



OFRF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS 2020

ORGANIC AGRICULTURE IS BUILT ON SOIL HEALTH

Organic agriculture has the potential to sequester carbon, mitigate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, reduce environmental impacts related to fertilizer and pesticide use, and build resilience to extreme weather events. Implementing regenerative organic agriculture systems is the best approach to mitigating climate change and its impacts on farms, ranches, rural communities, and food systems. Best organic farming practices continuously regenerate the soil, enhancing our soils' ability to store carbon and be more resilient to increasingly erratic weather events.

To enhance regenerative organic agriculture's potential to address the climate crisis, Congress needs to increase investments in organic agriculture research, remove barriers and strengthen support for organic systems, and promote the widespread adoption of organic agriculture through technical assistance.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Federal policy should provide incentives and technical support to facilitate the adoption of organic production systems and practices that both mitigate climate change impacts and help farmers, ranchers, and rural communities cope with a rapidly changing climate. Outreach, involvement, and participation by farmers of color and limited-resource farmers should be prioritized in conservation, research, and organic programs.

To continue improving and expanding organic production systems and their climate mitigating ability, further research is needed to advance our understanding of organic farming practices that sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and build resilience. Congress can support organic agriculture as a climate change solution by adopting the following OFRF policy recommendations.

1. ***Increase funding for research to reduce GHG emissions, and enhance carbon sequestration and climate resilience in organic production systems.***
 - Congress should significantly increase federal funding for USDA competitive grant research programs such as the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI), Organic Transitions Program (ORG), and the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program, with a focus on effective climate change strategies in the agriculture sector. Additional priority should be given to sustainable and organic research, education, and extension across USDA REE supported programs. Tribal Nations and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers should be involved in research from the outset to develop the best, most practical, and applicable solutions with farmer buy-in.
 - USDA research programs should prioritize climate mitigation and adaptation research within new and existing programs. In particular, research and education efforts should focus on optimizing carbon sequestration and climate resilience in certified organic production systems. Priority should be given to projects investigating practical on-farm practices and systems that increase stable carbon sequestration and optimize nutrient cycling to minimize nitrous oxide emissions from agricultural

soils, improved methods for measuring soil organic carbon, and evaluation of the greenhouse gas footprint of different livestock and integrated crop livestock production systems.

- Investment in public plant and animal breeding research is vital for climate-resilient organic agriculture. Resilient organic agricultural systems rely on plant varieties and animal breeds selected to perform under organic management systems, specific local soil and climate conditions, forage availability, and pest regimes. OFRF calls for an increase in research resources for the development of publicly available seeds and animal breeds adapted to regional climates through AFRI, OREI, and other USDA research programs. For example, OREI has supported farmer-participatory and classical plant breeding and cultivar development specifically for organic systems. With expanded funding, OREI will be better able to provide expanded and long-term support for both plant and animal breeding for the organic sector. Similarly, AFRI and other USDA research programs should prioritize public plant and animal breeding with an emphasis on climate resilience.

2. *Incentivize climate-friendly farming practices and ensure organic farmers can effectively access federal conservation programs.*

- Increase funding for federal conservation programs and support organic producers' participation in the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation programs to make agriculture more resilient in the face of climate change, and to help farmers reduce greenhouse gas emissions. More support is needed to ensure organic producers can access NRCS conservation programs by aligning NRCS conservation practice standards with organic production practices, training NRCS staff in organic systems so they can provide adequate assistance to organic farmers and those seeking to transition to organic, and providing more organic-specific options through programs like the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Organic farmers should be recognized and financially rewarded for their contribution to soil health, carbon sequestration, and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

3. *Promote transition to organic agriculture by providing incentives and addressing barriers, while protecting the integrity of the organic label.*

- Congress can support the transition to organic agriculture by increasing reimbursement rates for certification cost-share programs, creating an advance payment option for socially disadvantaged and limited-resource producers applying to certification cost-share programs, and by removing the separate lower payment limit for organic producers under EQIP. As more acres transition to organic production, Congress and USDA must protect the integrity of the organic label through enforcement of organic standards, particularly those related to soil health.

4. *Complete the research cycle by investing in education, Extension, and outreach.*

- Research advances the development of tools for organic farmers and ranchers to enhance carbon sequestration, mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, and improve resilience of farming operations. These research findings need to be verified, delivered, demonstrated and adopted by the agricultural community at large. Funding and support for the University Extension system is critical to support widespread adoption of the latest findings and tools. Farmers need a trusted scientific resource to be successful. Thus, providing full funding and support to train Extension, NRCS, and other agency personnel can ensure that federal investments in organic agriculture research provide the greatest return on investment.