

Scientist and Expert Statement of Support For Public Investment in Agroecological Research

We support greater public investment in agricultural research that applies ecological principles and relies, to the greatest extent possible, on ecological processes (“agroecology”) to address current and future farming challenges.

Agroecology regards farms as ecosystems embedded in broader landscapes and society. Agroecological approaches are based on understanding and managing ecological processes and biological functions to increase and sustain crop and livestock productivity, efficiently recycle inputs, and build soil fertility, while minimizing harmful impacts on soil, air, water, wildlife, and human health.ⁱ ⁱⁱ Hallmarks of agroecological farming practices include increasing the types of crops rotated on fields from year to year; controlling pests and weeds with fewer chemical pesticides; enhancing soil health while reducing the need for synthetic fertilizers; and valuing non-cropped areas of farms for the services they provide.

Agroecology has a proven track record of meeting farming challenges in a cost-effective manner. Research has found that applying agroecological methods, like those detailed above, can result in high yields for each crop in a rotation sequence.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, long-term studies have found that organic practices—a specific set of agroecological practices that eschew the use of all synthetic chemical inputs—typically improve soil health compared to plots where conventional practices are applied, and may produce comparable yields. This research also demonstrated that economic returns for organic crops can be greater than for conventional crops, despite higher labor costs.^{iv}

These findings indicate that additional research has the potential to increase our understanding of agroecological methods and increase their adoption. Farmers could benefit from this added knowledge to produce a wide range of crops in many different regions, with greater resilience to variation in pests, weather conditions, markets, and other factors.

While other approaches may also yield promising solutions, they are more likely to already benefit from private sector support. Agroecology is less likely to be supported by the private sector since these farming methods often reduce requirements for purchased inputs. This leaves to the public sector the responsibility to fund agroecological research that serves the interests of farmers and society.

At present, however, public research into agroecology is drastically inadequate. Land-grant universities were once guided by their original missions to enhance understanding of agriculture that served the public interest. But these institutions have fallen victim to budget cuts that have driven them to rely upon private dollars to fund research^v, leveraging public investment largely for the benefit of the private sector. And past analyses have found that funding for agroecology is a very small part of the federal research budget.^{vi} ^{vii}

Agroecological research can further our understanding of productive and profitable farming methods that will minimize harmful impacts on human health, the environment, and rural communities. These methods will provide resilience to both anticipated events such as climate change as well as unforeseen developments. Modest public investment can yield enormous returns for farmers and society well into the future.

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