



ORGANIC FARMING RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Fostering the improvement and widespread adoption of organic farming.

November 12, 2020

Dear Mr. President-Elect Biden and Ms. Vice President-Elect Harris,

The Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) would like to congratulate you and the Biden team on the result of the election. We look forward to working with the Biden Administration and its transition team on organic agricultural issues and the intersection of organic agriculture and the climate crisis.

[OFRF](#) is a national non-profit organization that works to foster the improvement and widespread adoption of organic farming systems. OFRF cultivates organic research, education, and federal policies that bring more farmers and acreage into organic production. Over the past 27 years, OFRF has awarded over 300 small grants (totaling over \$3 million) to producers and researchers trialing innovative organic strategies to build soil health and fertility; manage pests, plant pathogens, and weeds; and develop improved crop cultivars for organic farming systems. Many of these grants provided seed money for initial “proof of concept” studies that provided a foundation for larger endeavors funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other sources, and led to substantial practical outcomes for organic and other producers.

In this letter, we summarize major topics relevant to organic agriculture and its role in mitigating the climate crisis, which is one of the many issues that the Biden Administration will need to address as it gears up and gets started. Included are recommendations for administrative actions during your first 100 days and first year in office that address key issues in organic agriculture as it relates to climate change. These include:

- increasing investment in organic agricultural research;
- improving participation by organic farmers and ranchers in federal conservation programs;
- promoting widespread adoption of organic agriculture through technical assistance; and
- scaling up plant and animal breeding research to meet the challenges brought on by a changing climate.

Organic agriculture has the potential to sequester carbon (C), mitigate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, protect water quality and reduce environmental impacts related to fertilizer and pesticide use, and build resilience to extreme weather events. OFRF [summarized](#) best organic farming and ranching practices to sequester carbon, mitigate nitrous oxide (N₂O) and other GHG emissions, and build healthy, resilient soils and agro-ecosystems that can sustain production and profitability in the face of a rapidly changing climate. While further research is urgently needed to realize the full potential of organic and sustainable systems to mitigate and adapt to climate change, there is sufficient science-based knowledge to formulate federal policy and programming that supports practices to help producers meet the climate challenge and be part of the solution.

Incentivizing and implementing organic agriculture systems is key 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 build resilience to increasingly erratic weather events.



ORGANIC FARMING RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Fostering the improvement and widespread adoption of organic farming.

The following are actionable steps the Biden Administration can take within the first 100 days to enhance organic agriculture's capacity to address the climate crisis:

1. Support organic specific research at USDA through increases in budget requests and programmatic changes. Current funding levels should be at least tripled so USDA-funded organic research is at a level commensurate with organic's six percent market share. The major vehicles to achieve this goal are the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI), Organic Transitions (ORG), the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), other extramural research programs, and the Agricultural Research Service (ARS).

- Ensure each year's budget requests propose a tripling of funding for organic research so that it is commensurate with organic's market share of six percent.
- Emphasize the following research areas in Request for Applications (RFAs) for both OREI and ORG:
 - Soil health and fertility management to sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and build resilience to climate change stresses;
 - Systems-level approaches to weed, pest, and disease management to minimize pesticide use, conserve biodiversity, and enhance carbon sequestration;
 - Organic livestock and poultry, advanced grazing management, and crop- livestock integration to sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and enhance climate resilience of livestock production systems; and
 - Public plant and animal breeding research for organic production systems and resilience to a changing climate.
- Develop searchable databases of all OREI and ORG projects similar to the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, providing links to major outcomes for each project to increase farmer adoption of research innovations in organic agriculture.
- Ensure a balance of funding for smaller research proposals with simple goals and on-the-ground methods with larger, more complex, and multi-institutional projects.
- Invite proposals for a meta-analysis of previous research endeavors (OREI, ORG, and other research programs) on carbon sequestration and GHG mitigation in organic systems, and on co-management of soil quality, plant nutrition, and weeds in organic systems.
- Ensure that federally funded organic research is tracking the needs of organic producers. OFRF routinely conducts surveys, supported by OREI funding, to determine the research needs of the organic community. The next National Organic Research Agenda (NORA) report is scheduled to be published in 2021 and OFRF will provide copies to the Biden Administration and USDA staff.
- Increase the number of graduate student-led organic research projects funded through OREI and expand overall support for graduate student led organic research through both OREI and ORG, as well as other funding mechanisms for graduate and post-doctoral research.
- Prioritize funding for organic agriculture research projects under the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), USDA's flagship competitive grant research program. While AFRI



ORGANIC FARMING RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Fostering the improvement and widespread adoption of organic farming.

funding has increased in recent years, research funding focused on organic production has not kept pace.

- Continue and expand support and funding for organic agriculture research through the SARE program.
- Expand funding for organic agriculture research through ARS, especially the Sustainable Agricultural Systems Research (National Program 216), and also Grass, Forage, and Rangeland Ecosystems (National Program 215), Food Animal Production (National Program 101), Crop Production (National Program 305), and other National Programs.
- Devote \$60 million of ARS's \$1 billion in annual funding to organic-specific research. This will help address the gap between research investment in organic and organic's current market share of six percent. Additional funding for organic research will help continue to expand growth in organic agriculture and address barriers to widespread adoption.

2. Promote breeding and development of new public crop cultivars for resilience to climate disruption and performance in climate-mitigating organic 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 pressures.

Launch a department-wide public plant and animal breeding research initiative that commits federal resources to public cultivar and livestock breed development, thereby reversing the decades long trend of disinvesting in our public breeding research infrastructure, a trend that has harmed our nation's farmers. The Biden Administration should engage the widest array of stakeholders in these efforts to develop a long-term strategic plan for restoring the U.S. as a leader in plant and animal breeding research innovation in the face of agricultural, global food security, climate change, and public health challenges.

- Develop a comprehensive national plan to restore funding and institutional capacity for public plant and animal breeding, with a focus on regional adaptation, organic production systems, and climate resiliency.
- Invest at least \$50 million per year in ARS research funding and an additional \$50 million per year in extramural research funding to support designated and distinct public breeding and cultivar development research within competitive programs and intramural research.
- Separately fund the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) Request for Applications on Public Cultivar and Breed Development at \$10 million per year.
- Expand support for graduate student led public plant and animal breeding research through AFRI, OREI, SCRI, and other funding mechanisms for graduate and post-doctoral research.



ORGANIC FARMING RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Fostering the improvement and widespread adoption of organic farming.

- Elevate stakeholder engagement to identify and prioritize breeding needs of the agricultural community in the face of a changing climate, emerging regional food systems, and the growth in demand for organic commodities by:
 - Holding a stakeholder input session early in the new Administration to set the agenda for the next term;
 - Establishing a White House Office of Science and Technology Policy Liaison for Public Breeding;
 - Directing USDA's Research, Education, and Extension Office (REE) to coordinate public plant and animal breeding research activities within and between REE agencies and in close coordination with the National Genetic Resources Advisory Committee (NGRAC); and
 - Establishing a USDA agency-wide Seeds and Breeds Advisory Team that includes external stakeholders from the farming, ranching, and breeding communities.

- 3. Support the widespread adoption of organic systems by ensuring adequate and appropriate technical assistance and nationwide access to federal conservation programs for organic and transitioning to organic farmers and ranchers.**
 - Building on the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) organic provision of the 2018 Farm Bill, create an entire CSP Organic Initiative. Ensure that organic and transitioning producers have sufficient options through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Reinstate and expand CSP enhancements offerings for organic systems, and include flexible bundles of conservation activities targeted to organic producers. Ensure that CSP allocations to the states are based on a full accounting of organic demand and production and that every state ranking pool includes an organic sub-pool.

 - Implement and actively promote opportunities within the EQIP Organic Initiative for producers transitioning to organic methods. This should include robust allocations to each state, based on organic demand and production, as well as targeted conservation practices and additional incentives. Additionally, EQIP-OI should be redesigned to fully support producers throughout the conversion process, ensuring they are able to fulfill the conservation-related requirements of an Organic System Plan (OSP).

 - Urge Congress to remove the separate lower payment limit under EQIP-OI. Under the EQIP general pool, a producer can receive up to \$450,000, whereas EQIP-OI contract payments are capped at \$140,000. The lower payment limit under EQIP-OI has discouraged many organic producers and those wishing to transition to organic production from applying to the program.

 - NRCS should clarify that EQIP participants who are transitioning to organic production (including participants who are exempt from organic certification due to their size) are not required to complete an OSP during the life of their contract.

In addition to these key areas, we encourage the Biden Administration to restore funding for the National Organic Certification Cost-Share Program (NOCCSP), and increase funding for organic data collection. For fiscal year 2020, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) announced that due to accounting errors, the agency had miscalculated the amount of funding available for the program. FSA made the unilateral decision to lower the cost-share amount that an organic operation can receive from 75% or up to \$750 per operation



ORGANIC FARMING RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Fostering the improvement and widespread adoption of organic farming.

to 50% or up to \$500. At a time when farmers and ranchers across the country are struggling with uncertainties brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme weather events, and trade disruptions, farmers and ranchers should be able to rely on the programs authorized by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill. If necessary, use the CCC to restore full funding for NOCCSP and bring payments back up to 75% and \$750, including retroactively.

Additionally, as the organic sector continues to grow, OFRF hopes that funding for organic data collection will increase and keep pace with growth in the organic sector. The Biden Administration can expand regularly collected data on organic production through the National Agriculture Statistics Service's (NASS) Organic Production Survey and Census of Agriculture and ensure surveys are conducted at regular intervals and in a manner that allows data to be compared over a series of years to identify trends in the organic farming sector. We encourage the Biden Administration to support the planned expansion of the Organic Integrity Database to integrate the Organic Certifiers Survey, ensuring all data points previously collected as part of the survey continue to be captured in the database.

We trust the Biden Administration will seek climate solutions like organic agriculture that provide multiple benefits by promoting on-farm soil health practices that sequester carbon, protect water quality, help enhance an operation's resilience to climate change, while also reducing reliance on fossil fuels through the elimination of fossil fuel-based synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. Through additional resources, infrastructure, and conservation assistance, USDA under the Biden Administration can play a critical role in providing increased support for farmers to transition to organic production.

We look forward to working with the Biden Administration on addressing the climate crisis through organic agriculture and will provide more detailed recommendations to USDA officials as they step into office. To learn more about our [policy recommendations](#) and [research priorities](#) for organic agriculture as a climate solution, please visit our [website](#).

Sincerely,

Brise Tencer, Executive Director

Cristel Zoebisch, Climate Policy Associate

Mark Schonbeck, Research Associate