

House bill would increase organic research funding

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

A bill to more than double the annual funding for organic research through USDA is being warmly embraced by members of the organic community.

The Organic Research Act of 2017 would boost annual funding for USDA's Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative from \$20 million a year to \$50 million.

It was introduced last week by Reps. Chellie Pingree, D-Maine; Dan Newhouse, R-Wash.; and Jimmy

Panetta, D-Calif.

OREI funding has been critical in solving problems and developing ways for organic farmers to increase productivity, prevent loss and streamline their operations. But insufficient funding has led to unmet research needs and opportunities, Pingree said in introducing the bill.

U.S. organic sales now exceed \$43 billion annually, up from \$19 billion 10 years ago and \$3.5 billion 20 years ago.

But domestic production isn't keeping up with consumer demand—a missed opportunity for U.S. farmers. One prob-

lem is the dramatic increase in demand hasn't been met with an increase in public investment in research, Pingree said.

Organic research is a top priority for organic farmers, said Kate Mendenhall, director of the Organic Farmers Association.

"Having more federal funds dedicated to organic research is a win-win-win for organic farmers, conventional farmers and consumers," she said.

While organic research clearly helps organic farmers, conventional farmers also benefit from more information on cover crops, seeds and breeds,

crop rotation and soil health, she said.

"When we improve soil health and focus on growing healthy food, all citizens benefit," she said.

Several members of the organic community applauded introduction of the bill in written statements and weighed in on the need for more funding.

The Organic Trade Association said robust funding for agricultural research is critical for the advancement of organic practices.

"The future of organic farmers' success is tied to discovering new organic crop varieties,

developing breakthroughs in pest and weed control, crop rotation and the development of effective and compliant farm inputs," said Lara Batcha, OTA executive director and CEO.

The Organic Farming Research Foundation has pushed for the organic share of USDA's \$3 billion in annual research funding to at least reflect organic sales, which is about 5 percent or 6 percent of all U.S. food sales.

"At a time when demand for organic food is increasing, it is critical that we continue funding research that supports this promising opportunity for rural

communities across the U.S.," said Brise Tencer, OFRF executive director.

Erin Silva, University of Wisconsin organic-sustainable cropping systems specialist, said the benefits of OREI extend beyond the organic community.

"Research supported by this program has furthered our knowledge of soil health, soil biology and agricultural resilience—knowledge that will contribute to the creation of more sustainable and productive systems across all agricultural approaches and commodities," she said.



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