

Climate plan calls for forest expansion

By [Traci Watson](#), USA TODAY



Enlarge 2004 photo by John L. Russell, AP

A farm in Acme Township north of Traverse City, Mich., sports a sign supporting an upcoming open space initiative to preserve land from development.

WASHINGTON — New forests would spread across the American landscape, replacing both pasture and farm fields, under a congressional plan to confront climate change, an Environmental Protection Agency analysis shows.

About 18 million acres of new trees — roughly the size of West Virginia — would be planted by 2020, according to an EPA analysis of a climate bill passed by the House of Representatives in June.

That's because the House bill gives financial incentives to farmers and ranchers to plant trees, which suck in large amounts of the key global-warming gas: carbon dioxide.

The forestation effort would be even larger than one carried out by the [Civilian Conservation Corps](#) during the [Great Depression](#), says the [U.S. Forest Service's](#) Ralph Alig. The CCC, which lasted from 1933 to 1942, planted 3 billion trees, says the Civilian Conservation Corps Legacy, an alumni group for workers and family members.

The environmental benefits are clear. More trees would not only lower carbon dioxide levels, but they would improve water quality, because they need lower levels of pesticides and fertilizers, says agricultural economist Bruce McCarl of [Texas A&M](#)

University, who contributed to the EPA analysis.

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The plan would, however, be hard on ranchers and farmers and potentially food prices, says American Farm Bureau chief economist Bob Young.

In the Senate, which is likely to consider a similar bill this fall, there are some who worry the loss of farmland would lead to increases in food prices worse than those seen in mid-2007, when costs spiked 7% to 8% above 2006 levels.

If those food prices seemed high, "wait till you start moving agricultural acres into climate-change areas," warns Sen. [Mike Johanns](#), R-Neb., Agriculture secretary for [President George W. Bush](#).

McCarl says food costs would stay roughly the same.

The latest EPA analysis does not say where the farmland would be lost. However, an EPA study done in 2005 that analyzed climate-change policies similar to the House bill found that trees would overgrow farms primarily in three areas:

- Great Lake states: Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin.
- The Southeast: Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.
- The Corn Belt: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri and Ohio.

Forests once grew there, says study author Brian Murray of [Duke University](#), so trees would sprout quickly in those areas if farmers got financial incentives. The House climate bill would allow landowners who reduce carbon dioxide to sell carbon permits to polluters, such as power plants.

Agriculture Secretary [Tom Vilsack](#) last week hailed the possibility that climate-change action could help forests. "We have our own deforestation problem right here in the U.S. of A," he said. "Just keeping forest as forest is a significant challenge."

Roughly 1 million acres of forests every year were flattened to make way for homes and other development in the 1990s, Alig says. Without a climate bill, a net total 26 million acres of forest will be lost to development by 2050, he says.

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