

October 27, 2011

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry

The Honorable Frank Lucas
Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry

The Honorable Collin Peterson
Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Chairman Lucas, and Ranking Members Roberts and Peterson,

As you prepare the Farm Bill proposal for the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, we the undersigned organizations urge you to invest in the growth and future of American agriculture by maintaining and enhancing mandatory funding for all three programs in the Research Title without baseline funding after 2012 – the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI), the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI), and the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP). Administered by USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), these programs serve large and growing constituencies that do not receive equal benefits from other programs within NIFA.

Congress authorized OREI, SCRI, and BFRDP as distinct programs in previous farm bills in response to the lack of USDA research and extension serving organic, specialty crop, and beginning producers. These programs remain unique in their scope and function, and ensure that USDA invests in emerging and growth sectors of agriculture. Each of these programs can only fund a small percentage of the eligible proposals it receives, indicating the enormous demand for research, extension, and innovation in the organic, specialty crop, and beginning producer sectors. These needs are inadequately addressed by larger competitive grant programs such as the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative.

In previous farm bills, Congress funded OREI, SCRI, and BFRDP with mandatory funds to ensure that the backlog of unaddressed research and extension needs of organic, specialty crop, and beginning producers would begin to be met. Each of these programs also had an additional authorization for appropriations that has not been fulfilled because of the extreme budget pressures on the appropriations committee to cut funding for agriculture spending, including for research. Without mandatory funding through the farm bill, these programs would essentially cease to exist and innovation for the growth and future of American agriculture would drastically decline.

An investment in research, extension, and innovation underpins growth in any sector. To meet growing consumer demand for organic and specialty crops, and to ensure that there are American farmers and ranchers to maintain the nation's food supply in future generations, we urge you to maintain OREI, SCRI, and BFRDP as separate, stand-alone programs in NIFA with enhanced mandatory funding.

Sincerely,

Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association, Salinas, CA
American Dietetic Association, Chicago, IL
American Society for Horticultural Science, Alexandria, VA
California Climate and Agriculture Network, Sebastopol, CA
Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, Pittsboro, NC
Center for Rural Affairs, Lyons, NE
Ecology Center, Ann Arbor, MI
Farm Fresh Rhode Island, Pawtucket, RI
Food System Economic Partnership, Ann Arbor, MI
Growing Home, Chicago, IL
Health Care Without Harm, Reston, VA
Illinois Stewardship Alliance, Springfield, IL
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Minneapolis, MN
Iowa Farmers Union, Ames, IA
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, Baltimore, MD
Kansas Rural Center, Whiting, KS
Land Stewardship Project, Minneapolis, MN
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, East Troy, WI
Michigan Food and Farming Systems, East Lansing, MI
Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service, Spring Valley, WI
Minnesota Food Association, Marine on St. Croix, MN
National Organic Coalition, Washington, DC
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, Washington, DC
National Young Farmers' Coalition, Tivoli, NY
Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, Ceresco, NE
New England Farmers Union, Shelburne Falls, MA
Organic Farming Research Foundation, Santa Cruz, CA
Organic Trade Association, Brattleboro, VT
Organic Valley Family of Farms, LaFarge, WI
Practical Farmers of Iowa, Ames, IA
Prairie Crossing Farm Business Development Center/Liberty Prairie Foundation, Grayslake, IL
Public Health Law & Policy, Oakland, CA
Rural Advancement Foundation International – USA, Pittsboro, NC
Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, Fayetteville, AR
Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance, Washington, DC
The Land Connection, Sidney, IL
The Vermont Land Trust, Montpelier, VT
Union of Concerned Scientists, Cambridge, MA
Virginia Association for Biological Farming, Lexington, VA

For more information please contact Ariane Lotti at ariane@ofrf.org