves connecting people across various fields of expertise, and across different focuses, and creating networks and webs of resilience. Examples of these kinds of cross-pollinating solutions, so to speak, already exist in real-life ways. For instance, Brillinger says she is excited about a network of Soil Health Hubs that began launching in California in 2023, as a result of a collaboration between the [California Association of Resource Conservation Districts](https://carcd.org/) and the [Carbon Cycle Institute](https://www.carboncycle.org/) (a nonprofit organization and member of the CalCAN coalition). One example of these networks is the [North Coast Soil Hub](https://soilhub.org/), which connects people working toward soil health in six northern California coastal counties: Humboldt, Lake, Marin, Mendocino, Napa, and Sonoma.

The idea, she says, is that an interconnected set of hubs around the state—connected to the best science, innovative growing techniques, technical expertise, and public funding sources—can bolster farmers already looking to reduce climate impacts.

Brillinger shares that CalCAN is leading a similar effort nationwide: the [National Healthy Soils Policy Network](https://www.soilpolicynetwork.org/), which is a group of farmer-centered organizations in 27 states working on healthy soils practices.

“As in California, this group is working on developing a network of regional hubs, each serving several states, to increase access by underserved farmers to state and federal climate and agriculture funding and programs,” she says.

Brillinger notes that Indigenous peoples have been growing food in regenerative ways for thousands of years, “while staying in balance with natural resource limits and coping with unpredictability, pests and diseases, and weather extremes.”

“They did so without the use of fossil fuel inputs or other practices common in the intensive form of agriculture that has been in use only for the past 70 years or so,” she says. “Organic and biodiverse farming systems most closely resemble these practices, and scaling them up is the best chance we have to transition to a climate resilient food system.”