**Headline:** The GOP’s Stalinesque Plan 2025 to Shape the Future of U.S. Food and Agriculture

**Teaser:** The conservative think tank Heritage Foundation wants to rid the USDA of sustainability, climate change mitigation, and racial equity.

By Elizabeth Henderson

**Author Bio:** Elizabeth Henderson farmed at Peacework Farm in Wayne County, New York, for more than 30 years. Peacework CSA was one of the [first community-supported agriculture farms](https://www.oeffa.org/news/) in the U.S. She is co-chair of the Interstate Council policy committee of the [Northeast Organic Farming Association](https://nofa.org/) (NOFA) and represents the Interstate Council on the board of the [Agricultural Justice Project](https://www.agriculturaljusticeproject.org/en/). Henderson is the lead author of [*Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen’s Guide to Community Supported Agriculture*](https://www.amazon.com/Sharing-Harvest-Community-Supported-Agriculture/dp/193339210X/ref) (Chelsea Green, 2007), with a Spanish-language e-book edition in 2017. She contributes to the [Observatory Wiki](https://observatory.wiki/Elizabeth_Henderson).

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**[Article Body:]**

Since I started organic farming more than 40 years ago, I have heard the same claims about the wonders of farmers in the United States: They are unparalleled in their productivity, feed the world with safe food, and are innovative and efficient. From the glowing accounts from industry leaders, [the American Farm Bureau Federation,](https://www.fb.org/advocacy/grassroots-and-political-advocacy/118th-congress-briefing-booklet) [the secretaries of the U.S. Department of Agriculture](https://www.farmprogress.com/farm-business/a-special-tribute-to-earl-butz) (USDA) under every administration, [U.S. trade negotiators](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=7511783672238990), and [deans of schools of agriculture](https://www.cultivationcorridor.org/news-events/why-iowa-qa-with-dr-daniel-robison), you would never know [that 44 million people across the nation suffer from food insecurity](https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america), [5 million farms have gone under](https://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/examining-the-latest-agricultural-census-data/)—[especially the farms of people of color](https://food.berkeley.edu/q-and-a/reversing-the-trend-of-black-land-loss/)—or [agriculture is the primary source of pollution for the waters of the U.S.](https://www.nrdc.org/stories/water-pollution-everything-you-need-know)

During the public debates on the [Farm Bill](https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/farm-bill/index) every five years—that compendious package of legislation that regulates food and farming—politicians from all camps praise the iconic American farmer and defend proposals that have steadily consolidated the grip of concentrated agribusiness on the global food system.

In April 2023, the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, released the ninth edition of [*Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*](https://www.project2025.org/policy/), a series of books outlining specific policy recommendations for the federal government. (The first one was released in 1981 to guide the incoming Reagan administration.)

[Chapter 10](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-10.pdf) of this book is the latest iteration of the party line in defense of the status quo. In this nearly 900-page manifesto, a 400-member team lays out a plan for taking power at noon on January 20, 2025.

In the name of [restoring](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf) “the blessings of Liberty” to the ordinary people of the country, ending elitist rule, and “woke culture,” the authors propose a classic Stalinist model, which entails reducing civil service professionals who staff government agencies to a minimum and replacing them with political appointees who will make sure that everyone remains loyal to the (Republican) president’s agenda.

The introduction makes this delusional [declaration](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf): “The long march of cultural Marxism through our institutions has come to pass. The federal government is a behemoth, weaponized against American citizens and conservative values, with freedom and liberty under siege as never before.”

**‘Liberating’ the USDA From Environmental Issues**

To see what this means for food and farming, I read the chapter on agriculture. It was written by Daren Bakst, director of the [Competitive Enterprise Institute’s Center for Energy and Environment](https://cei.org/), a nonprofit libertarian think tank that advocates for limited government. (Bakst previously served as a senior research fellow for environmental policy and regulation at the [Heritage Foundation](https://www.heritage.org/staff/daren-bakst), an activist conservative think tank based in Washington, D.C.)

Bakst begins by [parroting](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-10.pdf) the mainstream line on agriculture in the United States, a sentiment I have heard for more than four decades: “American farmers efficiently and safely produce food to meet the needs of individuals around the globe. Because of the innovation and resilience of the nation’s farmers, American agriculture is a model for the world. If farmers are allowed to operate without unnecessary government intervention, American agriculture will continue to flourish, producing plentiful, safe, nutritious, and affordable food.”

So, what interference does Bakst think is holding the nation’s agriculture back? We must translate some of his language to expose his code words and decipher his recommendations. He wants to liberate the United States Department of Agriculture so that it can [focus](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-10.pdf) on “removing governmental barriers that hinder food production or otherwise undermine efforts to meet consumer demand.”

As he sees it, the USDA has been using its power to change the nature of the food and agriculture economy into one that is “equitable and climate-smart.”

Translation: Eliminate regulations on toxic or synthetic farm inputs, allow the commercial use of new genetically modified organisms (GMOs) without safety testing, and end any attempts at redressing racial inequities or rekindling antitrust so that the megacorporations that control retail, distribution, processing, and export can continue exploiting society and the environment for profit.

Bakst insists that USDA’s current vision is much too broad. In a 2023 report, the agency [writes](https://inclusiv.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/3-May-3-Wed-GS-3-Neal-RBCS-Inclusiv-20230503.pptx): “An equitable and climate-smart food and agriculture economy that protects and improves the health, nutrition, and quality of life of all Americans; yields healthy land, forests, and clean water; helps rural America thrive; and feeds the world.”

To narrow its focus to producing food efficiently so that it is as cheap as possible (low-income households spend a [higher percentage of their incomes](https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId) on food), he proffers this [model mission](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-10.pdf): “To develop and disseminate agricultural information and research, identify and address concrete public health and safety threats directly connected to food and agriculture, and remove both unjustified foreign trade barriers for U.S. goods and domestic government barriers that undermine access to safe and affordable food absent a compelling need—all based on the importance of sound science, personal freedom, private property, the rule of law, and service to all Americans.”

In case we missed his main point, Bakst [clarifies](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-10.pdf): “The USDA should recognize what should be self-evident: Agricultural production should first and foremost be focused on efficiently producing safe food.”

Translation: Environmental issues are ancillary. Equity and justice are not the Department of Agriculture’s concerns, and to maintain the existing social order, it is necessary to keep working people fed.

The [Biden administration’s programs supporting organic farming](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/05/14/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administration-highlights-investments-in-rural-america-invites-public-nominations-for-rural-innovators-initiative/#:~:text=Strengthening%20Local%20and%20Regional%20Food%20Systems&text=USDA%20is%20also%20investing%20%24300,so%20more%20farmers%20can%20participate.), announced on May 14, 2024, are especially offensive to Bakst. In his view, the investment of $300 million to assist farmers in transitioning to organic demonstrates Biden’s disrespect for farmers and his desire to dictate farming practices to them.

In summarizing his recommendations, Bakst repeats all the above and adds that the U.S. should end any association with the United Nations, particularly the efforts for sustainable food development.

**Taking on Commodity Funding, Crop Insurance, and Nutrition Programs**

Addressing one of the fights underway in the 2024 Farm Bill debates, Bakst wants to repeal the agriculture secretary’s discretionary powers in allocating [Commodity Credit Corporation](https://www.usda.gov/ccc) (CCC) funding. Established as part of the 1933 New Deal, the CCC serves as a pool of federal funds for domestic farm income support, conservation, marketing, and export programs.

Congressional Republicans have been [attacking Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack for using $3.1 billion for “climate-smart” agriculture](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/04/21/senate-hearing-picks-apart-climate-smart-farming-00093138?utm_campaign).

Those same Republicans did not make a peep when Trump [used billions](https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/25/politics/farmers-trade-aid-trump/index.html) to compensate farmers for losses from his tariff wars with China.

In Bakst’s view, market pricing interference reeks of “harmful central planning.” He wants to eliminate any trace of price support that forces megacorporations to pay prices that cover farmers’ production costs. He favors legislation that would end the primary subsidy programs, the Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) and the Price Loss Coverage (PLC) programs, since they compensate farmers when prices fall below certain levels.

He wants to cut the federal sugar program because it limits production and keeps U.S. sugar prices above international prices.

Bakst worries that higher sugar prices will create hardship for low-income households. He accuses farmers who use both subsidy programs and crop insurance of double-dipping. Instead, he proposes relying exclusively on crop insurance to help farmers survive weather catastrophes.

Bakst slightly nods toward fairness, calling for reducing the current 60 percent subsidy rate for crop insurance premiums to 50 percent, [explaining](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-10.pdf), “After all, taxpayers should not have to pay more than the farmers who benefit from the crop insurance policies.”

As a refreshing surprise, amid all his market obfuscation, Bakst advocates for a more open Farm Bill process. Sustainable agriculture proponents could not put it more [clearly](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-10.pdf): “The farm bill too often is developed behind closed doors and without any chance for real reform… When it comes to American agriculture and welfare programs, they deserve sound policy debates, not political tactics at the expense of thoughtful discourse.”

Bakst makes this statement in the context of his insistence that agriculture and nutrition programs should be separated.

He advocates for moving all food and nutrition programs under USDA to the Department of Health and Human Services along with other welfare anti-poverty programs based on means-testing. Clumping them together would make the exorbitant amounts of money the government spends more obvious so that work requirements can be increased and payments to people who don’t deserve them can be eliminated.

He further slams the Biden administration for raising SNAP outlays by 23 percent to pay for the redefined Thrifty Food Plan.

[Echoing right-wing influencers](https://www.nationalreview.com/2022/04/patients-beware-washington-is-pushing-woke-health-care/), Bakst insists that benefit guidelines are so loose that millionaires have been able to claim [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/temporary-assistance-needy-families-tanf). However, the only evidence he provides is a January 15, 2018, article by Kristina Rasmussen, “[How Millionaires Collect Food Stamps](https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-millionaires-collect-food-stamps-1516044026),” published in the Wall Street Journal, which does not give any data to back up the claim.

He blames excessive regulations for the shortages of infant formula that have led some states to allow [Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) payments](https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic) to only a single company. He wants to return free school meal [programs](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-10.pdf) to the “original goal of providing food to K–12 students who otherwise would not have food to eat while at school.”

In addition, Bakst opposes any federal dietary guidelines: food choices should be individual, with dietary advice left to the private sector and a person’s physician.

Similarly, he opposes federal involvement in planetary needs and climate change mitigation since farmers are the “original conservationists.”

Bakst would like to see conservation programs focused on specific and measurable environmental concerns instead of those that are “[speculative in nature](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-10.pdf)” (translation: climate change): “Any assistance to farmers to take specific actions should not be provided unless the assistance will directly and clearly help to address a specific environmental problem. Further, any assistance to encourage farmers to engage in certain practices should only be provided if farmers would not have adopted the practices in the first place.”

Referring to the [Conservation Reserve Program](https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program/index) as an “overbroad” effort, he suggests eliminating it. This program provides payments to farmers to remove highly erodible land from production.

Translation: Private property rights are supreme.

Building on his contention that Biden’s USDA is dictating practices to farmers, Bakst opposes any environmental requirements for program eligibility. He insists that the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is overreaching because it offers payments for a list of practices. Instead, “each farm (as a function of eligibility) must have created a general best practices plan. Such a plan could be approved by the local county Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD).”

Bakst seems confident that since their peers elect them, local SWCD commissioners will spend funds for changing farm operations more cautiously.

To free the flow of farm products, Bakst advocates accepting state inspections as adequate for interstate meat sales, even though standards vary from state to state, with some being much lower than others.

He seeks to dismantle conservation easements since they restrict private property by limiting future land uses.

However, his recommendations on [checkoff programs](https://nationalaglawcenter.org/overview/checkoff/) would resonate with many mid-sized and smaller farmers. By law, farms that produce certain commodities must pay a percentage of their revenues to programs that promote those commodities (for example, “[Got Milk?](https://www.gotmilk.com/campaigns/)”).

Bakst declares: “Marketing orders and checkoff programs are some of the most egregious programs run by the USDA. They are, in effect, a tax—a means to compel speech—and government-blessed cartels. Instead of getting private cooperation, they are tools for industry actors to work with government to force cooperation.”

Regarding trade and exports, Bakst distinguishes between trade policy and product promotion. He favors policies that reduce trade barriers “such as sanitary and phytosanitary measures, blocking American agricultural products from gaining access to foreign markets,” especially barriers to biotechnology, which he equates with innovation.

Translation: There should be no labeling of GMOs or regulations that slow GMO adoption; Mexico should have to accept U.S. GMO corn.

As an ideological free marketeer, however, Bakst opposes government promotion of food and farm products for [export](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-10.pdf), “something these businesses and industries can and should do on their own.”

Bakst’s first concern is maximizing lumber industry access to the nation’s forests. He insists that harvesting more trees is the way to reduce forest fires. Without citing any evidence, he [asserts](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-10.pdf), “Increasing timber sales could also play an important role in the effort to change the behavior of wildfire because there would be less biomass.”

The chapter on agriculture does not touch on central food system issues like the regulation of chemicals and farm labor since they are under the purview of different departments of the “administrative state.”

**Republican Stance on How to Deal with the EPA and Farm Labor Issues**

In [Chapter 13](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-13.pdf) of the book, Mandy M. Gunasekara, founder of Energy 45 Fund—a pro-Trump nonprofit—tackles the Environmental Protection Agency, criticizing its policies for limiting the tools available to farmers by giving too much weight to the adverse effects of new chemicals instead of looking at their benefits. A conservative EPA would do a better job of risk-benefit balancing.

In [Chapter 18](https://www.project2025.org/policy/), the “Department of Labor and Related Agencies,” Jonathan Berry of the Federalist Society, who was part of former President Donald Trump’s Department of Labor, displays the schizophrenia that has characterized conservative policies on farm labor. On the one hand, he is eager to protect the family farm, asserting that there should be a cap on H-2A visas—which allows agricultural workers to take up jobs in the U.S. temporarily—and a gradual phasedown over the next decade to protect farm jobs for U.S. citizens.

Instead of making it easier to import labor, the government should encourage industry to develop more equipment to reduce the need for employees.

On the other hand, if H-2A workers were reduced, labor shortages might force farm employers to increase wages, “raising the price of food for all Americans, and [that] even such wage increases may not be sufficient to attract enough temporary American workers to complete the necessary farm tasks to get food products to market since those jobs are, by their nature, seasonal.”

For this reason, a conservative labor department might want to retain H-2A as a relatively inexpensive way to keep farms profitable and food prices low.

Here we find another nugget of [agreement](https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-18.pdf): “To protect the American workforce from unscrupulous immigration lawyers, employers, and labor brokers, the department must follow the recommendations of the OIG [Office of the Inspector General] and institute more robust investigations for suspected visa fraud and speedier debarments for those found guilty.”

**The Need to Preserve Solidarity Along the Food Chain**

To return to Bakst: The guiding concepts for his conservative USDA are efficiency, safety, and affordability, so it is essential to translate what he means by those terms.

Efficient farms produce the greatest possible yields per acre with minimal restrictions on the materials used for fertility and pest control or on the use of wetlands or highly erodible soils.

Safe foods are free of pathogens without consideration of chemical residues.

Affordable food is cheap without public guidelines for nutrient density, health consequences of highly industrialized processing, and environmental or social impacts—which remain externalized—so the public can avoid paying for them at the checkout counter.

Along with the other contributors to the [*Mandate for Leadership*](https://www.project2025.org/policy/), Bakst cloaks his totalitarian formula for consolidating the capitalist system as a valiant defense of individual freedom.

For more than 50 years, the movement for a more equitable, just, and localized way of growing food without damaging the planet has been opposing the unsustainable dominant food and agriculture system.

“The blessings of Liberty” unleashed through this plan would drive the movement for food sovereignty back into the shadows. From every indication, however, it is a last-ditch effort.

Whatever the election outcome in 2024, the farmers and conscious eaters in every state and county are reaffirming their liberated territory and joining hands along the food chain for cooperation, solidarity, and community.