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Guest column: After Copenhagen: Make agriculture more resilient

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The observers and negotiators are home, and the hosts have cleaned up in Copenhagen. Commentators and critics are dissecting what happened - was it a failure or an important step forward? What you see depends on where you started.

If you hoped the talks could produce a treaty committing nations to drastic greenhouse gas reductions, you were optimistic. If you believed citizens and world leaders could unite to "bend the trend" in addressing climate change, you can find hope in the Copenhagen Accord. There was no disagreement over the need to act, but the complexity of addressing this global challenge proved daunting. How the talks may influence agriculture depends on how nations act on commitments they made.

Regardless of your view on climate change, agriculture needs to become more resilient. Perhaps our "unusually" wet fall that delayed harvest - and caused millions in crop losses across the South (over \$1 billion requested for disaster aid) - was just "the weather." But what if it's a preview of how climate change may increase farming's vulnerability? We care about our future, so we should plan for how we may need to adapt.

Adaptation and mitigation were key issues in Copenhagen. Helping farmers adapt is one role of the world's gene banks, like an international center for potatoes in Peru, a national program for corn in Ames, or private efforts by Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah. Gene banks may hold varieties adapted to environmental stress. Cary Fowler of the Global Crop Diversity Trust was among those who tried to include agriculture in the final agreement.

Rainforests were another key issue. Known as REDD for "reforestation and reducing forest destruction," negotiators made critical progress on international funding to protect rainforests. This has special resonance for Iowa farmers. It makes more economic and strategic sense to protect rainforests in Brazil than to plant new forests in Benton County. Saving rainforests preserves carbon-storing benefits and avoids huge emissions from their destruction. It is good for Iowa and the climate if rainforests stay intact, plus millions of new acres aren't planted to soybeans or grazed for beef, reducing competition.

The United States will not be "shaken down" or pay reparations for alleged climate crimes. But we should help fund progress going forward, such as preventing deforestation. Any international agreement, whatever its legal status whenever signed, must verify and monitor nations' actions - and protect our right to use trade adjustments for those unwilling to observe commitments. The talks show China remains a special concern due to its limited view of the rule of law and reluctance on international transparency.

One opportunity is to engage consumers by marketing food with a climate dimension. Efforts can be as simple as promoting local food, like Drake's Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign. Reducing the distance food travels - what Italians call "zero kilometer" meals - also strengthens and diversifies local

farm economies. Consumer involvement can take other forms, such as certifications Brazil is developing to ensure the beef and soy products retailers sell are not produced on illegally cleared rainforest. The key is using what farmers do - raising food and caring for land - to support climate friendly actions. This is different than developing new markets for practices such as sequestering carbon.

U.S. experience shows returns to farmers from carbon contracts are low in voluntary markets. If the House cap-and-trade bill passes, returns may grow, but developing new markets will have high transaction costs. Chasing dollars is only one reason to increase soil carbon. Researchers believe farming to increase soil carbon improves fertility, boosts yields and enhances water-holding capacity. If so, it shouldn't take the lure of new payments to see change. If farming to conserve carbon addresses soil erosion and water quality - agriculture's most troubling environmental impacts - the opportunity is even greater. Funding research is critical to helping farmers mitigate and adapt. This is why U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack had USDA join an international alliance on climate research. The potential benefits make it surprising some farm groups oppose addressing climate change.

Food security and climate change are linked - sides of one coin. Each day we wake up we should be thankful for living here. No matter our circumstance, we are better off than most people. The 1 billion facing hunger and starvation and the second billion living on \$2 a day represent a third of the world.

The majority are farmers, mostly women and their children, already facing climate threats. Drought, spreading pests, increasing sea levels and changing monsoons drive their demands for global action. They are in the cross hairs - the kill zone - of climate change. Fortunately, our economy and farms are stronger, but our relative advantages shouldn't delude us into thinking we are immune or without responsibility.

If climate change and food security are inexorably linked, then climate change and national security are as well.

We must find solutions to the world's food future. Our powerful economy and research system can help make agriculture a more resilient and powerful engine for progress. Iowa farmers will be part of the solution. The farmers I grew up with in Adams County know about doing the right thing - caring for their animals, tending their land, and trying to stay productive and profitable. Being part of the solution to climate change is doing the right thing. Agricultural leadership means embracing research on better farming practices to be more productive in a changing climate. Leadership also means constructive engagement in the processes our nation and world uses to shape the future. Copenhagen was just one step on a long, challenging journey we are taking together.
