



# ORGANIC FARMING RESEARCH FOUNDATION

*Fostering the improvement and widespread adoption of organic farming.*

April 7, 2021

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

The Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) congratulates you on your nomination and confirmation to serve as Secretary of Agriculture. In this, our first communication with you since you have taken back the reins at USDA, we want to highlight five key administrative actions that we very much hope you will take in the coming weeks and months. We have also provided more detailed agency-by-agency recommendations in the attached document.

First, we urge you to appoint a Department-wide organic policy coordinator, a position you wisely put in place during the Obama years but lapsed these past four years. Organic food and farming issues touch nearly every aspect of the Department, and we believe that having someone to ride herd on organic issues, coordinate across agencies, and bring pressing considerations and choices to your attention was and is an excellent idea and should be re-instituted.

Second, on a related note, we urge you to resuscitate the Department's Organic Working Group and re-establish its direct communication with stakeholders. The once vibrant and active Working Group has receded in recent years and has completely lost the aspect of its work that brought organic stakeholders into contact with the Working Group on a regular basis.

Third, as a research organization we urge you to work raise REE funding for organic to its fair share. Organic is six percent of the market, yet less than two percent of the REE funding stream. We believe concrete plans need to be developed and implemented, with clear metrics for progress, if the bias against organic research is ever going to be adequately addressed. A clear directive from the top to achieve a fair share goal during the next four years is the critical first step. We urge you to issue such a directive this year and to simultaneously encourage NIFA to adjust Requests for Proposals to include organic, and ARS to establish a five-year organic research plan, as detailed in the attachment.

Fourth, we strongly recommend addressing the Organic Certification Cost Share Program funding crisis. As you know, the already meager \$750 maximum cost-share payment was reduced to \$500 as the result of a funding shortfall that was

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Brise Tencer

not anticipated by Congress and was not communicated by the previous Administration until there was no time to do anything about it. We trust you will take immediate action to restore the \$750 maximum, and work with the organic community and the Department's statisticians and economists to work toward a more adequate payment rate in the next Farm Bill.

Fifth, there is much that can and should be done in the conservation program arena to help foster transitions to organic production with all the soil health and climate benefits that would result from more widespread adoption. Here we will just note one item that we believe deserves immediate attention—directing NRCS to flesh out a robust Organic Initiative within the Conservation Stewardship Program. Congress laid the groundwork for this in the 2018 Farm Bill, but the agency has not yet taken advantage of the opportunity in a meaningful way.

With respect to budget requests for FY 2022 and the years following, we recommend:

- An increase for research under the Organic Transitions Program to \$10 million for FY 23 and \$15 million for FY 24.
- An appropriation for the Organic Research and Extension Initiative of \$20 million for each of FY 23 and FY 24.
- An investment of at least \$80 million per year in ARS research funding for organic research by FY 26, with significant stair-step increases proposed for each fiscal year beginning in FY 2022. In recent years, ARS organic research has fallen to just \$12 million, or less than one percent of total ARS research spending, far from a fair share of six percent.
- Sufficient appropriated funding in both FY 22 and FY 23 to restore the Organic Certification Cost Share Program to the level needed to restore payments to a maximum of \$750 per scope.

Finally, with respect to the American Jobs Act plan, we hope that CSP and other farm bill conservation programs will see substantial funding increases to address climate change and related resource issues, and that within the agricultural research dollars included there will be significant attention to the pressing research needs of organic agriculture.

Thank you for your consideration of these high priority items. We look forward to working with you and your staff to restore organic agriculture to its rightful place at the Department. Please do not hesitate to be in touch with us if we can be of assistance to you as you move forward.

Sincerely,



Brise Tencer  
Executive Director