

We recently hosted USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack and EPA Administrator Michael Regan at the Agricultural Sciences Center for a roundtable discussion with agricultural leaders here in Raleigh. You can see photos from the event on page 8.

Regan previously served with the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources in Raleigh before heading to Washington D.C. to lead EPA. This is Vilsack's second time serving as Agriculture Secretary.

It was a great discussion and I was pleased to hear that the two agencies are committed to working together on Climate Smart initiatives for common sense answers.

One of the biggest take-aways that I wanted to stress with them is that in North Carolina, agriculture is carbon negative and the industry sequesters 26 percent of offsets in the state. That is significant.

I've written before in this column about the need to bring more attention to the positive environmental contributions of agriculture, and this is a good example of that.

Farmers have a direct, vested and personal interest in caring for our natural resources. They are forward thinking and are accustomed to doing more with less, especially in uncertain times like we are in today.

The land they farm provides their livelihood. If farmers don't take care of the land and water, those resources will not continue to provide for them.

Many farmers I know share the philosophy to, "leave the Earth better than you found it."

Both Vilsack and Regan recognized and praised the conservation practices agriculture is already engaged in. Data in the 2020 Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report released by EPA in April points to agriculture's contributions.

Calculations provided by American Farm Bureau with EPA data shows that over the past 20 years, agriculture greenhouse gas emissions have slightly increased. However, farmers are faced with reducing their footprint while simultaneously feeding more people AND on less land.

Transportation and electricity are the largest contributors (27% and ~25%) of greenhouse gas emissions in the US.

Conservation practices farmers have been using for the past 50+ years are ones we are still talking about today-including no-till crops, cover crops, anaerobic digesters, nutrient management and conservation cover.

Our forestry and land-use practices capture and sequester carbon to go back into the land, again, around 26 percent.

When you look at the percentage of this amount captured by our industry and subtract it from the overall greenhouse gas emissions of the agricultural industry, the final calculation is a negative footprint (-2%).

One of the things we want to do is to plant more trees in North Carolina, something we have been asking for federal support to do for some time now.

I believe committing to plant more trees makes sense on a number of levels. Environmentally, there are benefits to realize, but our forests are also under attack from a number of destructive pests, so it is important that we monitor forest health and manage these resources to ensure their sustainability. Emerald ash borers, hemlock woolly adelgids and spongy moths (formerly known as gypsy moths) are a few examples of pests.

I was encouraged by some of the discussion raised during Vilsack and Regan's visit and I believe they recognize that farmers should be applauded for their conservation efforts and that federal Climate Smart initiatives should include opportunities for farmers.

I appreciate Secretary Vilsack and Administrator Regan's visit and willingness to meet with members of North Carolina's agriculture community.