

OFRF Policy Priorities



**ORGANIC
FARMING
RESEARCH
FOUNDATION**



By embracing and supporting these policies, Congress and the USDA can unlock the full potential of the organic sector—creating economic opportunities, empowering producers, strengthening rural economies, and delivering environmental benefits that extend far beyond the farm.

POLICY PRIORITIES

The Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) recognizes the organic method as the leading form of agriculture and a vital solution to many challenges facing U.S. agriculture. However, USDA support has not kept pace with the sector's rapid growth and increasing importance. This document outlines policy priorities and positions designed to align research investments and market information, enhance technical and financial assistance, and strengthen the incentive structures that reward stewardship of our natural, social, and economic resources.

POLICY PRIORITY #1:

USDA's research investments into organic agriculture topics proportionally reflect the industry's growing market share.

Organic products represent the fastest-growing sector of the U.S. food market, accounting for over 6% of total food sales and over 15% of produce sales. Despite this growth, organic agriculture receives less than 1% of all USDA funding and less than 2% of all USDA research funding. This disproportionate investment has left domestic production struggling to keep pace, increasing our reliance on imported organic goods.



Strategic and proportionate public investment in organic research is essential to closing the domestic supply gap and ensuring rural communities capture more of the economic value generated by the growing organic sector.

Publicly funded agricultural research has a proven track record of delivering high-quality research findings and significant returns. [According to the Economic Research Service](#) (ERS), every \$1 of public research investment triggers over \$20 in economic activity. However, since 2000, public agricultural research funding has declined by 20%. While private funding has filled some gaps, it is often driven by proprietary technologies rather than public welfare goals. To fully harness the economic and environmental benefits of organic farming, public research commitments to organic agriculture must increase, fostering innovations that strengthen the entire agricultural system.



Farm Site and Research Lands Manager Daryl Wong (Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at UC Santa Cruz) speaks to Representative Jimmy Panetta (CA) at an OFRF field day in 2024.

a) Establish an Organic Research Coordinator for all REE agencies.

Creating a designated Organic Research Coordinator role will ensure better oversight and coordination of organic research efforts across the USDA's Research, Education, and Economics (REE) mission-area agencies. This coordinator would foster collaboration among the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), Economic Research Service (ERS), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), and other external partners. This leadership would ensure research priorities are being implemented effectively, identify cross-cutting topics and opportunities, and ensure that organic research across these agencies complement each other rather than operate in silos.

b) Bolster ARS intramural research.

ARS intramural research plays a critical role in addressing the long-term needs of organic agriculture. By generating foundational knowledge of topics from soil science and pest management to climate resilience and nutrient cycling, ARS scientists generate the science-based solutions that enable producers to enhance both productivity and sustainability.

Increasing the amount of organic research projects with ARS will strengthen market opportunities for organic farmers, reduce reliance on imported synthetic inputs, and accelerate the development of region-

specific practices that enhance resilience and profitability. Greater investment in ARS organic projects is vital to addressing production challenges and ensuring the sector thrives in the face of evolving market and environmental conditions.

c) Strengthen NIFA competitive grant programming to support organic solutions.

The Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) and Organic Transitions Research Program (ORG) provide critical funding for projects that directly answer farmers' pressing production challenges. Alarming, organic agriculture research funding in broader programs like the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) and the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI) remains disproportionately low, despite increasing demand and importance. Strengthening funding and prioritization for organic agriculture research through NIFA's competitive grants will enable researchers and educators to develop practical solutions and deliver them to farmers and ranchers. Extension agents, technical service providers, universities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in translating research findings into tools and practices that improve on-farm outcomes. USDA must ensure organic research programs are sufficiently funded to meet these growing needs.

d) Support market analysis from NASS/ERS.

Robust economic tools are essential to the organic sector's continued growth

and resilience. As organic agriculture rapidly matures from a once-niche, hyper-local alternative market into a mainstream commodity sector, NASS's comprehensive data collection and ERS's in-depth economic tools are essential for understanding market trends, regional production hotspots, supply chain bottlenecks, and consumer preferences.

Expanding resources for NASS and ERS will provide farmers and stakeholders with actionable insights, ensuring that organic markets remain stable, transparent, and sustainable. Accurate and comprehensive market analysis is vital to any modern economic sector—especially agricultural ones.

POLICY PRIORITY #2:

USDA and state technical and financial support agencies continue to work to increase organic producers' utilization of their resources.

The USDA and state agencies provide crucial support to organic producers, offering programs that include financial and technical assistance, conservation resources, crop insurance, and market development opportunities. However, despite the growing number of programs available, many organic producers remain unaware of these resources, limiting their ability to benefit from them. Compounding this issue, there is an ongoing concern among producers that many agricultural agencies and service providers lack sufficient institutional knowledge of organic systems, which

can lead to inconsistent and inadequate support. OFRF recognizes these challenges and proposes targeted actions to increase both outreach and engagement for producers while improving the capacity of agencies to serve the organic community effectively.

a) Increase organic knowledge and experience for technical service agencies and providers.

To better serve organic producers, it is essential to strengthen the expertise of the professionals who provide support to them. Conservation planners, extension agents, and other technical service providers play a vital role in guiding farmers through the complexities of organic management systems. However, many of these professionals lack adequate training to address the unique challenges and needs of organic operations.

OFRF recommends expanding training and educational opportunities that equip service providers with a deeper knowledge of organic systems, such as soil health management, pest control strategies, and compliance with organic certification standards. This enhanced training would foster a better understanding of the specific needs of organic producers and the interrelationships between the programs and management styles. Equipped with this knowledge, their ability to offer relevant, actionable advice tailored to organic content will continue to grow. By bridging these gaps in knowledge, USDA and state agencies can deliver consistent, high-quality support that empowers organic producers to achieve long-term agronomic and economic success.



Organic farmer Bryce Bauman (Lazy 8 Farm, Paint Lick, Kentucky) explains how a custom-designed door is used to open and close several high tunnels at once. Bryce utilized NRCS support to purchase some of the high tunnels and shared results at an Organic Association of Kentucky field day in 2024.

b) Increase organic farmers' knowledge of and participation in key assistance programs.

Many organic producers and farmers transitioning to organic practice remain unaware of the wide range of tools and programs available through USDA and state agencies. This lack of awareness limits their ability to access financial assistance, technical support, and other resources that could enhance their operations.

OFRF emphasizes the need to strengthen outreach efforts to ensure farmers fully understand the programs designed to support them. Investing in farmer networks through initiatives such as workshops, in-person field days, and online platforms can ensure that organic farmers and those interested in organic practices can navigate the resources

available to them. Increased awareness of USDA's resources, grants, technical assistance, and what those resources can do for organic farmers will lead to increased utilization of these programs. This will only expand the sector's positive impact on the American agricultural landscape and on the communities that live within it.

c) Increase the access and amount of services provided to organic producers.

USDA's programs offered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Risk Management Agency (RMA), and the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), as well as state-level counterpart agencies, are instrumental in the success of America's agricultural businesses. These programs provide farmers with technical and financial assistance for implementing conservation systems, accessing crop insurance policies, and getting their products to market. However, existing programs often fall short of meeting the unique needs of organic producers due to limited funding, administrative barriers, or a lack of tailored guidance.

OFRF calls for expanding and simplifying these services for organic producers while also making them more transparent and easier to use. By addressing these barriers, USDA and state agencies can empower organic producers to thrive, creating a more resilient and sustainable agricultural system that benefits farmers, rural economies, and the environment alike.

POLICY PRIORITY #3:

Rural communities and economies benefit from the organic economic engine.

Organic agriculture's benefits extend far beyond the farm gate. Its emphasis on value-added products, diversified production, and environmentally sound practices catalyze economic development in rural and urban communities alike. By fostering vibrant, sustainable food systems, OFRF views organic agriculture as a proven driver of job creation, local entrepreneurship, and generational renewal. These benefits revitalize rural and urban communities and ensure that producers and their neighbors all share in the opportunities created by organic agriculture.

a) Invest in organic market development through targeted financing.

Investments in organic market development are essential to supporting the growing consumer demand for organic products. By targeting financing toward initiatives that expand market channels, refine supply chains, and establish critical processing infrastructure, these investments will strengthen the ability of domestic producers to compete and thrive. Strategic market development initiatives, like the Organic Market Development Grant program, are critical for ensuring that organic producers can reliably access fair, profitable markets.

In the face of increased organic imports due to a lack of domestic infrastructure, these investments will provide domestic producers with the tools and resources needed to meet consumer demands, ensuring the value of the organic market remains within the United States.

b) Further the research into recognizing the economic effect of organic hotspots.

Research has demonstrated that “organic hotspots”—regions with higher levels of organic production—generate significant economic benefits for surrounding communities. Studies conducted by Penn State University reveal that organic hotspots correlate with increased household income and reduced poverty levels compared to neighboring non-hotspot regions. Expanding research on these economic effects is critical for understanding how organic agriculture can catalyze regional economic development. By aligning investments in research, technical support, and incentive structures, policymakers can encourage the creation and growth of organic hotspots, bringing these transformative economic effects to more regions across the country.

c) Advance federal policy to recognize and reward organic agriculture’s ecological, social, and cultural benefits.

Organic agriculture generates significant environmental and social benefits alongside its economic contributions, including healthier soils, cleaner water, enhanced biodiversity, and increased opportunities for community connection. While current government programs and market structures acknowledge these ecosystem services through consumer premiums for organic products, these contributions can remain undervalued.

OFRF advocates for leveraging the insights from cutting-edge research to improve how these positive externalities can be valued, incentivized, and integrated into working lands business structures. Aligning economic incentives with ecological stewardship will ensure that organic farmers are duly compensated for the broader environmental and social benefits they provide, strengthening a virtuous cycle of innovation, regeneration, and economic return throughout the organic sector.



For more information, visit OFRF's Advocacy page (www.ofrf.org/advocacy) or contact Gordon Merrick, OFRF's Senior Policy & Programs Manager, at gordon@ofrf.org.



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