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Roger Johnson and Preston Chiaro, Washington, column: Farming, coal mining and climate change

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WASHINGTON — On Monday and Tuesday, the world is coming to Bismarck.

At the International Climate Stewardship Solutions Conference, regional and international energy experts will convene to discuss how coal and agricultural states can take the lead in building a smart, clean, energy-independent foundation for a better tomorrow.

The world is now watching us. There is little doubt there will be consumer costs to making the transition to a lower carbon economy, but the costs are manageable and far less than what we currently pay for insurance, health care or defense.

Yet, the price tag for ignoring global climate change is daunting, both in terms of lost economic activity and damage to our environment.

Fortunately, we are in a good position thanks to abundant domestic renewable and low-carbon energy sources, such as wind and biofuels, and the chance to use coal more responsibly with advanced technologies that capture and store carbon dioxide.

Agriculture and coal are both vital parts of the U.S. economy, especially in the Midwest and northern Plains, and they can — in fact, must — be driving forces in the new energy economy and our energy security.

America's farmers and ranchers stand ready, willing and able to help in the fight against climate change, and the National Farmers Union is committed to helping Congress adopt smart climate policy that addresses agriculture's unique role.

A cap-and-trade program could give farmers and ranchers the chance to be part of the climate change solution by using soil carbon sequestration and methane from certain livestock projects. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that carbon sequestration by forests and agricultural lands offsets about 12 percent of annual greenhouse gas emissions, and they have the capacity to offset 20 percent of greenhouse gas emissions from all sectors of the economy.

Farmers Union believes the flexibility of a cap-and-trade program holds the most potential for achieving actual greenhouse gas emissions reductions, while mitigating increased costs.

Since its launch in 2006, the Farmers Union Carbon Credit Program has enrolled more than 5 million acres across 31 states. The organization is now the largest aggregator of agriculture carbon credits on the Chicago Climate Exchange.

Likewise, coal will remain pivotal in the coming decades, even as we aggressively expand renewable energy. Industry must commit to delivering carbon capture and storage with coal to achieve deep cuts in long-term CO2 emissions and a secure, reliable and affordable energy supply.

And while carbon capture and storage often is portrayed as an emerging and unproven technology, important large-scale commercial applications are already successfully and safely deployed around the world.

Dakota Gasification at Beulah, N.D., leads the world in coal with carbon capture and storage, capturing nearly 3 million tons of CO2 annually. The CO2 is piped to Saskatchewan and injected into an aging oilfield. This forces otherwise unrecoverable oil to the surface in a safe, decades-old commercial process called enhanced oil recovery, thus providing domestic petroleum at a much lower CO2 footprint than imported alternatives.

The time to make the right strategic decisions for the future is now. We are ready to work with business and agricultural leaders to put the policy, infrastructure, resources and human capital to work and speed the transition to the new energy economy, and we must do so now.

The timing couldn't be better. We have the technology; we have the opportunity. We need congressional support, business support and Herald readers' support.

Let's take this chance to create a better world for our children and grandchildren.

History is calling us.

Johnson, North Dakota's former agriculture secretary, is president of the National Farmers Union. Chiaro is CEO of energy and minerals for the London-based Rio Tinto, one of the world's largest mining and exploration companies.

Johnson and Chiaro both are featured speakers at next week's climate-change conference in Bismarck.

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