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## Guest column: American farmers must step up on climate change

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Next month, I travel to Copenhagen for the U.N. Climate Change Negotiations (COP 15) with two Drake agricultural law students. We are part of the Iowa U.N. Association delegation going to witness the international talks on possibly the most significant environmental, social and political issue shaping our futures.

My special interest is what the talks may mean for farmers in the United States and abroad. U.S. policy discussions show much of America's agricultural sector doesn't take climate change seriously.

The reality is the impacts of climate change are being felt around the globe - whether or not U.S. farm groups and politicians believe it. Fortunately, most other nations recognize the obligation and opportunity to engage in deciding how best to respond.

The adverse impacts climate change has on food production and the critical role agriculture may play in addressing it means farmers have a major stake in the debate.

The magnitude of U.S. contributions to greenhouse gas emissions make Copenhagen a prime opportunity for America to help lead development of effective responses - leadership the world needs and expects. The negotiations are especially important to farmers, because American agriculture thrives on international rules supporting free trade and open markets. If we engage at Copenhagen, then ideas to protect the environment and increase farm income may emerge, but sitting on the sidelines while others craft the agenda is a recipe for conflict and lost opportunities. Lack of U.S. leadership won't just limit success of the negotiations and limit the willingness of other nations to act, but may signal erosion in U.S. prestige and national confidence.

The Kyoto climate-change treaty created little role for agriculture, but proposals for COP 15 give farmers a large, even central role. Still many U.S. farm groups are ambivalent - not just to Copenhagen but to whether climate change is real or U.S. action is needed.

Some groups like the National Farmers Union and the renewable energy coalition 25X25 endorse

cap-and-trade legislation as the basis for ambitious goals for Copenhagen.

Others like the American Farm Bureau Federation oppose cap and trade - and appear uninterested in what the world may do. Farm Bureau members are being encouraged to protest to Congress "don't cap our future," arguing agriculture will suffer increased energy costs with no corresponding economic benefits. Studies show the proposed legislation will have limited impacts on farm costs and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack argues the law will open new streams of farm income from offsets and carbon markets.

He has spent months explaining to farmers why they should support the legislation. Last week, President Barack Obama announced he and Vilsack will go to Copenhagen to show U.S. resolve to address climate change, even though Congress has yet to act.

Agriculture's opposition to cap and trade is delaying progress on legislation to reform U.S. energy policy. The lack of progress has already led to scaling back expectations for what might happen in Copenhagen. But remember the saying, "If you aren't part of the solution you are part of the problem."

We shouldn't delude ourselves the rest of the world won't act without us or that we are immune from either the natural effects of climate change or the political effects of policies developed in our absence.

Our lack of engagement threatens to make U.S. agriculture the "problem" other nations address and risks development of an international agreement adverse to U.S. interests. Ironically the opposition may also jeopardize our ability to engage in international markets and the trade negotiations central to continued growth of American agriculture.

The opposition to climate-change action is puzzling given agriculture's support for biofuels like corn ethanol as the "answer" to our energy needs. America's farmers have a successful history of innovating to meet new demands. But U.S. politics on cap and trade has become largely a question of "What is in it for me?" rather than focusing on how agricultural practices can help address climate change.

Our responding is not optional - the scientific and international political realities of climate change are real, as is the need to act. Yes, there is debate about whether the practices and policies being proposed will significantly reduce global temperatures, but disagreement about effectiveness shouldn't obscure the fact that doing nothing ensures no progress.

From a legal perspective, something will happen. If Congress fails to act, the Environmental Protection Agency will regulate greenhouse gas emissions as required by a 2007 U.S. Supreme

Court ruling. Legislation may raise concerns but it will be friendlier and more tailored to agriculture's needs than EPA regulations.

The world is going to address climate change, and farmers and agriculture in other nations will lead in developing responses - many have no choice if they are to protect their land and futures. The COP 15 negotiations are a stage on which the willingness of nations to act and lead will be measured.

American agriculture is fond of congratulating itself for "feeding the world," even if the claim is far from true. The reality is most of the world tries to feed itself. The tragedy is that over 1 billion go hungry today, and climate change threatens even more. America may not feed the world, but we have long claimed a central role in leading it.

The climate-change debate is an opportunity for the United States - agriculture and farmers included - to live up to our self-image as leaders. Failing to do so risks America being seen as a self-serving nation in decline - a portrait our enemies and critics are happy to paint. My hope is we have the vision, courage and wisdom to rise to this occasion. That is why I am going to Copenhagen.

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