

Senate OKs bill to certify farm practices limiting emissions

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In this April 5, 2021 file photo, farmer Rick Clifton drives a spray tractor across one of his fields, applying herbicide to cover crops that occupied the ground during fall and winter in Orient, Ohio. The U.S. Senate has approved a measure intended to encourage greater use of farming and forestry practices that prevent greenhouse gas emissions and remove planet-warming carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Credit: AP Photo/John Flesher, File

The U.S. Senate has approved a measure intended to encourage greater use of farming and forestry practices that prevent greenhouse gas emissions and remove planet-warming carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

It authorizes the federal Department of Agriculture to create a program helping farmers, ranchers and private forest landowners earn payments through private markets for planting offseason cover crops, reducing tillage and taking other steps to lock up carbon in soils and trees.

"Solving the climate crisis is a critical challenge for all of us ... and we are taking landmark steps toward supporting agriculture and forestry leadership in addressing this," Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, a Michigan Democrat and the bill's chief sponsor, said Thursday before it passed on a 92-8 vote.

It now goes to the House, which is considering a similar proposal.

Federal policies have long supported environmentally friendly practices such as planting buffer strips to prevent soil and nutrient erosion that feeds harmful algae blooms in waters.

Some of those actions also work against climate change. Pulling marginal lands out of crop production, for example, can make way for carbon-absorbing grasses, trees and wetlands.

The National Academy of Sciences estimates agricultural soils could take in 250 million metric tons (276 million tons) of [atmospheric carbon dioxide](#) annually, which would offset 5% of U.S. emissions. If scaled up significantly, farm and forestry actions could offset the yearly carbon output from nearly 110 million automobiles, Stabenow said.

In recent years, companies wanting to shrink their environmental

footprints have begun [purchasing credits for carbon and other greenhouse gases stored in farmlands](#) and forests, working through brokers who contract with farmers to use the best-management practices.

Under the Senate bill, the agriculture department program would certify those who provide technical assistance to farmers entering carbon markets—and third-party experts who verify that the emission-preventing steps are taken.

Sen. Mike Lee, a Utah Republican who voted against the bill, argued the federal program wasn't needed and could hamper innovation.

"It would insert the federal government into a market that is blossoming on its own, imposing burdensome regulation and picking winners and losers in the carbon credit marketplace," Lee said.

Some environmental advocates contend voluntary actions by farmers won't do enough to prevent climate change.

"Rather than embracing offset schemes, we need to keep fossil fuels in the ground and transition away from emissions-intensive agricultural practices like factory farming and large scale monoculture," said Mitch Jones, policy director of Food & Water Watch.

But the bill drew support from other environmentalists—and farm groups which which they are often at odds.

The Department of Agriculture is "perfectly positioned to define science-based best practices for measuring, reporting and verifying agricultural carbon credits," said Elizabeth Gore, senior vice president of the Environmental Defense Fund.

Without the department's involvement, it could be risky for farmers to

participate in the markets and hard to determine whether the credits represent genuine emissions prevention, she said.

Zippy Duvall, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, said lack of access to reliable information about [carbon](#) markets and a shortage of technical assistance have deterred some landowners.

The bill "acknowledges the potential of climate-smart farming while ensuring farmers would be respected as partners who can build on our strong foundation of environmental stewardship," Duvall said.

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