

ORGANIC AGRICULTURE RESEARCH PROGRAMS AT THE USDA:

Purposes, Funding, Project Examples, and Key Challenges



Certified Organic products now account for **6% of U.S. food sales** and **over 15% of produce sales**, yet **less than 2% of USDA research dollars**—approximately **\$75 million** across the ARS and NIFA budgets—are dedicated to **organic systems**. USDA's research programs provide the foundation for all farmers to meet growing consumer demand, reduce reliance on imported food and inputs, and ultimately strengthen rural economies. Organic producers continue to face agronomic and socioeconomic challenges related to meeting the consistently growing domestic demand for organic products, leading to increased imports of these goods. Without continued and consistent increases in funding for organic research, this gap will only increase. The agencies and programs outlined below are the primary drivers of organic research and extension activities.

AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH SERVICE (ARS)

Research into organic agriculture topics

- USDA's in-house research agency, ARS operates labs and field stations nationwide. Organic research has included projects on cover crop integration in vegetable systems in CA, organic dairy herd health in WI, and long-term crop trials in MD.
- Funding:
 - ARS does not receive any mandatory funding from the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC); instead, it relies on annual appropriations and report language to inform the agency's funding and research priorities.
 - Current dedicated organic research funding within the agency totals \$15 million of a \$1.7 billion budget, less than one percent of its budget.
 - ARS' Organic Research Roadmap (2022) identified a need for at least \$20 million in additional annual funding to address research gaps and support the industry.
- Key Challenges:
 - Agency-wide staffing challenges (nearly 1,300 ARS employees, over 15%, took deferred resignation) slow the capacity to expand and conduct organic research.
 - National Security Memo barring foreign citizens from participating in research funded through USDA sources.
 - USDA Reorganization, which included shutting down the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center and further cuts to ARS.
- Congressional Direction: FY26 House Ag Approps report language stated, “Organic Agriculture Research.—The Committee notes the growing demand for organic products and provides no less than the fiscal year 2025 level for organic agriculture research.”

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE (NIFA)

Competitive grant programs

- While ARS conducts research for the USDA, NIFA's mission is to provide grants to research institutions, including ARS and the Land-Grant Universities. About \$57.5 million of NIFA's \$1.9 billion portfolio is dedicated to organic-specific programs, though some general-purpose grants also fund organic projects.
- Funding:
 - NIFA funds research at universities, nonprofits, and ARS through competitive grant programs. Depending on the program, some receive mandatory funding as part of the Farm Bill's direction to use CCC funding, some are authorized by the Farm Bill for appropriations, and some are Integrated Activities of NIFA funded by appropriations.
- Key Challenges:
 - Agency-wide staffing challenges due to the effects of the administration's Deferred Resignation Programs have cut staffing by ~15%.
 - In FY25, NIFA will not release Requests for Applications (RFAs) for several major programs, including OREI. This disrupts the typical grant cycle (applications due in winter, decisions made in late spring/early summer, funding dispersed by fall) and risks delaying new research until 2026.
 - Costs of conducting research are steadily increasing, but the budgets for these programs have largely stayed the same over the past 5 years, meaning that less research can get done with the same amount of funding. This leaves fewer resources for both farmers and researchers to address their challenges.

A. ORGANIC RESEARCH AND EXTENTION INITIATIVE (OREI)



Above: Texas A&M researchers collect mid-season data on organic cotton growth and pests in the Texas High Plains. Award #2023-51300-40849.

Below: Variety selections for OSPREY Seed Yield Trials. Photo: Molly Travis, Organic Seed Alliance. Award #2024-51300-43056.



- **Purpose:** The flagship NIFA competitive grant program is dedicated to organic agricultural research. It supports research, education, and extension programs that enhance the ability of organic producers and processors to grow and market high-quality products.
- **Funding Mechanism:** Farm Bill Mandatory, [7 USC § 5925b](#); starting in 2023, OREI receives \$50 million per year in permanent mandatory funding through the Farm Bill, and up to \$25 million in additional authorized annual appropriations, but that has not been used in the past decade.
- **Project Examples:** Penn State University's [Improving Productivity of Organic Small Grain Production in North East](#), UConn's [Enhancing Microbial Safety and Production Efficiency in Organic Poultry Farming](#), Texas A&M's [Fostering Sustainable Organic Cotton Production in the US](#), and Organic Seed Alliance's [Organic Seed Production Resources on Economics and Yield \(OSPREY\)](#).

B. ORGANIC TRANSITIONS PROGRAM (ORG)

- **Purpose:** Awards grants for production and competitive-based agricultural issues, especially for farmers transitioning to organic production systems.
- **Funding Mechanism:** §406 Integrated Activity, [7 USC § 7626](#). FY26 House and Senate Agriculture Appropriations bills gave level funding.
- **Project Examples:** Clemson University's [Increasing Coastal Organic Rice Production in South Carolina Using Salt-Tolerant Cultivars](#), University of Tennessee's [Tapping the Potential of Double Cropping for Profitable Organic Grain and Forage Production in the Southeast US](#), and Washington State University's [Living Mulch and Grazing Techniques to Improve Soil Health and Weed Control for Farmers Transitioning to Organic Farming Across Climatic Zones](#).

C. SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE RESEARCH AND EDUCATION PROGRAM (SARE)

- **Purpose:** USDA's longest-running sustainable agriculture grants program. While not exclusively organic, SARE has funded thousands of farmer-driven projects, including many led by organic and transitioning producers.
- **Funding Mechanism:** Farm Bill Authorized, [7 USC §§ 5814, 5821, 5831, 5832](#). Authorized to receive \$60 million in annual appropriations, but historically has not met that threshold. FY26 House Ag Appropriations Bill \$40 million, Senate Ag Appropriations Bill \$48 million.
- **Project Examples:** University of Wisconsin-Madison's [Ecological and Genetic Assessment of Colorado Potato Beetle \(CPB\) Insecticide Resistance Risk on WI Organic Potato Farms](#), California Polytechnic State University's [Evaluation of Organic Soil Treatments for Managing Lettuce Fusarium Wilt Disease](#), and North Dakota State University's [Reducing Fusarium Wilt Pressure in Organic Tomato Production Systems using Allium Species](#).

D. SPECIALTY CROP RESEARCH INITIATIVE (SCRI)

- **Purpose:** SCRI is a NIFA competitive grant program that provides resources for research and extension projects for the [specialty crop](#) industry. Organic's share of SCRI-funded projects is highly variable — as low as 3% in 2023, but as high as 13% in 2021 — depending on applicant pool and USDA priorities.
- **Funding Mechanism:** Farm Bill Mandatory, [7 USC § 7632](#). OBBB increased mandatory funding for SCRI from \$80 million to \$175 million.
- **Congressional Direction:** FY26 Senate Ag Approps Bill, [report language](#) "Given the growing demand for organic products, the Committee also encourages USDA to increase the number of organic research projects funded under AFRI and the Specialty Crop Research Initiative."
- **Project Examples:** UC Davis' [Delivering Breeding and Management Solutions to Prevent Losses to Emerging and Expanding Disease Threats in Strawberry](#), Hawaii Agriculture Research Center's [Developing an efficient breeding pipeline for producing CLR-resistant coffee cultivars and maintain unique quality](#), and University of Arkansas's [Development of germplasm resources and molecular breeding tools to combat diseases in US spinach production](#).

E. AGRICULTURE AND FOOD RESEARCH INITIATIVE (AFRI)



Field robots developed through Iowa State's AI Institute for Resilient Agriculture (AIIRA). Award #2021-67021-35329.

- **Purpose:** AFRI is a research, education, and extension competitive grant program that covers a wide range of topics, from improving rural economies, increasing food production, ensuring food safety and security, enhancing human nutrition, and training the next generation of the agricultural workforce. A range of 2-5% of AFRI funds are awarded to organic topics on an annual basis.
- **Funding Mechanism:** Farm Bill Authorized, [7 USC § 3157\(b\)\(11\)\(A\)](#). Authorized to receive \$700 million in annual appropriations, but historically has not met that threshold. FY26 House Ag Approps Bill \$405 million; FY26 Senate Ag Approps Bill \$445 million.

- **Congressional Direction:** Language was included in the [FY26 House Ag Approps report](#) and the [FY26 Senate Ag Approps report](#), and previous reports have encouraged NIFA to align AFRI RFAs with organic research priorities, but follow-through remains inconsistent.
- **Project Examples:** University of Illinois's [Assessing the Importance of Free-Living Nitrogen Fixation in Organic Systems](#), University of Idaho's [Engineering Research and Development of a Prototype Hydrochar Production System for Phosphorus Cycling from Dairy Manure](#), and Iowa State University's [AI Institute: AIIRA: AI Institute for Resilient Agriculture](#).

IN CONCLUSION

Organic agriculture research remains significantly underfunded compared to market demand and farmer needs. Although each of these USDA programs is essential, they collectively account for less than 2% of USDA's research budget, while the sector makes up 6% of the food market. Future appropriations and Farm Bill discussions will be crucial in determining whether organic farmers have the tools they need to meet the rising demand for organic products.



For additional information or to learn about organic research projects in your state or district, please contact:

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