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THE PROTECTING FUTURE FARMLAND ACT OF 2023

Federal investment and market drivers are leading to rapid deployment of renewable energy, including solar. Because deployment of these technologies often takes place in rural communities, farmers and ranchers are pressing for improved land stewardship and responsible methods of deploying renewable energy. The *Protecting Future Farmland Act* ensures that federal investment in rural energy projects prioritizes both of these practices, and directs the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to put forth best practices for farmland management and protection during solar energy development.

Current challenge:

- Agricultural land and land favorable for solar coincide because agricultural land often has existing connections to the electric grid, access roads and relatively flat ground.
- Currently, there is not a coordinated federal strategy for management of land located beneath solar arrays. Many farmers and landowners are concerned about the quality of agricultural land after a solar lease ends, as well as the impact of energy installations on soil and water quality.

Specifically, the *Protecting Future Farmland Act*, would:

- Prioritize federal assistance to large scale renewable energy projects through USDA's Rural Energy for America Program that have in place soil, water and vegetation management and conservation plans;
- Collect data on conversion of farmland to solar energy and require a report to Congress on the ways to maximize protection of prime agricultural land and renewable energy deployment;
- Authorize the National Resources Conservation Service to develop best practices for protection of soil health and productivity during the siting, construction, operation and decommissioning of solar energy systems on agricultural land;
- Authorize the National Resources Conservation Service to provide technical assistance to farmers growing crops or managing grazing below or in tandem with solar energy systems; and
- Set a definition for agrivoltaic systems and authorize USDA to conduct a study on agrivoltaic systems, including compatibility and risk-benefit analyses. Agrivoltaics – the colocation of agricultural production, including crop production, livestock grazing and pollinator habitat, with solar energy infrastructure – has the potential to reduce land-use conflicts and provide additional benefits to farmers, rural communities, and the solar industry.