



Promoting Sustainable Agricultural Production in the Next Farm Bill: Is There Any Common Ground?

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This week, farmers, agriculture groups, and climate advocates have been demonstrating in Washington D.C. requesting that Congress do more to address climate change in the next farm bill (e.g., [Douglas, 2023](#)). The event, Farmers for Climate Change Action: Rally for Resilience, called for resources, assistance, and incentives to encourage farmers to address climate change ([NSAC, 2023](#)). This demonstration is a part of a much larger conversation about climate change and agriculture – and how to induce farmers to adopt sustainable practices.

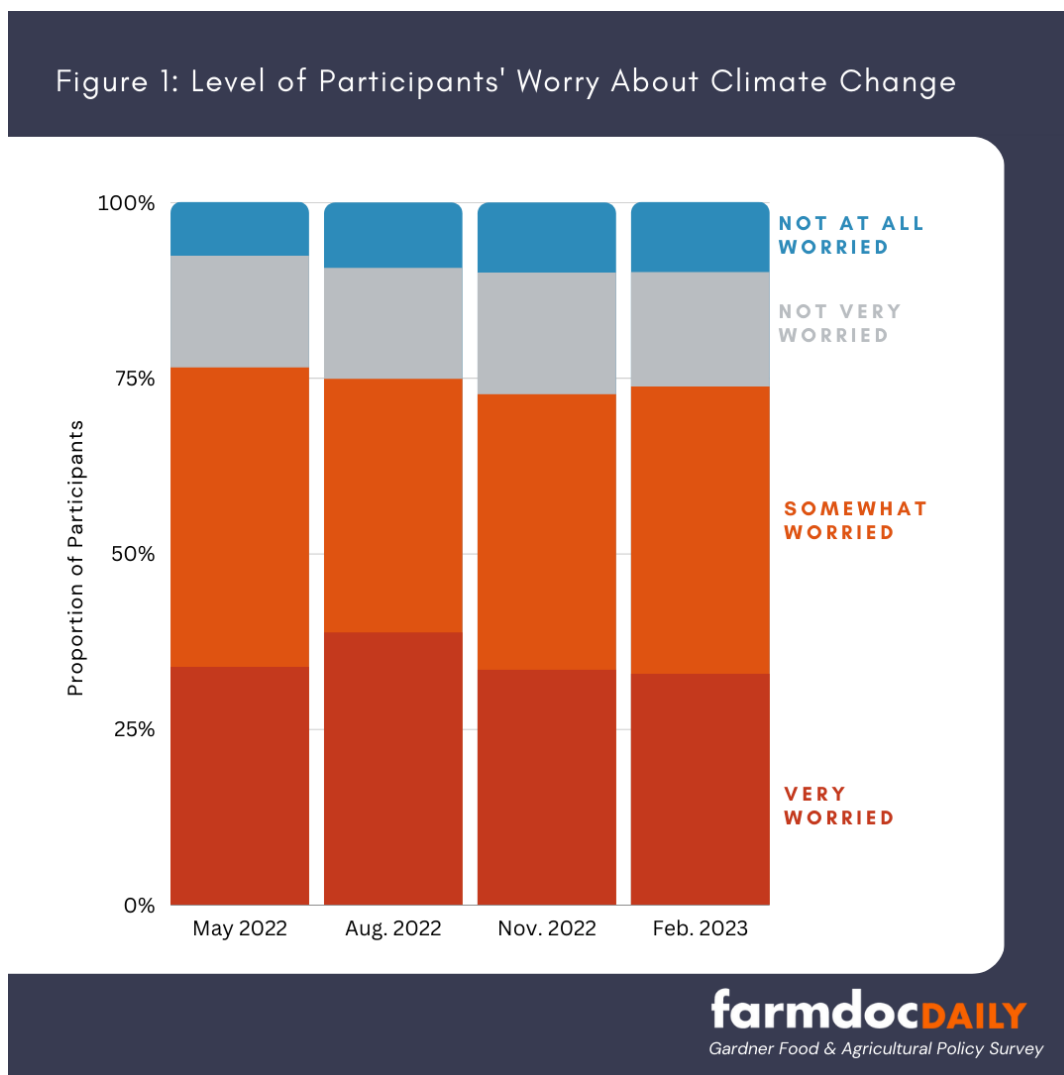
The hearing phase of the farm bill reauthorization effort is now underway (Senate ANF, [Hearings](#); House Agriculture, [Hearings](#)), and the policy priorities surrounding sustainability are destined to be major topics in the debate. In particular, the priorities and policies for the funding provided to conservation programs in the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, intended for addressing climate change, soil health, nutrient losses and similar natural resource concerns, is likely to be contentious (see e.g., *farmdoc daily*, [August 11, 2022](#)).

Over the past year, using the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey, we have collected data on public concern about climate change in agriculture and how the public thinks about encouraging farmers to adopt sustainable production practices. Below, we review results from four waves collected in May 2022, August 2022, November 2022, and – most recently – February 2023. The survey is conducted online quarterly. Each quarter approximately 1,000 consumers are recruited to match the US population in terms of gender, age, income, and region.

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Public Concern About Climate Change

As part of our recurring tracking questions in the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey, we ask participants how worried they are about climate change. Across the year, we find that over 70% were either somewhat worried or very worried (see Figure 1). Climate change continues to be a concern – and political priority – for the public.



Concern about climate change has differed across political parties in all waves of the survey. In Table 1, we present the levels of concern from participants from the combined four survey waves (May 2022-February 2023) across political parties. We find that 51.5% of Democratic participants indicated they were very worried, compared to 18.6% of Republican participants and 30.1% of Independent/Other participants (see Table 1). However, over 50% of participants in every political party indicated they were worried (either very or somewhat) about climate change.

Table 1. Level of Worry About Climate Change Across Political Parties (May 2022-February 2023)

	Percent of Republican Participants	Percent of Democrat Participants	Percent of Independent/Other Participants
Very Worried	18.6%	51.5%	30.1%

Somewhat Worried	38.5%	38.3%	42.7%
Not Very Worried	25.7%	8.0%	17.2%
Not At All Worried	17.2%	2.2%	10.0%

Note: Results are data from across all four waves of the survey, May 2022-February 2023.

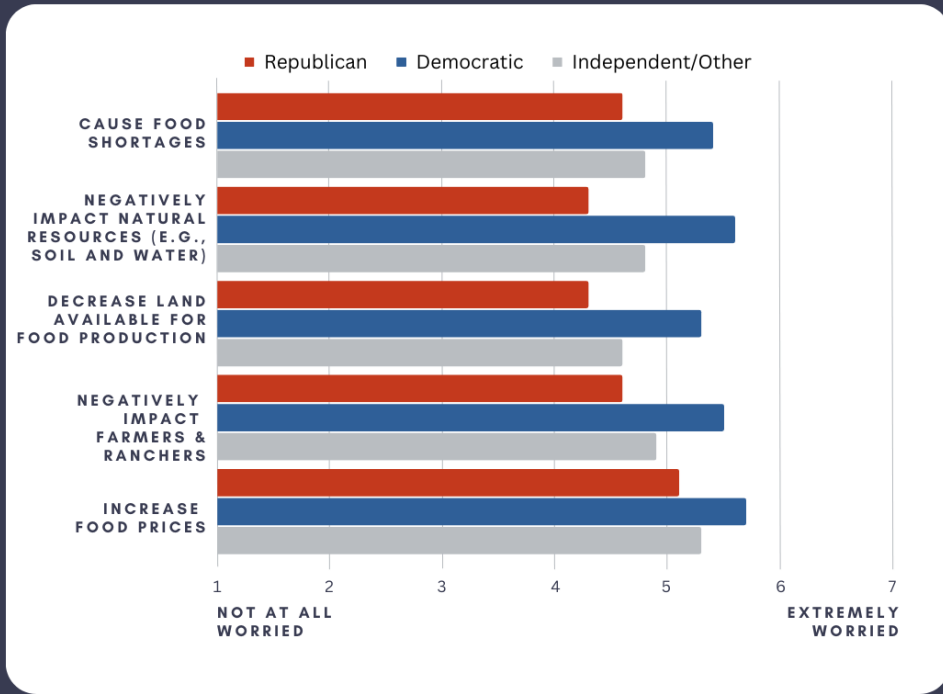
Additionally, as agriculture both has an impact on climate change *and* climate change has an impact on agriculture – public concern about climate change can also be intertwined with concerns about future food prices and availability (see Table 2). We asked participants on a scale from 1 (not worried at all) to 7 (extremely worried), how worried they are that climate change will result increased food prices, cause food shortages, negatively impact farmers and ranchers, decrease land available for food production, and negatively impact natural resources (e.g., soil and water). Participants were relatively concerned about all possible impacts but had the highest level of concerned that climate change would result in increased food prices. This is in line with previous our previous reports highlighting public concern about rising food prices (*farmdoc daily*, [January 20, 2023](#)).

Table 2. Average Level of Worry That Climate Change Will Result in Different Food System Issues on a Scale from 1 (Not Worried at All) To 7 (Extremely Worried)

	Wave 1: May 2022	Wave 2: Aug. 2022	Wave 3: Nov. 2022	Wave 4: Feb. 2023
Increase Food Prices	5.3	5.4	5.4	5.4
Negatively Impact Farmers and Ranchers	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
Decrease Land Available for Food Production	4.8	4.9	4.7	4.7
Negatively Impact Natural Resources (e.g., soil and water)	4.9	5.0	4.9	4.9
Cause Food Shortages	5.0	5.0	4.9	5.0

In line with our results on worry about climate change overall, we find that Democratic participants were more concerned about the implications of climate change on agriculture and the food system than Republican or Independent/Other participants. In Figure 2, we present the average level of worry for participants from each political party across all four survey waves (May 2022-February 2023). However, differences were most partisan on worry as to whether climate change would negatively impact natural resources (difference of 1.3) and least partisan on worry that climate change would increase food prices (difference of 0.6).

Figure 2: Average Level of Worry that Climate Change Will Result in Different Food System Issues, Across Participants' Political Parties (May '22-Feb '23)



Note: Results are data from across all four waves of the survey, May 2022-February 2023.

Although recent studies have found that more than 50% of the public believes that climate change is the greatest threat to US farm production today (Lusk and Polzin, 2022), climate change has not appeared prominently in a farm bill in over 30 years (see *farmdoc daily*, September 29, 2022 for additional details). In the development of the newest farm bill, debate on this topic is expected to be contested between the political parties (e.g., Bass, 2023). From the public's perspective, however, there are areas for potential political priority overlap, in particular, in providing farmers financial incentives to adopt a variety of more sustainable agricultural practices (e.g., Downs, 2023) – some of which we explore in more detail below.

Public Perception of Government Spending on Sustainability in Agriculture

In addition to general concern about climate change, we also track public support for government spending on sustainable agriculture more broadly. In each wave, we asked participants whether they thought the government should provide financial support when farmers adopt sustainable production practices, and we find that over 65% of participants in every wave indicated they thought the government should provide this type of financial support (see Table 3).

This is in line with previous research, which has found high levels of public support for government funding being directed towards sustainable agriculture (e.g., Lusk, J. and Polzin, S., 2023). Similarly, we previously reported results which showed high levels of support for payments to farmers when natural disasters harm their crops (*farmdoc daily*, March 9, 2023), an increasing concern associated with climate change.

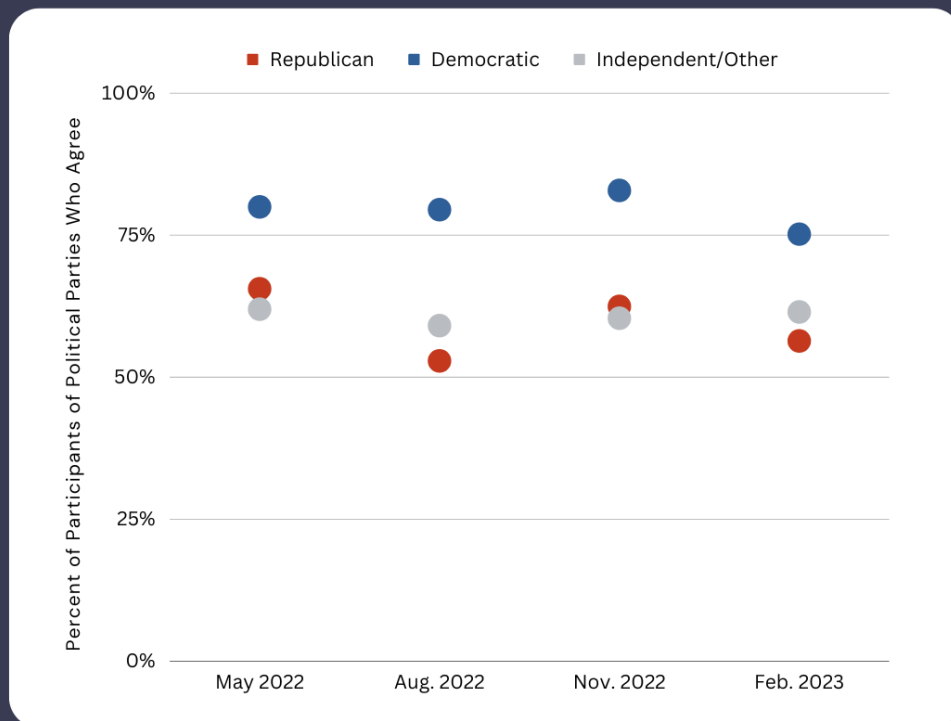
Table 3. Proportion of Participants Who Indicated the Government Should or Should Not Provide Financial Support to Farmers When They Adopt Sustainable Production Practices, across Survey Waves

	Wave 1: May 2022	Wave 2: Aug. 2022	Wave 3: Nov. 2022	Wave 4: Feb. 2023
Yes	69.8%	65.9%	69.7%	65.3%
No	16.2%	19.4%	18.2%	20.1%
Don't Know/No Opinion	14.1%	14.8%	12.1%	14.6%

Our results indicate that responses to whether participants think government should provide financial support when farmers adopt sustainable production practices differs substantially by participants' political party (see Figure 3). In a split Congress, this is likely to be central to the debate on the farm bill. Across the year, participants who indicated they were Democrats were substantially more likely to agree that the government should provide financial support to farmers to adopt sustainable production practices.

Although both Republican participants and Independent/Other participants were less likely to support this type of program than Democratic participants, over 50% of Republican and Independent/Other participants supported this type of funding in every survey wave. These results underscore the potential common ground for providing financial support when farmers adopt sustainable production practices.

Figure 3: Proportion of Participants Who Think the Government Should Provide Financial Support When Farmers Adopt Sustainable Production Practices, Across Political Parties



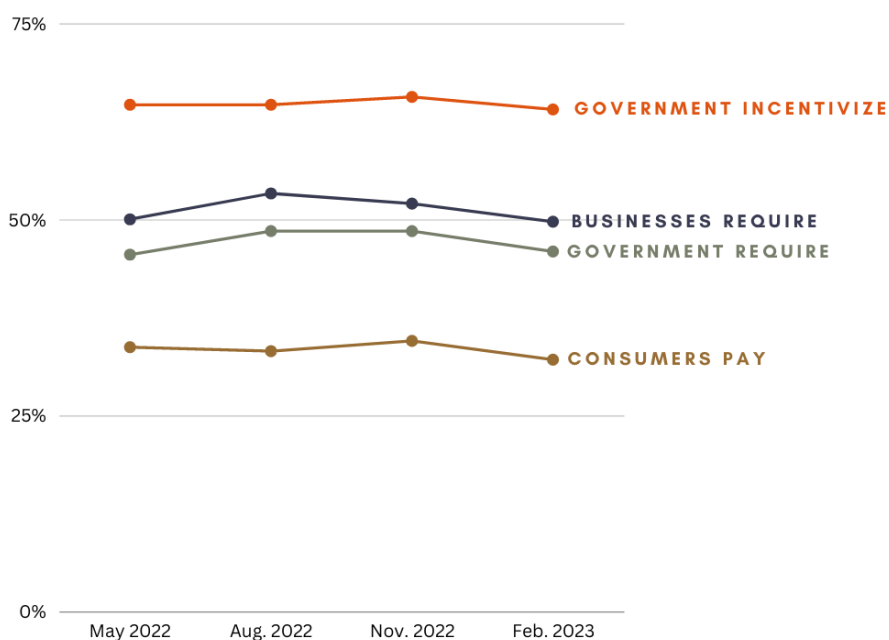
Public Perception of Ways to Encourage Sustainable Production Practices

There are many ways to encourage more sustainable production practices – most likely to feature in the farm bill are government incentives. We asked participants whether they support or oppose four possible alternatives to encourage more sustainable food production: (1) the government requires farmers to adopt sustainable practices, (2) the government offers financial incentives for farmers to adopt sustainable practices, (3) businesses like grocery stores and restaurants require farmer suppliers to adopt sustainable practices, (4) consumers pay more for food produced using sustainable practices (see Figure 4).

We find that across all four waves, participants were most supportive of government incentives, with approximately 65% of participants in every wave indicating they supported this way to encourage more sustainable food production. Both businesses requiring and government requiring farmers to adopt more sustainable practices were less popular, although business requirements were slightly more popular than government requirements. The least popular option was having consumers pay more for food produced using sustainable methods.

Importantly, these options vary in speed, effectiveness, and cost. For example, businesses that require their farmer suppliers to adopt sustainable practices is likely a much faster path to sustainable production than federal regulations, as the latter has to gain bipartisan approval and would likely allow a much longer transition window for farmers to comply. However, transition costs may be more likely passed on to consumers via higher food prices.

Figure 4: Proportion of Participants Who Support Different Ways to Encourage More Sustainable Food Production

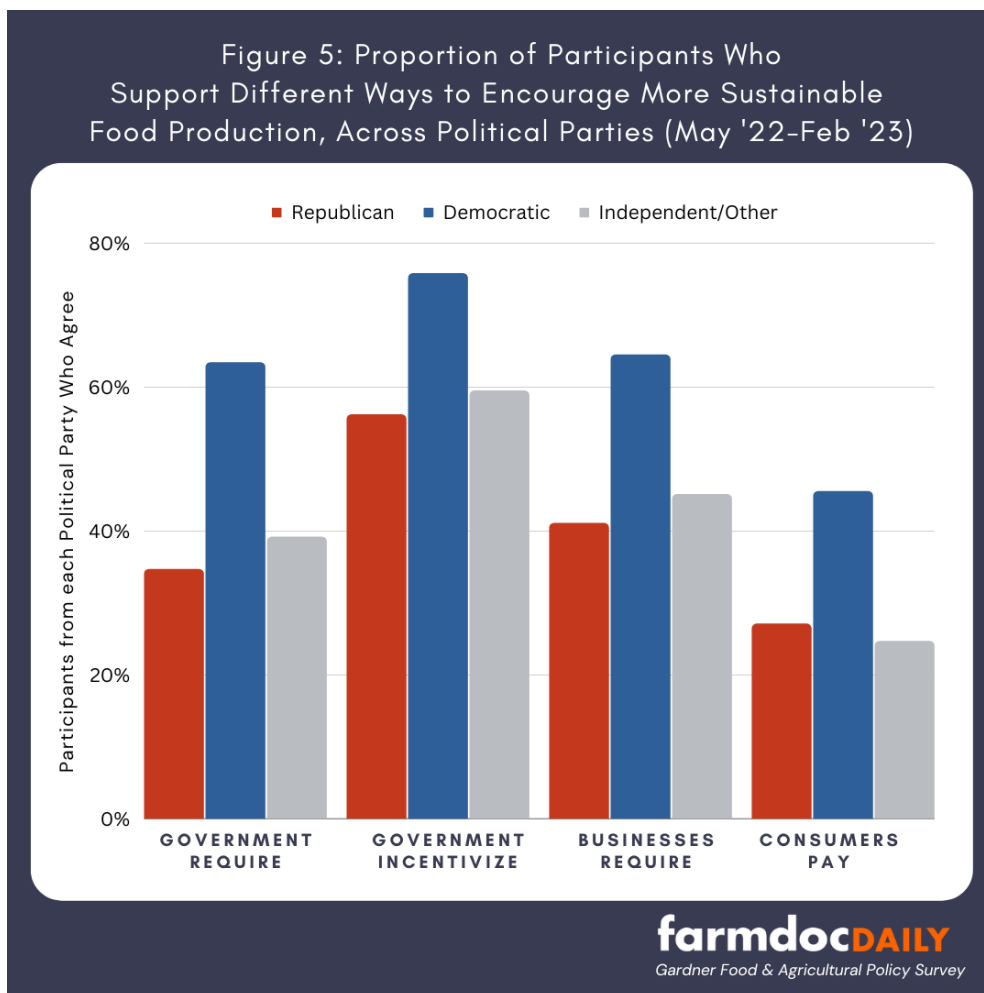


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These preferences differed substantially by political party. In Figure 5, we show these results from the all four waves vary across participants' stated political parties. Democrats supported all four mechanisms for encouraging more sustainable food production at higher rates than either Republican or Independent/Other participants. All three groups had the highest levels of support for government

providing incentives (75.8% of Democrats, 56.2% of Republicans, and 59.5% of Independent/Others), which is in line with news reports focusing on politically feasible paths to increasing climate change focus in the farm bill (e.g., [Downs, 2023](#)).

Our results indicate that government requiring farmers to adopt sustainable production practices had the largest difference across political parties – with 63.4% of Democrats, 34.7% of Republicans, and 39.2% of Independent/Other participants supporting the government requiring farmers to adopt sustainable practices.



Conclusions

As the Congressional Agriculture Committees initiate the effort to reauthorize a farm bill in 2023, advocacy for programs and policies focused on sustainable food production and climate change continues to build. The current political environment and partisan divides in Congress add challenges to this debate, but the results from about a year of Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy surveys suggest some common ground and bipartisan support by the American public.

In this post, we review results from four waves of the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey that suggest that the majority of the public is worried about climate change and its potential impacts on agriculture – and in particular, food prices. Further, our results indicate that the public is broadly supportive of the government incentivizing sustainable food production. We also highlight areas where the public seems more divided across political parties (e.g., the use of government mandates to enforce sustainable production practices).

Overall, these results underscore the bipartisan support from the public for a more sustainability focused farm bill, however, whether this translates into agreement in Congress remains an open question.

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