

White Papers on the Green New Deal: Planning a Just Transition in Agriculture

Abstract

HR Res 109 or The Green New Deal (GND) lays out a vision for a mobilization against the dual challenges of climate catastrophe and economic inequality. One component of this vision is to reform the agricultural sector in ways that promote small scale agriculture, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and increase access to a more sustainable and healthy food system. This white paper reviews the vision for agriculture in the GND through examples from concrete proposals that have emerged since the resolution, and examples of existing programs whose goals align with those of the GND.

Executive Summary

Description of the Problem

The farming sector in the U.S. at present is symptomatic of the challenges that the GND aims to address. It is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions; large corporations have steadily taken over the industry (and exert a large degree of control in Washington); as a result, Federal policies have been designed to support and promote large scale agribusiness; access to affordable healthy food is a challenge for communities across the nation. Globally, the IPCC reports that one quarter of human-produced greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture and forestry sectors (and related issues such as forest fires) (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and Edenhofer 2014, 8). And yet according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the

United Nations, ten percent of the worlds anthropogenic carbon emissions could be sequestered in agricultural soils through the right farming practices (“Soil Carbon Sequestration | FAO SOILS PORTAL | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations” n.d.).

Since the 1940s the number of farms have been in a steep decline while the average farm size has been increasing. Today nearly forty percent of farmland is rented. As of 2017, the largest four percent of U.S. farms, those which are 2,000 or more acres,

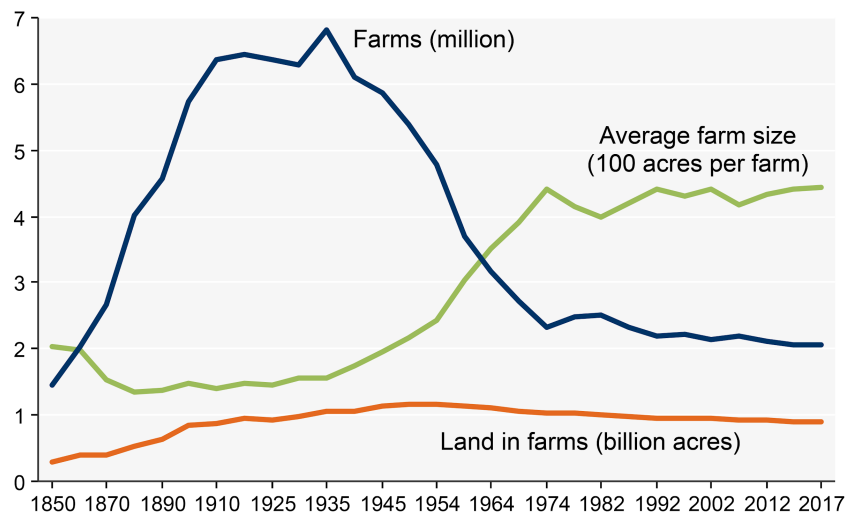
control fifty-eight percent of all farmland. Likewise, 84% agricultural production nationally is concentrated among the largest 12% of farms (Hoppe and Banker 2010).

It is clear that the kind of economic inequality and concentration of wealth and opportunity that the GND aims to tackle in the U.S. as a whole is quite present in the farming sector.

The GND proposes a series of goals aimed at reducing carbon emissions, spurring infrastructure investment, creating jobs and economic prosperity, securing access to a sustainable and healthy environment for all Americans, and promoting justice and equity. These goals are followed by plans for a ten-year national “Green

Farms, land in farms, and average acres per farm, 1850-2017

Million farms, billion acres, or 100 acres per farm



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Census of Agriculture (through 2012) and *Farms and Land in Farms: 2017 Summary*.

New Deal mobilization.” Among the components of the mobilization is the proposal to begin:

“(G) working collaboratively with farmers and ranchers in the United States to remove pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector as much as is technologically feasible, including—

(i) by supporting family farming;

(ii) by investing in sustainable farming and land use practices that increase soil health; and

(iii) by building a more sustainable food system that ensures universal access to healthy food” (Ocasio-Cortez 2019)

And yet upon its initial release the GND was criticized by the American Farm Bureau and the National Farmers Union, two major representatives of the interests of the agricultural sector (Patel and Goodman 2019). However, more recently a coalition of farmers and ranchers organized through Regeneration International and the Sunrise movement have formed in support of the GND through a letter putting forward a number of concrete proposals for what a collaboration with farmers and ranchers might look like (Regeneration International 2019). This plan, as well as the plans proposed by Democratic Presidential Candidates Warren and Sanders share a number of common themes and demands.

In what follows I will discuss the challenges and opportunities raised by these proposals through examples drawn from existing programs and policies which tackle them in whole or in part.