

**Testimony Submitted by Gordon N. Merrick, Senior Policy & Programs Manager for the Organic Farming Research Foundation, to the Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration Pertaining to FY 2025 Appropriations for USDA Research, Education, and Economics Agencies and Programs**

**April 3, 2024**

**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. Investments in organic agriculture research will support agriculture'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 has 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.

In conjunction with that agency plan, a \$20 million increase in Fiscal Year 2025 and further increases in subsequent years would put the ARS research budget on a path toward an equitable distribution of research funding for organic agriculture over the course of the next several fiscal years. ARS looks to the Appropriations Committees for their direction, providing clear support for expanding organic agriculture research is necessary for ARS to act.

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 Program**

**Request: \$15 million**

This is a key competitive grants program that supports organic agriculture research at universities around the country, with specific emphasis on addressing barriers to a successful transition from conventional to organic production methods and on documenting and optimizing the ecosystem services provided by organic production and organic transition. The overall 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. 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. As the cap on project size was lifted to reflect increased costs, the gap between demand and available funding continued to increase, reducing the breadth of economic impact generated by research investments.

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. 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.

## **Organic Research and Extension Initiative**

**Request: \$10 million in discretionary funding**

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. Investing in organic systems research is an effective way to develop practical strategies for both climate mitigation and adaptation through land management.

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**

The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program has a clear and consistent focus on sustainability and farmer-driven research. SARE research and professional development training have yielded a large and growing library of books, manuals, bulletins, and archived webinar presentations that help organic and nonorganic farmers alike improve their management of soils, crops, pests, and weeds as well as their bottom lines. 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**

The Organic Data Initiative (ODI) collects and disseminates data regarding organic agriculture through the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), Economic Research Service (ERS), and National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). 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.

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Organic Farming Research Foundation