Farm Bill 2023: The SOAR Act

The Strengthening Organic Agriculture Research Act (SOAR Act) was recently introduced by Representative Newhouse (WA-04), with Representatives Pingree (ME-01) and Panetta (CA-19) as original cosponsors.

This act provides continued, needed investments into organic agriculture research and market analysis in order to increase resilience of U.S. agriculture, create economic opportunity for producers, and improve the ecological vitality of the landscape. Here's what the SOAR Act will do, why it is important, and how you can help support it.

WHAT WILL THE SOAR ACT DO?

1) Bolster the funding for the Organic Research and Extension Initiative.

The SOAR Act would provide stair-stepped budget increases to the Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI), from $60 million in 2024 to $100 million in 2028.

2) Provide Congressional authorization and direction for the Researching the Transition to Organic Program.

The bill would also provide first-time Congressional authorization for the Researching the Transition to Organic Program (RTOP), currently known as the Organic Transition Research Program (ORG), with an authorization for appropriations of $10 million a year from 2024-2026 and $20 million from 2027-2028.

3) Bolster funding for the Organic Production and Market Data Initiative (ODI).

Providing $10 million over the life of the Farm Bill, the SOAR Act would double the farm bill funding for this crucial joint-initiative of three USDA Agencies: NASS, Economic Research Service (ERS), and Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS).

The data produced through the ODI is essential for the development of risk management products and targeted market development. The SOAR Act also directs ERS to conduct a full, systematic evaluation of the economic impact organic agriculture has on rural and urban communities, taking into account economic, ecological, and social factors.

Farm Bill 2023: The SOAR Act

WHY ITS IMPORTANT

Agricultural and economic research investments must be a part of the United States' strategy to increase domestic organic production to meet the growing domestic and international demand for organic products. Currently NIFA invests ~2% of their budget into direct organic agriculture research, while organic agriculture makes up more than 6% of the food sales market.

The OREI and ORG competitive grant programs operated by NIFA require all research projects to involve producers in their research, ensuring that the research conducted produces action-oriented, usable research products that ultimately increase the economic profitability and ecological vitality of farming operations.

It is also important to note that investing into organic agriculture research does not only benefit organic producers. Research of practices, techniques, and systems that originate in organic research are often adopted by conventional farming operations because of their economic and ecological efficacy.

Examples of this include the increasing use of cover crops in field crop production, and integrated pest management techniques. Conversely, conventional research often cannot be utilized by organic producers due to the substance restrictions and systems-based nature of the organic method of production.

CONTACT GORDON MERRICK
POLICY AND PROGRAMS MANAGER, OFRF
GORDON@OFRF.ORG

The policies in the SOAR Act represent a significant step toward providing needed investments into organic agriculture research, and supporting a rapidly-growing and -maturing organic food and agriculture market.

These policies will provide research tools to help farmers thrive. They also signal to researchers that organic agriculture research is a valued and important area of study which incentivizes young researchers to pursue organic agriculture research projects and expertise. Alongside these market-wide benefits, public investments in agricultural research can have significant positive impact on rural communities.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

The SOAR Act is a marker bill, and the more support it receives at this stage of the process, the more likely it is to get incorporated into the Farm Bill this year.

Learn more and take action with OFRF's SOAR Act Toolkit which includes:

- SOAR Act overview
- Sample Newsletter
- Templates for congressional outreach
- Template for a Letter to the Editor
- Social Media Posts & Graphics

ORGANIC FARMING RESEARCH FOUNDATION