



February 10, 2021

## **Testimony of the Natural Resources Defense Council for the Assembly Committee on Agriculture’s Informational Hearing re Environmental Farming**

Dear Chairman Rivas,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the importance of environmental farming. Our state faces numerous systemic problems in agriculture that require systems-based solutions.

Governor Newsom’s [Executive Order](#) (EO) on nature-based solutions to climate change and protecting biodiversity points to the “all-hands-on-deck” approach needed to tackle the systemic challenge of protecting California’s biodiversity and climate-resiliency in our food system.

Science shows us that agriculture can and must be part of the climate solution. California has listened to the science by investing in programs like the [Healthy Soils Initiative](#), the [Biologically Integrated Farming Systems Program](#), [Sustainable Lands Conservation Program](#), and the [State Water Efficiency and Enhancement Program](#). These programs incentivize farmers, ranchers, and private landowners to adopt agricultural practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Beyond these programs, [regenerative](#) and [organic](#) farming practices – like cover cropping, continuous cover, planting diverse species, no-till, and a reintegration of animals into croplands – sequester carbon, increase water retention and infiltration, reduce the use of chemical inputs, increase pollinator habitats, and save farmers and ranchers money. These practices are a way of farming in harmony with nature that helps restore and regenerate ecosystems. Incentivizing these practices is only the first step towards transformative, systemic agricultural change.

For millennia, Indigenous communities have shown us that farming in nature’s image and managing natural and working lands holistically, [works](#). Their wisdom must guide our understanding of how to use agriculture as a climate mitigation and adaptation strategy, while teaching us about the healing power of food and farming. At a time when our water, climate, public health, and biodiversity [crises are colliding](#), we must look to Indigenous leaders and build their wisdom into the foundation of future programming.

Systems-oriented solutions require a significant shift from the status quo, and we know these conversations will be difficult. It requires looking at improvements within and

across the agriculture sector—from farm labor to farm management, from land ownership to supply chains, from market incentives to infrastructure, and from policy to research and development. We look to the Legislature to adopt new laws and policies that will enable agencies to go beyond their existing toolbox. Otherwise we risk maintaining business-as-usual practices rather than solving the urgent problems before us. In other words, [the pendulum of economic investment](#) and policy need to swing in a new direction.

To that end, we developed a framework that is fundamental to California’s continued leadership in environmental stewardship and climate-smart agriculture, including organic farming:

**Knowledge:**

We need Indigenous ecological knowledge to lead our land management activities. Using “traditional ecological knowledge” for baseline assessments of the state’s biodiversity, which the EO calls for, should only be the beginning.

**Education:**

We need to make sure Indigenous models of land management (e.g. regenerative, organic, agroecological) are made accessible to producers – especially socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers who don’t typically have access to state programs – through extension services, outreach, training, mentor-mentee relationships, research and development, and university education.

**Equity:**

Primarily Latino and immigrant farmworkers and their communities are at constant risk of exposure to toxic, fossil fuel-based pesticides, among other health threats. California leads the United States in pesticide use – the California Department of Pesticide Regulation’s [latest report](#) shows a near-record high of 209 million pounds used in 2018. [Far too many workers on conventional farms](#) and the communities that surround them are poisoned by these chemicals, suffering acute and chronic health threats as a result. California needs to shift away from this short-sighted reliance on synthetic inputs (including synthetic fertilizers) in order to protect the people that are the backbone of our thriving agricultural economy. This transition toward organic and regenerative practices will also help the state [realize its climate-resiliency goals](#).

**Power in Decision-Making:**

We need equity and representation in decision-making spaces that connect to food and agriculture —when 70% of California’s ag lands are worked by Latino community, why are [85% of the people who sit on agricultural county boards white](#)?

It is the responsibility of our leaders to ensure that the stakeholders who are invited to shape food and agriculture policy include the entirety of California’s incredibly varied farming sector. This means making sure that a diversity of farmers and ranchers are

meaningfully represented. And we mean diversity in every sense: vegetable and fruit growers, organic producers, small- and mid-sized growers, growers with diverse cropping systems, women growers, Indigenous growers, farmers and ranchers of color, young agpreneurs, farming communities whose first language is not English. For far too long, corporate agricultural interests have dominated these spaces, and benefited from their disproportionate power and access.

**Infrastructure:**

We need holistic changes to our agricultural sector—from how food is grown to how it's distributed, from how we care for our farmworkers to how we create pathways to ownership for historically marginalized growers. Thankfully, improvements and innovations in our supply chain infrastructure can build more stable regional food systems, create jobs for a 21st century green economy and keep dollars spent recirculating in California's economy.

Now is the time for reimagining what our natural and working lands, and broader food and agricultural economy, look like. We at NRDC will continue pushing against the status quo and advocating for holistic changes to our agricultural system—for people, public health, and the planet.

We look forward to continuing to work with you to advance a new vision for California agriculture.

Sincerely,

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Natural Resources Defense Council