

Funding for organic research makes strides

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AMES, Iowa -- Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation, says funding for organic research made strides in the 2008 farm bill, but it still has a long way to go.

"Thanks to Sen. Tom Harkin, organic farming research received \$18 million per year, but we're still only halfway to where we should be," said Scowcroft, keynote speaker at the recent Iowa Organic Conference at Iowa State University.

Scowcroft said his organization, which funds research, was founded by organic farmers who believed that "since we've done everything else ourselves in organics why not create a foundation and give away money to identify the science behind what we already know works."

"Organic has been there since the 1940s, but it has not been able to articulate through peer-reviewed, public domain research how cover crops set nitrogen or why pests are important to keep beneficial insects on your farm," Scowcroft said.

Scowcroft's organization has awarded more than \$2.2 million in \$5,000 to \$10,000 increments during its 19-year history. Its board of directors is largely composed of farmers. Its focus is on systems.

In the late 1990s, the group created a policy program to advocate for its fair share of federal agricultural research dollars.

"Ten years ago, we did a study that showed that out of 30,000 USDA agricultural research projects, just 35 were explicitly organic, that's 0.1 percent," Scowcroft said. "We've always had a fair-share philosophy. Organics is 3.5 percent of the market place so we should be getting \$35 million."

Scowcroft said his organization has become a voice for organic research nationally. Federal funding has increased from \$3 million per year in 2002 to \$18 million for 2009.

The organization posts all its research reports on its website www.ofrf.org and sends organic farmers a newsletter twice each year with research summaries. The organization's data base includes 13,000 organic farmers.

"We're not a membership organization," Scowcroft said. "Our founding board felt that organic farmers already had to pay for everything retail while conventional farmers were subsidized at every level, so we decided we would raise the money to give away everything we do free of charge to any farmer that wants it."

Scowcroft applauded Iowa's work in building an organic industry. The state certifies 200 growers and more than 50 processors.

Kathleen Delate, head of ISU's Organic Program, said Iowa has the fourth largest number of organic farmers in the country. They raise about 100,000 acres of organic crops. The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship is a leader with five staff members working in its organic program. ISU ranks in the top five in the country for organic research and education activities.

Delate said ISU's organic research plots averaged 184 bushels per acre for corn and 55 bushels per acre for soybeans in 2008, impressive in a year when crops sat in water for several weeks.

"Our cost of production analysis consistently shows that the return for organics is twice what it is for conventional crops taking into account all costs," Delate said.