



ORGANIC FARMING RESEARCH FOUNDATION

fostering the improvement and widespread adoption of organic farming

March 29, 2019

Mr. Stephen Censky
Deputy Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Jefferson Dr., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Docket: USDA-2019-0002

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**RE: 2018 Research, Education, and Economics Farm Bill
Implementation Listening Session**

Dear Mr. Censky,

Thank you for this opportunity to present recommendations from the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) for research, education, and extension efforts across multiple agencies within USDA.

As the organic community continues to experience exponential growth, the support of the USDA REE has been instrumental in contributing to a better understanding of the science of organic production, the economics of the booming organic sector, and supporting outreach to producers and consumers. It is vital that the USDA continue to invest resources into organic research, extension, and education as this segment of U.S. agriculture continues to expand. Research, extension, and education are vital to the growth and development of food and agricultural systems.

The organic sector is built upon the hard work and dedication of organic producers around the country, and these farmers and ranchers deserve robust research, education, and extension support. While USDA has invested a small percentage in organic agriculture, too often organic farmers and ranchers receive little or no support from their research universities, county extension agents, certified crop advisors, and even local USDA offices. As outlined in OFRF's report, *Taking Stock: Analyzing and Reporting of Organic Research Investments, 2002-2014*, there are still many areas of organic agriculture that require scientific research and analysis.

Since 1990, OFRF has been working to foster the continuous improvement and widespread adoption of organic farming systems. OFRF



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sponsors organic farming research and education projects, and disseminates the results to organic farmers and growers interested in adopting organic production systems. One unique facet of OFRF grant projects is close collaboration with farmers. Projects with strong farmer collaboration tend to be grounded in the real-world challenges faced by producers. Farmer involvement translates into strong projects, which often produce results that are quickly adopted by the industry.

As consumer demand for organic products soars, there is a growing need for solutions to organic farming challenges, training for future agriculture producers and leaders, and information on organic agriculture. OFRF's *2016 National Organic Research Agenda (NORA)* provides an in-depth understanding of the state of organic agriculture in the U.S. and informs USDA, universities, agricultural extension agents, farmers, ranchers, and organic stakeholders and others on how research, education, and extension activities can be focused to meet the needs of the organic sector.

Research, Extension, and Education Priority Areas

Based on OFRF's NORA and Taking Stock reports, we recommend that future priorities related to organic agriculture be in the following areas:

Priority Area One: Production

- The connection between different tillage practices and the loss of soil carbon.
- The effects of cover crops, compost, and diverse rotations on fertility rates.
- Strategies for building soil organic matter.
- The needs of soil microbes and their role in crop health and disease and weed suppression.
- Insect and disease management interactions with soil biology, including nematode control.
- The best ways to source effective and affordable soil amendments.
- Soil health in urban environments.
- How economic or racial disparities influence soil management practices.
- Best approaches to disseminate best cultural practices to farmers and ranchers.

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Priority Area Two: Social Science

- Identify social obstacles preventing farmers from entering organic production.
- Better quantify the environmental benefits of organic farming systems.
- Assess the effectiveness of peer mentoring systems.
- How to target young beginning farmers, and increase their adoption of organic farming systems (32 percent of organic farm operators in 2015 were beginning farmers, and those with less than 5 years of experience made up 25 percent.
- Crop insurance is important for farmers to have a secure future and for us to secure a healthy food system.
- Labor challenge in fruit and vegetable farming in general and organic in particular. This labor problem is partly because of immigration policy.
- Input costs are very high for organic, including technology, seeds, soil amendments, and pesticides. How do we improve the supply of organic inputs?

Priority Area Three: Emerging Issues

- The link between organic practices to create healthy soils and improve the nutritional quality of products leading to improved health and nutrition of those consuming organic products.
- Soil Health is now a statutory priority area for the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative. While NIFA has done a wonderful job of supporting soil health research through this program, we look forward to NIFA furthering the science behind soil health and organic agriculture.

Research, Extension, and Education Recommendations

Fund Diverse Organic Research Based on Research Needs Identified by Organic Farmers and Ranchers.

As the USDA NIFA prepares to increase investment into organic agriculture to \$50 million/year by 2023 (Sec. 7210 of the 2018 Farm Bill), research funding programs and supporting agencies for outreach and extension should be directed to address challenges identified by organic farmers and ranchers across the country. As many organic practices are

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culturally and regionally specific, this will ensure USDA is identifying research needs and supporting robust scientific analysis across the country. Providing research funding and support for regionally adaptive organic research has proven to make lasting impacts on organic agriculture. Ensuring farmers needs are being addressed by NIFA supported organic research will enhance the quality and value of adoption of research results by producers.

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Fund Education Program Development, Outreach, and Extension Services to Ensure that Organic Farmers and Ranchers Receive the Support They Need

As consumer demand for organic products soars, there is a growing need for solutions to organic farming challenges. However, research alone will not overcome barriers and advance the organic sector. Extension and education, which transfer research-based information from the researchers to organic farmers and the organic community, is a crucial component necessary to bring information directly to the people who can create positive changes within organic agriculture.

While USDA NIFA organic research programs often require education or outreach components as part of a successful program, these initiatives are often not sufficient to ensure broad dissemination and adoption of cutting-edge organic agriculture research and techniques. At OFRF, we do our best to conduct outreach and education to organic farmers and ranchers across the country, based on the latest research and data. There are many other organizations that provide education and outreach to the organic farming community. However, without the help and support of USDA REE, these efforts are not enough.

The USDA has a number of resources that support education for organic farmers, including programs at Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). These agencies have State Organic Champions that are supposed to be experts in federal programs for organic agriculture. While some organic education and outreach programs are regional and others are national, there is still a demonstrated need around the country for organic agriculture education and extension to directly support organic agriculture.



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Therefore, we urge USDA REE to work to build and support the USDA Organic Champions through education and outreach (Sec. 7210). In the past, NIFA has had a program staff assigned as liaison to each state for direct communication with educational institutions, extension, and community about funding programs. Staff assigned to each state as Organic Champions could work in a similar role for better understanding of research, education, and economic programs being provided by NIFA, ERS, NASS, etc.

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One specific area for additional coordination and collaboration is Sec. 11108 of the 2018 Farm Bill, calling for education on organic and sustainable practices for crop insurance. We strongly urge NIFA's Extension Risk Management Education Program to take this under advisement as a key area for education and outreach.

Support the Organic Specific Research, Data Collection, and Economic Analysis of ERS and NASS

Consumer demand for organically produced goods has shown double-digit growth during most years since the 1990s, providing market incentives for U.S. farmers across a broad range of products. Organic products are now available in nearly 3 out of 4 grocery stores, and often have substantial price premiums over conventional products. Economics has been a strong driver of USDA certified organic agriculture, and the research and data of the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) has been vital to understanding this sector.

Funding for organic research, certification cost-share assistance, and other USDA programs has been increasing since 2002, when national organic standards were implemented. USDA research and federal policy initiatives have played a key role in the adoption of new farming technologies and systems, including organic agriculture. USDA ERS has conducted extremely important research for the organic sector, including comparing the cost of production and the economic returns for organic and conventional production in major crop/livestock sectors, and analyzing other economic characteristics of organic agriculture. This research and data has been vital as the USDA certified organic sector grows.

We urge the strong support of the USDA ERS to conduct research and economic analysis as growth in organic agricultural production is



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occurring in both developed and developing countries worldwide, and the competition for major consumer markets in the United States is increasing.

In addition to economic analysis, statistical analysis and data collection is vital to the \$50 billion U.S. organic sector. Since 2008, the USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service has conducted organic surveys and provided acreage, production, and sales data for a variety of organic crop and livestock commodities as well as organic marketing and agricultural practices. These data collection efforts surveyed all known certified, exempt, and transitioning organic operations in the U.S. Previous surveys were also conducted in cooperation with the USDA's Risk Management Agency in an effort to expand the number and variety of premium price elections for certified organic crops. In coordination with USDA National Organic Program, these NASS surveys are important for the entire organic community to fully understand the growth and scale of organic agriculture in the U.S.

Congress has continued to provide funding for NASS, ERS, and AMS to conduct research and data analysis through the Organic Data Initiative. This program received both mandatory funding in the 2018 Farm Bill (Sec. 10103 and discretionary funding via annual appropriations. Without an organic coordinator at USDA, there has been less coordination between the USDA National Organic Program and the statistical and research agencies that are conducting vital research on USDA Certified Organics. We urge USDA REE to continue research, data collection, and analysis for the organic sector, and ensure close coordination between various USDA agencies.

Ensure that ARS Continues to Support and Research on Organic Agriculture

The Agriculture Research Service (ARS) is USDA's principal in-house scientific research agency, responsible for developing solutions to a wide range of agricultural problems that affect Americans every day, from field to table. The objective of ARS Organic Agriculture research is to help producers compete effectively in the marketplace to meet consumer demand by producing high quality and safe products.

We have heard that several of the organic specific studies at USDA have not received adequate funding for their research and infrastructure. Cutting

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edge organic research has been conducted by ARS researchers, and we strongly urge USDA to continue to provide robust support for ARS organic agriculture research.

ARS Organic Agriculture Research Focus:

- Develop transition strategies for conventional-to-organic production systems with known risk of economic loss.
- Identify genetic plant growth efficiency mechanisms and combine with soil fertility management strategies to increase crop productivity with improved cultivars suited to organic production conditions.
- Develop whole-system biological-based management strategies for weed, insect pest, and disease control using preventive approaches as first defense, and therapeutic controls as rescue practices.
- Assess the prevalence of pathogens and their transport that can be associated with fresh produce from organic and conventional production systems, and develop whole-systems strategies to prevent their occurrence and growth.
- Develop whole-system biological-based management strategies for weed, insect pest, and disease control using preventive approaches as first defense, and therapeutic controls as rescue practices.
- Develop whole-system biological-based management strategies for prevention of parasites in small ruminant grazing animals.
- Determine the effects of organic production practices and whole-farm systems on ecosystem services, and provide guidelines that contribute to support of USDA Farm Bill Conservation Title.
- Identify optimal whole-farm strategies to integrate crop and livestock enterprises to increase on-farm resource utilization, minimize purchased production input needs, increase farm gate profitability with reduced risk of economic loss, and enhance natural resource quality.
- Develop market-driven production strategies to satisfy urban population center demand for regional organic and other specialty

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food products, and diversify food supply chains for increased National food security.

As stakeholders, OFRF hopes these recommendations will help improve the efforts at USDA in general and REE specifically as they continue to work to improve all agriculture. We look forward to working with you to further the research, education, and economics of organic agriculture.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Brise Tencer
Executive Director
Organic Farming Research Foundation

Michael Stein
Policy Associate
Organic Farming Research Foundation

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