

Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative: Stresses farm-level model in potential USDA sustainability program

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GREEN BAY, Wis. — Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative, with members throughout the Upper Midwest, is encouraging the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to focus on local farmer-led conservation projects as the agency considers creating a Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry Partnership Program.

The cooperative's views came this week in response to a USDA request for public input on the [potential program](#). One element the agency is exploring would encourage the adoption of practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions or sequester carbon and would promote markets for commodities produced using such practices. President Biden referenced the strategy on Tuesday during the U.N. Climate Change Conference.



Edge President Brody Stapel said the co-op sees great potential in financial incentives for dairy farmers who are committed to incorporating nontraditional farming practices aimed at reducing their carbon footprint.

He pointed specifically to local farmers working together voluntarily to leverage innovative ideas and financial resources.

“We have found that by partnering locally we can learn from and encourage each other and determine what is most effective for our individual farms. The result is the expanded use of science-based practices that improve soil health, reduce energy use, protect water quality and provide other environmental benefits,” said Stapel, a dairy farmer and member of a farmer-led nonprofit conservation group in eastern Wisconsin.

Stapel said Edge supports a model developed in part by a sister organization, [Farmers for Sustainable Food](#), that focuses on farm-level sustainability projects. That group and a set of partners developed a comprehensive framework for replicable projects and are piloting it with a local farmer group in Wisconsin. The nationally recognized project incorporates economically viable conservation.

“Farmers can be leaders in developing solutions to environmental challenges. We are proving that every day,” Stapel said.

SUMMARY FROM EDGE’S COMMENTS TO USDA:

Edge believes that USDA can play a role in incentivizing farmers to implement new practices that have potential to improve sustainability. In doing so, the agency should fund projects that are voluntary and farmer led.

Focusing on technical assistance to farmers through trusted advisers is key. USDA

should prioritize projects that demonstrate an ability to provide such assistance and can prove they are able to administer a reliable method for quantification, monitoring, reporting and verification.

The agency also has a role to play in providing certainty around the acceptance of the methods and protocols, showing national and international stakeholders that generated outcomes are consistent and reliable.

We believe regional and local groups of farmers voluntarily joining together to improve their communities is the most effective approach to sustainability.