

Testimony Submitted by Gordon N. Merrick
Senior Policy & Programs Manager, Organic Farming Research Foundation
House Appropriations Committee: Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Pertaining to FY 2025 Appropriations for United States Department of Agriculture
Research, Education, and Economics Agencies and Programs
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Contact Name and Email: Gordon N. Merrick, gordon@ofrf.org

Chair Harris, Ranking Member Bishop, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) to detail our fiscal year 2025 funding requests for USDA-REE agency programs important to the maintenance and growth of the organic sector. We have six specific requests:

- (1) Increased dedicated organic funding \$20 million to a total of \$35 million at the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and report language for organic agriculture topics;
- (2) General report language reiterating the importance of funding organic agriculture research through the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) and the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI) operated by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).
- (3) \$15 million for the Organic Transitions Research Program (ORG) operated by NIFA;
- (4) \$10 million for the Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) operated by NIFA, in addition to its dedicated funding;
- (5) \$60 million, or full authorized levels for the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SARE) operated by NIFA; and
- (6) \$1 million for the Organic Data and Markets Initiative (ODI), a joint initiative of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), Economic Research Service (ERS), and the National Agricultural Statistical Service (NASS).

USDA - Agricultural Research Service

Research into organic agriculture topics at ARS facilities

Request: \$35 million and report language

Organic farming is a bright spot in the agriculture economy, yet organic producers across the country remain disadvantaged by the lack of research on basic agronomic and economic challenges. Funding from the USDA ARS for organic farming research is not commensurate with the continued rapid growth of the organic market. In fact, according to ARS data, current organic farming research funding within the agency represents less than one percent, or about \$15 million, of the total ARS research budget. Meanwhile, the organic sector's market share is six percent, which should reflect over \$120 million in ARS research funding. This funding gap must be closed to provide equity and address barriers to wider adoption of organic production practices. Investments in organic agriculture research will support the organic sector's efforts to address pressing environmental, climate, and human health concerns.. ARS research facilities in Beltsville, MD, Salinas, CA, and several other locations continue to generate high quality research with valuable practical outcomes; however these endeavors continue to face budget constraints that put them at risk, and one ARS research project on organic rice has been terminated due to lack of funds.

The ARS recently released its Organic Research Priorities and roadmap for organic research to the Appropriations Committees. These priorities highlight the need for continued and expanded investments into researching organic crop and livestock production necessary to provide organic farmers cutting edge, usable research and technologies. Putting this plan into action is critical to meet the needs of organic and transitioning to organic producers.

Therefore, we request the following ARS report language:

USDA's National Organic Standards Board [NOSB] has identified key organic research priorities, many of which would help to address challenges that have limited the growth in organic production in this country. The Committee orders ARS to consider the NOSB organic research priorities applicable to the ARS mission, including breed and cultivar development, food safety considerations, and economic and ecological impact of the organic production system. To ensure the continued development of ARS organic portfolio, the Committee provides no less than the fiscal year 2024 level for the investigation into organic agriculture research topics, and increases the total by \$20 million. Given the growing demand

for organic products, the Committee provides this increase to reflect the need for more in-house, securely funded organic research projects at ARS research stations in each region.

Previous report language:

FY 23 House report: <https://www.congress.gov/117/crpt/hrpt392/CRPT-117hrpt392.pdf#page=19>

Organic Research.—The Committee looks forward to receiving the five year plan requested in House Report 117–82.

FY 22 House report: <https://www.congress.gov/117/crpt/hrpt82/CRPT-117hrpt82.pdf#page=23>

Organic Research.—The Committee directs ARS to develop a five-year plan for organic food and agriculture research encompassing all relevant crop, animal, nutrition, and natural resource national programs.

Report Language Request: Crop Improvement and Protection Research: Salinas, CA

The Committee provides \$1,000,000 for the Strategies and Tools to Improve Soil Resources, Pest Management, and Climate Resilience on Organic and Conventional Vegetable and Strawberry Farms Project in Salinas, CA (Project Number: 2038-21600-001-000-D) for the purposes of hiring an additional full-time scientist and providing a discretionary research budget.

USDA - National Institute of Food and Agriculture

General Report Language Request:

Organic Research.—USDA’s National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) has identified key organic research priorities, many of which would help to address challenges that have limited the growth in organic production in this country. The Committee encourages NIFA to give strong consideration to the NOSB organic research priorities when crafting future Requests for Applications for the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) and the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI). 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 SCRI.

Organic Transitions Research Program

Request: \$15 million

The goal of the Organic Transition Research Program (ORG) is to improve the competitiveness of organic livestock and crop producers, as well as those who are undertaking the transition to organic practices and USDA organic certification. Practices and systems addressed by ORG include those associated with organic crops, organic animal production, and organic systems integrating plant and animal production. ORG consistently receives more funding requests than can be accommodated as consumer demand for organic products outpaces domestic production. For example, in 2020 there were 34 applications and only 12 awards distributed, in 2023 that reduced to 8 awards. Importantly, NIFA recently raised the cap on the size of projects funded through ORG from \$600,000 to \$1,000,000 to reflect the increased costs of research. Therefore, doubling the funding from \$7.5 million in FY24 to \$15 million is needed to maintain the efficacy of this crucial program.

The program should be funded at \$15 million in FY2025, to ensure that U.S. farmers and ranchers have the information and technology necessary to meet the high demand for organic products in the marketplace.

Organic Research and Extension Initiative

Request: \$10 million

The Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) has been the flagship competitive grant program dedicated to organic agriculture topics. A majority of OREI-funded projects tackle challenges of nationwide or multiregional scope such as the need for crop varieties suited to organic systems or co-managing soil health and weeds in organic crop production. OREI has excelled in its funding for multi-cycle cultivar development projects, resulting in regionally-developed and -selected varieties of important crops for organic producers, including tomatoes, carrots, other vegetables, cut flowers, dry beans, and specialty grains.

OREI consistently receives more funding requests than can be funded, while 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 OREI as an organic-specific research grant program, this gap will only increase.

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program

Request: \$60 million

SARE has a clear and consistent focus on sustainability and farmer-driven research. Despite SARE's popularity and demonstrated administrative efficiency, after more than 30 years of proven on-the-ground results, the program has yet to reach its full authorized amount of \$60 million. As a result, USDA can only fund roughly ten percent out of all eligible research and education pre-proposals submitted to the program each year. We urge Congress to provide full funding at \$60 million for SARE in FY 2025.

USDA - Economic Research Service, Agricultural Marketing Service, and National Agricultural Statistics Service

Organic Data Initiative

Request: \$1 million

This program has been successful in providing valuable information to Congress, government agencies, and the organic sector. Funding specifically designated to the Organic Data Initiative is used for economic analysis, organic risk assessments, survey and statistical analysis, and market data collection and analysis. We urge strong funding for this small but valuable program, this increase in funds would allow for stronger intra-agency cooperation and be used to modernize systems and provide high-value, accurate organic price reporting and organic data collection. Organic farms, both certified and non-certified, throughout the United States, representing an over \$52 billion industry, will benefit from an increase in organic farming data tools and functions.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments, and for your consideration of these requests. I look forward to discussing them with you in the future.

Gordon N. Merrick, Senior Policy & Programs Manager
Organic Farming Research Foundation