USDA Support for Organic Agriculture across the Research, Education, and Economics (REE) Agencies

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The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has supported some research, education and extension related to organic agriculture for several decades, with significant increases in recent years, particularly since The Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) established the National Organic Program (NOP) in 1990. Final rules for implementing this legislation came out in 2000 and nationwide organic standards for certification under a national organic label were first established in 2002. The sale of certified organic products has continued to grow ever since.

REE Agency Activities on Organic Agriculture

Research, Education, and Economics (REE) conducts or funds the vast majority of organic agriculture research, education and extension at USDA. REE consists of four agencies: our intramural (research-conducting) agency the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), our extramural (research-funding) agency the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), and our two economic and statistical agencies: the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). Economic studies at ERS have expanded USDA’s and the American public’s understanding of the fast growing organic market for consumers and export. The current work by NASS on the 2012 Agricultural Census will increase data on organic products and their distribution chain. NIFA programs have helped to fund long-term research trials as well as specific topics such as major focus on disease and weed problems, nutrition and water relationships, effects on natural resources, and economic and marketing needs. ARS conducts organic farming research to understand the scientific basis of biological and physical processes that naturally regulate soil fertility and pests, emphasizing whole-system preventive solutions.

Due to support from USDA stakeholders and partnerships with the Land-Grant institutions and between USDA agencies, funding for research more than doubled from 2005 to 2010. Between 2002 and 2010, the REE mission area contributed over $275 million and over 2400 projects in support of organic research. Along with the growth in funding has come increasing interest in the role that organic agriculture may play in addressing the major agricultural challenges of our times.

Agricultural Challenges

To be innovative in approaching current and emerging agricultural scientific issues and to plan for future USDA research and education to help solve domestic and global challenges, USDA has developed the REE Action Plan. The Action Plan addresses seven goals: food security, climate and energy needs, sustainable use of natural resources, nutrition and childhood obesity, food safety, education and science literacy, and rural prosperity and rural-urban interdependence. There is currently work going on in many of these areas that relates to organic agriculture, especially gaining knowledge related to ecologically-based systems that are inherent in the practice of organic agriculture.