

December 14th, 2018

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

Thank you for your leadership as a member of the United States Climate Alliance—engaging in the critical work of responding to climate change with meaningful policy solutions in New York such as those to increase renewable energy generation and reduce GHG emissions. Your programs and policies have positioned New York to continue to lead with cutting edge strategies, such as those that harness the potential for farms and farmers to help the state reach its climate goals.

The most recent IPCC report stated that we must not only cut GHG emissions, but also remove carbon already emitted into the atmosphere by 2040 in order to stay below the 2[°]C warming limit identified in the Paris Agreement. The 4th National Climate Assessment recognized that “agriculture is one of the few sectors with the potential for significant increases in Carbon Sequestration to offset GHG emissions” and a recent study published in Science Advances by The Nature Conservancy, Cornell University, and other academic partners found that natural and working lands have the potential to sequester 21% of our national GHG emissions, if properly managed.

As a group of organizations focused on protecting and supporting New York’s farmers and agricultural economy, we appreciate your investment in state programs such as the Agricultural Non-Point Source Abatement and Control Program and the Climate Resilient Farming Grants, which encourage management practices that improve farm viability and resiliency while helping to mitigate climate change impacts, sequester carbon, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Under your leadership, New York is positioned to continue to lead the nation with new strategies that will support the agricultural economy while reducing greenhouse gas emissions, sequestering carbon, and increasing New York agriculture’s resilience to severe weather and a changing climate.

We strongly encourage you to make farms and other working lands a key component of New York’s climate strategies. Outlined below are at least five key ways that the state can take action now to assist farms and farmers in helping the state reach its climate goals.

Helping Farmers Continue to Adopt Climate Smart Farming Practices

Farming practices for soil health, such as planting cover crops and reducing tillage, can sequester carbon while improving farm viability, increasing farm resiliency to extreme weather events, and improving soil health and surrounding water quality. Thanks to State-led strategies including investments, legislative proposals, and programs and research at Cornell University, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Hudson Carbon, The Marine Biological

Laboratory at Woods Hole, and other organizations, many farmers throughout New York State have begun to adopt these practices. However, more education and resources to help farmers adopt these practices widely are needed. State-led strategies and programs should be explored to support farmers already implementing soil health practices, and to incentivize broader adoption of such practices on farms, including on rented farmland. Additionally, strategies to incentivize on-farm forest management for improved carbon sequestration should be explored as, according to Cornell researchers, 22% of state farmland is wooded.

Accelerating the Adoption of Renewable Energy on Farms while Protecting Productive Farmland

Reforming the Energy Vision has significantly increased opportunities to generate renewable energy in New York State, including on farms, with solar arrays, wind turbines, and anaerobic digesters. State level programs and policies to increase renewable energy generation in New York must encourage developers to design and site projects in ways that provide meaningful income to farmers without converting New York's most productive farmland out of farming.

Supporting Farm Viability while Reducing GHG Emissions from Farms

Improving fertilizer and manure management and livestock nutrition can improve farm efficiency, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and improve environmental performance on farms. Your leadership and commitment to recent investments in anaerobic digester maintenance, improved nutrient management and feed composition, and in cover and flare systems for manure storage are critical in reducing emissions from agriculture. These strategies and others that prioritize farm viability, including helping farmers adopt conservation practices like reduced tillage and cover cropping, should be the continued focus of programs aimed at reducing emissions from the New York agricultural sector.

Investing in Smart Growth and Protecting Farmland to Reduce Transportation Emissions

Research in California and New York led by UC Davis and American Farmland Trust has revealed that the conversion of agricultural land to development, particularly low-density real estate development, increases GHG emissions. In response to this information, the California Air Resources Board has invested over \$70 million of their carbon market proceeds to permanently protect farmland while helping local communities plan for compact development. These investments reportedly will avoid over 40 million metric tons of CO₂ equivalent over the next 30 years. The State of New York should take similar action to leverage current and potential future investments in farmland protection and planning through the Environmental Protection Fund to better capture and track the climate benefits of these investments.

We encourage you to work with farmers, landowners, non-profits, and others to establish a strategy for carbon sequestration associated with natural and working lands to direct incentives and support for farmers and landowners as a key part of the State of New York's overall climate strategy. Making natural and working lands a priority will focus state programs and policies to help deliver the tools and resources farmers need to play a greater role in achieving the State of New York's climate goals.

Lastly, we recommend developing an Agriculture and Climate Working Group to engage diverse stakeholders across New York in developing strategies to broadly support farmers in responding to climate change. Farmers are on the front line of climate change—both in bearing the brunt of its damage and in being a potential part of the solution. In order to identify the right programs and policies to prioritize investing in to unleash the potential of natural and working lands to help the state reach its climate goals, we must bring together researchers, policymakers, advocates, agricultural organizations, landowners, and forest groups on an ongoing basis to discuss effective, implementable strategies to ensure that our farms remain strong, resilient, and viable while being a key part of the fight against climate change.

Thank you for your continued leadership, and for your consideration of programs and policies to elevate the importance of New York farms and farmers in the face of climate change over the next year. We look forward to continuing to discuss these items in more detail.

Sincerely,

See Attached List of Signatories

cc: Pat Hooker, Deputy Secretary for Food and Agriculture
Evan Preminger, Assistant Secretary for the Environment
Jessica Scott, Empire Fellow for the Environment, Executive Chamber
Richard Ball, Commissioner, New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets
Basil Seggos, Commissioner, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

Kate Fish, Executive Director, Adirondack North Country Association

Teri Ptacek, Executive Director, Agricultural Stewardship Association

David Haight, New York State Director, American Farmland Trust

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