Reframing Farming: A Communications Toolkit

FRAME WORKS

RED TOMATO

WESTERN SARE
Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education

Introduction

Welcome to Reframing Farming, a communications toolkit to help you communicate more effectively about sustainable practices for crop farming.

It is intended for agricultural professionals who focus on crop farming practices and the ways in which farming connects to other social issues—a broad field that includes growers, researchers, educators, advocates, and more.

In this collection of resources you will find ways to cultivate more science-rich, curiosity-driven conversations that engage people in civic dialogue, not just consumerist conversations. You'll learn how to effectively explain what it takes to farm in ways that protect our environment, promote people's health and wellbeing, and provide the economic returns that allow farms to thrive.

Our recommended strategies draw from original, rigorous social science research on framing strategies that are effective for outreach, education, and advocacy communications about crop farming.

These strategies can help you make sound decisions about what to say in settings like the following:

- Public talks to non-farmer audiences
- Social media messaging
- Comments in print, television, or podcast interviews
- Brochures, signs, or website copy about farming approaches
- Letters to the editor, op-eds, or other written commentaries
- Letters to an elected representative or other official
- Testimony to legislative committees or other public bodies
- Contributions to policy working groups
- Press releases or media advisories

Contents

EST. FIVE-MINUTE READ

What Are We Framing?

Core ideas this toolkit is designed to communicate more effectively.

The field of agriculture is large and complex, so there are many ideas to communicate. No project could tackle them all. The Farming and Food Narrative Project has focused on translating the following main ideas for non-agricultural audiences.

Farming involves complex decision-making and risk management.

Farmers must consistently make difficult choices under varying, and risky, conditions.

Farming is a business in which it is hard to make a profit.

The costs to produce a crop have risen faster than the prices crops sell for, making the economics of farming exceedingly difficult.

There are many approaches to "sustainable" farming. All involve integrating multiple goals:

- *Economic goals:* Make decisions that allow farmers and farmworkers to be compensated fairly and continue to remain competitive in the marketplace.
- *Environmental goals:* Use farming practices that protect, respect, and/or restore the soil, water, air, and life on and around the farm.
- *Social goals:* Make decisions that promote the health and wellbeing of farmers, farmworkers, consumers, and the broader community.

Farming practices that benefit the environment and society can be expensive for farmers, yet go unacknowledged and undercompensated by society.

To meet the challenges of farming, we need society to do the following:

- Deepen and broaden its knowledge of farming
- Understand multiple dimensions of sustainability
- Support local, regional, and diverse farms as part of a thriving local economy
- Actively engage farmers/growers as essential voices in research and policymaking
- Support systemic changes that creat and expand opportunities in farming for younger people, people of color, and women

For a more detailed explanation of these ideas and how our project landed on them, check out The Landscape of Public Thinking about Farming: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understanding.

EST. THREE-MINUTE READ

Quick Start Guide to Reframing Farming

Six framing strategies that can shift thinking about sustainable farming

It's important that agricultural voices can communicate effectively about farming that respects the environment; compensates and treats farmers and farmworkers fairly; and ensures that the future of farming is inclusive and equitable, as well as economically viable and vibrant.

To convey these complex ideas, six framing strategies are essential. Keep them top-of-mind with this summary:

1. **Start with farming, not food.** The way we begin a communication has a powerful priming effect, shaping how people hear what comes next. If your goal is to open people's minds to the complexity of farming, lead with farming or other complex issues like environmental concerns.
2. **Make the story about interconnection.** When we talk about farming in ways that emphasize shared fates, interdependence, and intertwined issues, we prime people to learn more about a sector they know is essential but know little about.
3. **Show how adjusting farming practices and policies can contribute to the type of communities we want.** Paint a picture of one or two ways that farms contribute to the vitality and wellbeing of their communities—and then explain one or two steps society could take to strengthen both farms and the communities that rely on them.
4. **Talk about the tightrope that farms must cross.** Compare the risky, complex decision-making involved in farming to the process of crossing a tightrope. Explain policies or programs that can help farmers achieve balance, stability, or steady footing.
5. **Tell science-rich stories about innovative practices on farms.** When people think of farming as problem-solving, they are more likely to support farm-friendly policies. Set the scene for science by describing dilemmas that growers face, and explain how farmers work with researchers to develop, test, and adopt innovative solutions.
6. **Speak directly to historical and contemporary inequities.** It's vital to share our voices on important social topics that have the public's attention. By doing so we not only help to advance these issues, we also remind the public that farming is an integral part of society.

EST. FIVE-MINUTE READ

Frames to Avoid

To frame strategically, we can choose to leave some things unsaid.

Some patterns in public thinking can get in the way of understanding the complexity of farming. Others make it hard for people to see how systemic changes would make a difference. As you prepare to communicate, check to make sure you aren't using images, vocabulary, or arguments that could further entrench the unproductive understandings below.

Binary Thinking contrasts, or even pits, one form of agriculture against another.

If we offer up oversimplified pairs of options—like organic versus conventional, synthetic versus natural, or large versus small—people and policies will continue to undervalue the full range of sustainable agricultural approaches we need.

Look for ways you might be pitting the environment against the economy or sustainability against scale or setting up other false dilemmas. Revise so that you're helping the public understand that "good" farming practices vary according to context.

Simple Process thinking assumes that ultimately, farming means just plant, tend, harvest.

If we leave people with their pre-existing assumption that farming is hard labor, but simple work, we'll also be left with oversimplified policies and preferences.

Look for ways you might be reinforcing romanticized or oversimplified images of farming—like talking about "getting up with the sun" or enjoying the "simple life" on the farm. Reframe to show that farming involves complex challenges that are managed with expertise, not just effort.

Separate Fates thinking draws extreme contrasts between the experiences of social groups.

If our communication reinforces the idea that people involved in farming are "far away" from the rest of society, we make it easy for the public to tune out.

Avoid images like the familiar red barn in a remote field. Look for ways to show that farming is integral to society and we all have a shared stake in farming issues.

Consumerist Thinking reduces complex social issues to sets of marketplace transactions.

If we only and always think of people as shoppers, we will miss opportunities to engage the public in social, political, or policy issues involved in crop farming.

If your description of a problem suggests it will be solved simply by changing what people buy, it's time to reframe. Swap out market-oriented vocabulary with words that speak to the public good. Make sure to send the message that farming is a public issue that requires us to engage collectively as a society.

For more detail on these patterns of public thinking—and to learn about additional patterns that matter—see The Landscape of Public Thinking about Farming: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings.

EST. FIVE-MINUTE READ

Talking Points

Are you about to talk to the public about farming? The following talking points use the recommended framing strategies. Consider adapting the relevant talking points to your topic.

Interconnection

"As a society, we are interconnected, and what affects some of us affects all of us. This is particularly true when it comes to farming. We all rely on farmers to produce the food we eat and the fibers we wear. In turn, farmers rely on us to use our voices, our votes, and our choices in ways that support farming."

Sustainability

"We need to ensure that every farm has access to what they need to grow abundant crops, allow farmers and farmworkers to earn a decent living, and restore the natural environment. For our farming system to meet our needs far into the future, we need to consider economic, environmental, and social concerns together. That's what sustainability means to me."

Balancing Act

"Farming is a lot like crossing a tightrope while balancing environmental, economic, and social concerns. Today's farmers need to protect the environment and keep insects from damaging their crops. They need to pay workers a good wage and offer benefits and cover expenses like more effective equipment or new technology. They need to do all of this while balancing unpredictable weather, prices, and market trends that influence which crops they can sell and for how much."

Imbalanced Policies

"If you've ever seen someone walk a tightrope—or tried it yourself—you know that balancing is hard. Leaning too far one way or the other means trouble. Our policies should work to stabilize farmers, but instead, in many cases, they make the tightrope harder to cross by putting too much weight on one factor or too little on another."

Farming Context Matters

"Our public and institutional policies must recognize that different farms have different contexts, from the crops they grow to the soil and weather in their area. A fair system makes room for variation while also upholding the standards we need to protect our environment and do right by farmers and farmworkers."

Pesticides

"Farmers can't sell food that has been damaged by insects or diseases. An effective approach balances protecting the crop and protecting the environment. The most important part is to promote a healthy ecosystem on the farm, which keeps away most diseases and harmful insects. When problems do arise, an integrated approach can prevent crop damage."

Community Connections

"When our farms and communities are well-connected, both our farming systems and our society are stronger and more vibrant. We need to make sure we're setting policies that make it easier for farmers to do business, make a decent living, and do their part in helping communities thrive."

Importance of Equity and Inclusion

"Issues of race, class, gender, or citizenship matter just as much in farming as they do in the rest of society. We need to recognize and root out unfair practices that have made it hard for women, immigrants, and people of color to hold decision making jobs, own land, and earn a decent living in farming."

History of Unfair and Unjust Practices

"We hear a lot about the history of racism on other issues, like housing or education, but we don't talk about it as much in farming. Most Americans don't know that the federal agriculture department has admitted systematically discriminating against women, Black, Native American, and Hispanic farmers in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, the government has made changes that have significantly increased the diversity of farm ownership. What else could we learn—and improve—if we talked about these issues more often?"

Access to Farmland and Financing

"Every future farmer deserves a full and fair opportunity to get off to a strong start. That means we need to tackle unfair policies and practices that prevent women and people of color from getting a fair shot at accessing financing, securing farmland, and joining the next generation of farmers."

EST. FIVE-MINUTE READ

Keeping Conversations on Track

Use the "bridge and pivot" technique to keep conversations from going offtrack.

If a conversation focused on critical thinking about sustainable farming starts getting derailed, don't worry—you can steer it back on track by following a simple three-step formula.

Step One: Analyze

Figure out what you're responding to. Dismissal of sustainable farming practices tends to rely on patterned, predictable mental models. The following are the most common of these models:

- Farming is hard labor, but ultimately simple work.
- Pesticides and chemicals are bad for the environment and bad for human health.
- Farmers are victims of economic forces beyond their control.

Step Two: Bridge

When someone says something that might take the conversation off course, you first need a "bridge" between what they said and what you want to say. Acknowledge the person you are engaged in conversation with, but don't restate or try to rebut the assumptions in their message. Use an innocuous bridging phrase to redirect the conversation, such as the following:

- "Let me answer you by saying ..."
- "Another way to look at this is ..."
- "What's really at stake here is ..."
- "That speaks to a bigger point ..."

Step Three: Pivot

Introduce the framing strategy that will get the conversation back on track.

When You Encounter This Mental Model...	Pivot to This Framing Strategy:
Farming is hard labor, but simple work.	Farming is like crossing a tightrope.
Pesticides and chemicals are bad for the environment and bad for human health.	To protect crops from diseases and insects, farmers choose the least risky option.
Farmers are victims of economic forces beyond their control.	Farming is affected by collective policy decisions.

EST. THREE-MINUTE READ

"Tightrope"

A tested metaphor can help the public understand the need for balanced approaches.

"Tightrope"

A metaphor for balancing different elements of sustainability.

The main comparison: "Farming is a lot like walking a tightrope, balancing environmental concerns, people's health and safety, and economic pressures."

When to use this metaphor:

- Use this metaphor early and often in public discourse. It helps people think about the risky, complex decision-making that farming involves
- Use this metaphor to express the idea that environmental, economic, and social issues are all vitally important to farming and must be managed together.
- Use this metaphor when discussing macroeconomic trends—like farm consolidation or the loss of family-owned farmland—to steer people away from the fatalistic conclusion that there's nothing to be done. Offer ideas that could help to stabilize farmers.

Ideas for using this metaphor:

- Describe decision-making and trade-offs with words associated with tightropes, like *balancing, crossing, leaning, stabilizing*, or *wobbling*.
- Use the tightrope metaphor to help people understand the bigger issues reflected in a story of a particular farm, farmer, or farming challenge.
- Extend the metaphor to highlight the unique additional challenges that face women farmers, farmers of color, or other groups of farmers that have been marginalized or excluded:
  - "It's even harder to maintain balance in the face of discriminatory lending and financing."
  - "A history of land theft and dispossession helps to explain why Black and Indigenous farmers have less land, which means crossing the tightrope without assets that could cushion a fall."

EST. TEN-MINUTE READ

Structuring Science-Rich Stories

A formula for sparking curiosity about good farming practices

When our explanations invite people to take a scientific view of a topic, we pique their curiosity and tap into the deep American love of ingenuity and the belief that science and technology can solve problems. It also helps people recognize that farming is an applied science and that farmers benefit from policies that enable them to engage in scientific innovation. Learning to tell science-rich stories about on-farm practices can enliven and enhance your advocacy and outreach efforts.

Here's a formula for structuring these stories for maximum impact: "the 4 Bs."

The technique involves offering just a bit of *background* about the agricultural dilemma, explaining a *biological* or other technological response, introducing *barriers* to implementation, and concluding with a call for a *balanced* approach. See below for a generic outline as well as an example that applies the outline to different integrated pest management (IPM) practices.

The 4 B's: Background, Biology, Barriers, Balance

Background	By way of background, introduce an agricultural dilemma that farmers face. Keep it brief, and frame it as a puzzle to be solved.
Biology	Explain how a biological control or other technological fix could help farmers resolve the dilemma.
Barriers/Boundaries	State a barrier (an obstacle) that may prevent farmers from using the biological control, or a boundary (limit) that means it isn't a cure-all.
Balance	End with a description of a balanced approach or a call for a realistic, pragmatic response to the dilemma.

Example #1: Monitoring Insect Life Cycles

Background	If food has been damaged by insects or diseases, farmers can't sell it to mainstream markets. To stay in business, farmers must adopt strategies to keep these problems from harming their crops.
Biology	Some farmers use special traps that help them monitor insect life cycles and migration patterns. By knowing exactly which insects are around and when their feeding patterns are about to spike, farmers can select the right treatment and apply it at just the right time. This precise approach to protecting the crop is not only more effective, it also reduces the risk that the treatment will harm the environment or the workers applying it.
Barriers/Boundaries	But monitoring and targeted control take time and money that farmers are generally not compensated for when they sell their crops. This means that even when they want to adopt practices like monitoring insects with traps, they are not able to take the business risk.
Balance	We need to change our market design and farming policies to make it easier for more farmers to use resource-intensive, precise approaches to managing insects and diseases because they are effective ways to balance protecting the environment, protecting the crop, and protecting human health. We also need sensitive standards and regulations that recognize that problem-solving in farming is context-dependent. A one-size-fits-all rule doesn't work because farmers will apply different solutions to different crops in different climates, soil types, and locations. By supporting farmers' investments in context-appropriate, resource-intensive approaches to warding off insects and crop diseases, we can build a more stable farming system that is good for business, good for people, and good for the planet.

Example #2: Sticky Sphere Traps

Background	Farmers can't sell food that has been damaged by insects or diseases. One insect that's common in the Northeast is the railroad worm. Railroad worms are a native insect that used to feed on wild hawthorn trees. Over time, they have learned to love apple orchards! They are called railroad worms because they tunnel through apples and leave black tracks behind them that look a little like railroad tracks. To a grower, they look like a major risk: railroad worms can ruin a crop quickly.
Biology	One innovative farming practice is to use special sticky traps to keep an eye on the levels of railroad worms in the orchard. The traps are red spheres that look a little like apples. Growers coat them with an all-natural mixture of oils, resin, and wax. It's called tanglefoot because it traps insects permanently. Growers check the traps regularly from July to September. When the traps catch five adult flies, that's a sign that it's time to treat the trees. This "bait and see" method helps growers avoid using chemical insecticides if they aren't needed. It also helps to limit their use. When it's the most responsible option, growers use only the amount that's needed, right when it is needed.
Barriers/Boundaries	These sticky traps work well in the East, where the scale of orchards tends to be smaller than out West. But even in the East, there are orchards that could use them but don't. That's because monitoring and targeted control takes time and money that farmers are generally not compensated for when they sell their crops. This means that even when growers want to adopt practices like monitoring insects with traps, they are not able to take the business risk.
Balance	We need to change our market design and farming policies to make it easier for more farmers to use resource-intensive, precise approaches to managing insects and diseases because they are an effective way to balance protecting the environment, protecting the crop, and protecting human health. We would also benefit from a broader understanding of what we mean by "sustainable" farming. Sticky sphere traps promote local apples in the East, where traditional organic protocols won't work on a large scale. By taking advantage of scientific innovation, we can promote local, sustainable agriculture.

Example #3: Innovations in Irrigation

Background

In regions where soil tends to be drier and sandier, farmers often rely on irrigation to water crops. Pumping water to fields or orchards can be expensive, and in some instances, it can be hard for farmers to get permission to use the water they need. In times of drought, restrictions on water use make the situation even more complicated.

When farmers can't irrigate their land, it affects not only their ability to produce a good crop, it also affects the health of the local ecosystem. Wind and rain will erode farmland that has been left bare due to water shortages. Erosion can degrade the quality of the soil over time and also increase the risk that nearby water will be contaminated with fertilizer or other farming chemicals.

Biology

One partial solution is to figure out how to grow crops using less water. Technology that monitors the moisture in the soil, for example, allows growers to water crops precisely as needed, rather than on a set schedule. Updated irrigation equipment can help, too. For some crops, dripping the water rather than spraying it is just as effective, but loses less water to evaporation. For other crops, it's better to prevent evaporation by using special irrigation nozzles that deliver water closer to the plant's roots.

Barriers/Boundaries

While helpful technology exists, not all farmers can afford to invest in new equipment. Even if they can, changing irrigation methods comes with business risks. Some of the innovative technologies require changes in how fields or crops are planted or managed. It takes time and some trial and error to get the full benefit of more efficient irrigation systems. In farming, where so much is unpredictable and a misstep can lead a farm to a long, hard fall, it can be difficult to take risks on new ways of doing things.

Balance

Fortunately, we can work together to help farmers find the right balance between risk and predictability, as well as balance the need to conserve water with the need to produce a good crop. For example, we can fund the types of research and outreach that offer farmers confidence in new technologies. We can create public and market-based incentives that offset the cost of irrigation upgrades. And we can continue to support agricultural scientists in advancing the technology that matches irrigation levels with soil moisture levels, making it more accurate, more effective for farms of different sizes, and easier for farmers to use.

EST. FIVE-MINUTE READ

Talking About Pesticides

What to say about "the spray"

Because the public equates "natural" food with "healthy" food, it can be hard to have a productive conversation about the responsible use of chemical pest management. These strategies can help:

1. **Expect and embrace the opportunity to talk about chemicals used in farming.** When people express curiosity or concern about food safety, treat it as an important opportunity for agricultural education. Think of it as a chance to deepen people's understanding of what happens on farms. That doesn't mean launching into lecture mode. It means being ready to offer an explanation, not just an answer.
2. **Lead with the dilemma.** Start with the basic concept that crops need to be protected. We recommend saying, "Every farm has to protect their crops from insects, diseases, and wildlife." This replaces the catch-all and sometimes vague term "pests" with everyday nouns that people can easily visualize.
3. **Explain that in good farming, the primary approach is prevention.** Give examples that show that effective crop protection involves preventing insects, weeds, and diseases from ever getting a foothold on the farm in the first place
4. **Describe sound decision-making as looking for the least risky option that will work.** Be clear that modern farmers are looking for the least risky, most effective approach—and sometimes that means using materials to treat crops.

✕ Instead of this:	✓ Try This:
Pest management is critical to modern agriculture, including organic production. IPM gives growers the tools they need to practice smart, safe, and sustainable pest management and keep the world fed.	One of the big challenges on any farm is protecting the crop from insects, disease, weeds, and wildlife. Effective approaches combine multiple strategies, from building up natural defenses to using targeted treatments.
IPM is a science-based decision-making process that combines tools and strategies to identify and manage pests. Employing IPM strategies is a means of solving pest problems in a way that uses the most effective and least risky option.	Every farm needs to keep its crops from being damaged by insects, diseases, and animals. Modern farmers use a scientific approach to make decisions about which tools and strategies will be most effective and least risky in their context.
IPM is an ecosystem-based strategy that focuses on long-term prevention of pests or their damage through a combination of techniques, such as biological control, habitat manipulation, modification of cultural practices, and use of resistant varieties.	To protect crops from insects and diseases, effective farmers know that prevention is key. They combine strategies that build up healthy soil, healthy plants, and a healthy ecosystem on the farm, which cuts down on harmful insects and diseases.

EST. FIVE-MINUTE READ

Talking About Inequities

Agricultural voices are important in today's conversations about disparities, inequities, and inclusion. This resource offers guidance on how to frame these topics productively.

Right now, neither the media nor our own field are likely to talk about the exclusion or marginalization of immigrants, women, or people of color who are farmers or farmworkers. If agricultural voices don't engage in these issues, we are not only missing important opportunities to make farming better, we are also sidelining ourselves from the most vibrant public discussions of our time. Participating in public discourse on these topics is part of reframing farming as central, not peripheral, to the rest of society. It's important for agricultural communicators to listen closely to these national conversations—and to join them.

These strategies can help us embrace and cultivate opportunities to talk about how farming can and should operate differently to address issues of race, class, citizenship status, and gender. Consider them as you lead or participate in conversations about organizational practices or the future of the industry. Look for places to raise these issues as you describe your farming approach to visitors, funders, or the general public.

Examine who speaks.

When possible, consider whether a particular messenger should step up or step back in a particular communication. It's important for white, male farmers to speak up and speak out on equity issues. It's also important for people who have been left out of the conversation to have a voice and for solutions to be driven by the people who are most harmed by the problems of racism, sexism, and other forms of marginalization.

Attribute responsibility carefully.

Attribution means the way we explain the causes of behavior, events, or conditions. Be clear that the goal of equity-focused conversations isn't to place blame on individuals. Find places to attribute responsibility for inequities to systems and policies.

Connect problematic realities of today to the practices and policies of the past.

Most people are simply unfamiliar with the history of discrimination against farmers and farmworkers who are women, immigrants, Black, or Indigenous. Find places to share this history, and help people see how even long-abandoned practices still affect us today.

Lift up concrete, systemic solutions.

Connect farming to community goals by helping people visualize how they can come together to make farming more accessible and equitable. Remind audiences that addressing inequities in farming is part of larger efforts to advance justice.

Integrate other effective framing strategies.

Just as equity issues are central to improving farming, not an afterthought or side topic, the framing strategies for talking about farming are central to improving the way we talk about equity. Make use of framing strategies like emphasizing interconnection and helping people see how changes in farming contribute to the kinds of communities we want.

EST. FIVE-MINUTE READ

Depicting the Diversity of Farming

Farming has always been—and continues to be—vastly diverse in many ways.

The public often imagines "farmers" as white, rural, strong-bodied men who own a homestead and work vast fields from dawn to dusk. This romanticized, outdated image of farming is one way that society keeps farming out of sight and out of mind.

Depicting the full diversity of farming is one way to reframe farming as an integral part of society that everyone has a stake in understanding.

Vary the images of farms.

Lean away from the well-worn image of a red barn in the midst of lush cornfields. Show urban farms, orchards, research-oriented farms, and other growing sites that buck the stereotypes. Look for appropriate opportunities to use images and stories of specialty crops.

Vary the images of on-farm activities.

When people think of farming as three simple steps ("plant, tend, harvest"), it's hard to imagine why farms need innovation or change. Expand the mental image by showing farmers and farmworkers engaged in other activities, from research and analysis to business planning.

Vary the "characters" in your communication to expand the public's understanding of who farms.

Show farmers and farmworkers who are women or people of color without avoiding images of men or people who appear to be white. Talk about farmers and farmworkers who are immigrants or LGBTQ+, have disabilities, or come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Discuss how their identities affect their experiences as farmers. Show farmers of different ages.

Show farmers and farmworkers off-farm.

Depict people who work on farms as they play other roles in the institutions of our communities, from schools and places of worship to local government and civic organizations.

Avoid "othering."

When working to highlight the contributions or concerns of a particular group, it can be easy to slip into talking in ways that position "them" as "other." Sometimes, this can trigger us-versus-them thinking that divides or devalues people. Use the broad and generous "we."

EST. FIVE-MINUTE READ

Sample Letter to the Editor

Legislators always read the opinion pages in their local district press. A letter to the editor is a relatively easy and surprisingly powerful way to frame issues on your own terms.

This letter illustrates ways to follow the recommendation to show how adjusting farming practices and policies can contribute to the types of communities we want.

To the editor,

As a farmer who manages orchards that produce walnuts, pistachios, and almonds, I am proud of the role agriculture plays in our region. **At Harmony Orchard, we sell our product globally, but we are very much a local business. We employ dozens of local workers, many from families who have lived in this area for generations. A working farm like ours relies heavily on local businesses, from equipment repair shops to farm supply retailers.**

This reminds the public that farms are businesses without activating little-picture, consumerist thinking.

Yet we are more than just a vital part of our regional economy. **Like many other businesses in our area, we play an active role in the social and civic life of our community. Whether we are pitching in for new uniforms for the youth soccer league or opening our orchard to researchers from the nearby agricultural extension office, we bring a sense of community to our partnerships.**

Emphasizing the social and civic aspects of farms helps the public see a shared stake in farming.

It's this sense of community that drives us to take seriously our responsibility to preserve the region's water supply. **We share the concern that the Protect Our Water bill seeks to address. We rely on that water as much as anyone —and we know it is vitally important to prevent chemical runoff from polluting it.**

By now turning to the issue of water conservation, the letter has included economic, social, and environmental concerns.

The proposed approach—education for farmers, landscapers, and homeowners on how to properly apply these essential treatments—is a good start. But we believe our state could go further. **Changing crop insurance policies so that more farmers could plant cover crops in the offseason would make a huge difference. Keeping "roots in the ground year-round" keeps erosion and runoff at bay.**

It's important to point to specific policies that would support wider adoption of environmentally-friendly farming practices.

I hope to see more conversations on this idea and other important innovations that help farmers balance protecting their crops with protecting our environment.

EST. FIVE-MINUTE READ

Sample Social Media Posts

Framing fits in even the smallest of spaces.

To move mindsets on farming, it's important to change the conversation, not just participate in it. Clicks, views, and "likes" only mean so much if your posts don't help people to understand farming more deeply. Here are three ways to reframe your social feed:

1. **Don't reinforce outdated or unhelpful mental models.** The public holds many assumptions and associations that hold farming back. Instead of repeating ideas that keep the conversation stuck where it is, replace them with recommended reframes.

✕ Instead of this:	✓ Try This:
The joy of harvest season is upon us! Join us in celebrating the art of picking, sorting, and grading beautiful, ripe tomatoes. Remember, farmers and gardeners, the key to a thriving market is harvesting what's truly market-ready. Let's support sustainable agriculture!	Our first crop of drought-hardy tomatoes is ripe! Now our experienced staff is harvesting, sorting, and grading these beautiful tomatoes. We're relieved at how well they turned out despite dry spells this season. Sustainable agriculture involves taking some risks!

2. **Devote some posts to "the cause."** If your social media is primarily a marketing tool for your farm, farmstand, or crop, be sure to balance self-promotion with issue education.

✕ In addition to this:	✓ Try This:
Join us for Fall on the Farm on Oct. 8, 10 am–4 pm. Revel in apple cider and all things pumpkin spice! Don't miss our plant sale & farm tours. Stop by the Visitor Center for a walking tour!	Join us for Fall on the Farm on Oct. 8, 10 am–4 pm. Snag a mug of warm apple cider, then stop by the Visitor Center for a walking tour of the farm. Hear about how we protect our local water and wildlife as we grow our apples!

3. **Explain agricultural terms.** Even if your primary audience is farmers, others might encounter your posts. Make the science of farming accessible with simple explanations.

✕ Instead of this:	✓ Try This:
Don't miss out! Join our Annual Organic Field Day on July 21. Learn about roller crimping, the benefits of no-till or low-till methods, and how you can adopt regenerative organic agriculture. Perfect for farmers, gardeners, researchers, and all who are interested.	Join our Field Day on July 21! Heavy equipment compacts soil, leaving it less fertile. The fix: Less tillage! Check out the latest equipment and learn from no-till experts. Perfect for farmers, researchers, gardeners, and all who are interested in healthy soils.

EST. FIVE-MINUTE READ

Pitching Journalists

Ask for the right kind of coverage, the right way.

A strong media pitch relies not only on effective tactics for building relationships with journalists, but also on effective framing for building deeper understanding of farming. By incorporating recommended framing techniques into a pitch email, you begin to shape the narrative the public hears about sustainable agriculture. Here are considerations and examples to keep in mind.

How will you position the newsworthiness of your suggested story?

Among the traditional set of characteristics that make a story newsworthy, not all are equally well suited to reframing farming. A "warm and fuzzy" human interest story may feel good, but it may also serve to reinforce romanticized notions of farming. Suggesting a "conflict and controversy" angle might end up as just another repetition of a narrative about false dilemmas and oversimplified binaries.

Is there a way to pitch a "local interest" story that illustrates that the crop farming topic truly matters to the people who live in your area? Can you suggest a "superlative" story that leans into newer, better, or unique ways of managing farming challenges?

How can you integrate reframed ideas into your pitch?

Right now, news media rarely covers farming issues in the ways agricultural voices might tell the story. For example, the news tends to romanticize and simplify what farmers do—and rarely depicts farmers as innovators or problem-solvers.

✕ Instead of this:	✓ Try This:
Our growers' collaboration is a labor of love, making little profit but making a big difference to the land we farm and the way we farm it. We are a small team, but we love the land and aren't afraid of hard work. Together, we think we're strong enough to withstand the economic pressures that threaten so many smaller farming operations today.	Our growers' collaborative is a smart solution to the central problem of small-scale farming today: an imbalance between the cost it takes to produce a crop and the price at which it sells. We've figured out a way to cross this tightrope together—while balancing environmental concerns.

For more insights into patterns in news media stories about agriculture—and the opportunities to shift those patterns in productive directions—see Understanding the Conversation about Farming: An Analysis of Media and Field Communications.

Related Resources

You can learn more about the FrameWorks Institute's research on framing sustainable agriculture in the resources linked below and on the Farming and Food Narrative website.

Reports

The Landscape of Public Thinking about Farming: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings. This report compares agricultural experts' thinking to the mental models of ordinary Americans, offering communicators insights into how to navigate public thinking.

Understanding the Conversation about Farming: An Analysis of Media and Field Communications. This study analyzes media coverage and agricultural-sector communications about sustainable agriculture, pinpointing the stories that shape public perceptions and pointing out opportunities for reframing.

Reframing Farming: Strategies for Expanding Thinking about Agriculture. This culminating brief outlines six reframing recommendations that emerged from research involving more than 3,000 participants.

Reframing Farming Toolkit

The FrameWorks Institute,
in partnership with Red Tomato

Design by
Constructive

This toolkit was designed and written by the FrameWorks Institute, a nonprofit that conducts social science research to understand and solve important communications challenges. FrameWorks' research on reframing farming was conducted in partnership with the Farming and Food Narrative Project.

This material was created with support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2020-38640-31523) through Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SW21-928.) The content of this toolkit is the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.