

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.

Signed,

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

John D. Aber, Ph.D.
Professor, Natural Resources and
Environment
University of New Hampshire

Simon Addison, Ph.D.
National Programme Coordinator,
Programmes
Oxfam Kenya

Alison Alkon, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Chair, Sociology
University of the Pacific

Arthur Allen, Ph.D.
Professor, Agriculture
University of Maryland Eastern Shore

Patricia Allen, Ph.D.
Chair, Food Systems and Society
Marylhurst University

Miguel Altieri, Ph.D.
Professor, Environmental Science, Policy
and Management
University of California, Berkeley

Molly D. Anderson, Ph.D.
Partridge Chair, Food and Sustainable
Agriculture Systems
College of the Atlantic

Ray Anderson, Ph.D.
Research Soil Scientist, US Salinity
Laboratory
USDA-ARS

Georg K.S. Andersson, Ph.D.
Researcher, Centre for Environment and
Climate Research
Lund University

David Andow, Ph.D.
Distinguished McKnight University
Professor, Entomology
University of Minnesota

Carol Anelli, Ph.D.
Professor and Associate Chair, Entomology
The Ohio State University

Cynthia Annett, Ph.D.
Research Scientist, Center for Hazardous
Substance Research
Kansas State University

J. Gordon Arbuckle, Jr., Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Sociology
Iowa State University

William Scott Armbruster, Ph.D.
Principal Research Scientist, Institute of
Arctic Biology
University of Alaska Fairbanks

Joseph E. Armstrong, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus of Botany, Biological
Sciences
Illinois State University

Dolaporn Novem Auyeung, Ph.D.
Senior Scientist, NYC Urban Field Station
NYC Department of Parks and Recreation

Agustin Avila Romero, Ph.D.
Professor, Department of Economics
Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas

Catherine E. Badgley, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Ecology and
Evolutionary Biology
University of Michigan

Roger Bales, PhD
Director, Sierra Nevada Research Institute
University of California, Merced

Bradford Barham, Ph.D.
Professor, Agriculture and Applied
Economics
University of Wisconsin, Madison

David A. Barnes, Ph.D.
Professor, Geosciences
Western Michigan University

Linda J. Barnes, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology
Marshalltown Community College

Jill Baron, Ph.D.
Research Ecologist, Ecosystem Dynamics
US Geological Survey

Andrea Basche, Ph.D.
Kendall Science Fellow, Food and
Environment Program
Union of Concerned Scientists

Ricky Bates, Ph.D.
Professor, Horticulture
The Pennsylvania State University

Janna Beckerman, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Botany and Plant
Pathology
Purdue University

Julia Ann Bell, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Large Animal Clinical
Sciences
Michigan State University

Michael Bell, Ph.D.
Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor,
Community and Environmental Sociology
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Anne Bellows, Ph.D.
Professor, Public Health, Food Studies, and
Nutrition
Syracuse University

Tamara Benjamin, Ph.D.
Research Scientist, Botany and Plant
Pathology
Purdue University

Elena Bennett, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Natural Resource
Sciences
McGill University

Jim Bentson, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Mechanical
Engineering
Polytechnic University, Brooklyn

Alan Berkowitz, Ph.D.
Head of Education
Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies

Jim Bever, Ph.D.
Professor, Department of Biology
Indiana University

Felix Bianchi, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Farming Systems
Ecology
Wageningen University

Alan Biggs, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant and Soil Sciences
West Virginia University

George Bird, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Entomology
Michigan State University

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

Robert Blanchette, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant Pathology
University of Minnesota

Patrick Bohlen, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology
University of Central Florida

Randall Boone, Ph.D.
Professor, Ecosystem Science and
Sustainability
Colorado State University

Thomas Borch, Ph.D.
Professor, Soil and Crop Sciences
Colorado State University

Branden Born, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Urban Design and
Planning
University of Washington

Victoria A. Borowicz, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Plant Ecology, School
of Biological Sciences
Illinois State University

Richard Boyce, Ph.D.
Professor, Biological Sciences
Northern Kentucky University

Andrea Brace, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Health Sciences
Towson State University

Jason Bradford, Ph.D.
Managing Director
Farmland LP

Kathryn Brasier, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Rural Sociology
The Pennsylvania State University

John Brauner, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Biology
Jamestown University

Mark Brick, Ph.D.
Professor, Soil and Crop Sciences
Colorado State University

Lindsay Brin, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Researcher, Potato Research
Centre
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

Kirk Broders, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Bioagricultural Sciences
and Pest Management
Colorado State University

Amy Brown, Ph.D.
Professor, Entomology
University of Maryland

Cheryl Brown, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Resource Economics
and Management
West Virginia University

Kathleen Brown, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant Stress Biology
The Pennsylvania State University

Sandy Brown, Ph.D.
Faculty Director, Master's Program in
Public Affairs
University of San Francisco

Patrick Brown, PhD
Associate Professor, Crop Sciences
University of Illinois

Bryan Brunner, Ph.D.
Horticultural Researcher, Crops and
Agroenvironmental Sciences
University of Puerto Rico

Mary Ann Bruns, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Soil Microbiology
The Pennsylvania State University

Mark Brunson, Ph.D.
Professor, Environment and Society
Utah State University

Alexander Bucksch, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Scientist, School of Biology
and School of Interactive Computing
Georgia Institute of Technology

Mirjana Bulatovic-Danilovich, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Plant, Soil Science and
Extension
West Virginia University

Jesse Burkhardt, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Agricultural and
Resource Economics
Colorado State University

Eric Burkhart, Ph.D.
Program Director, Plant Science
The Pennsylvania State University

Robyn J. Burnham, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Ecology and
Evolutionary Biology
University of Michigan

David Burress, Ph.D.
Lead Economist
Kansas Progress Institute

John T. Bushoven, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant Science
California State University, Fresno

Ethan Butler, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Associate, Forest Resources
University of Minnesota

Liz Carlisle, Ph.D.
Lecturer, School of Earth, Energy, and
Environmental Sciences
Stanford University

Deborah L. Carr, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Biology
Texas Tech University

John Carroll, Ph.D.
Professor of Environmental Conservation,
Natural Resources and Environment
University of New Hampshire

Angie Carter, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Sociology
Augustana College

David Carter, Ph.D.
Academic Coordinator, Botany and Plant
Sciences
University of California, Riverside

Martin Carver, Ph.D.
Senior Hydrologist
Aqua Environmental Associates

Antonio Castilla, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow, Integrative Biology
University of Texas

Claudia Catalanotti, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow, Plant Biology
Carnegie Institution

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

Jeffrey Catchmark, Ph.D.
Professor, Agricultural and Biological
Engineering
The Pennsylvania State University

Richard L. Cates, Jr., Ph.D.
Senior Lecturer, Soil Science
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Barney Caton, Ph.D.
Agroecologist

Rakesh Chandran, Ph.D.
Professor and Extension Specialist,
Agriculture and Natural Resources
West Virginia University

Michael Jahi Chappell, Ph.D.
Director, Agroecology and Agricultural
Policy
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

Allison Chatrchyan, Ph.D.
Director, Cornell Center for Climate Change
and Agriculture
Cornell University

Marta Chiappe, Ph.D.
University of the Republic, Uruguay

E. Ann Clark, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Plant Agriculture
University of Guelph

Jill Clark, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, John Glenn School of
Public Affairs
Ohio State University

Sean Clark, Ph.D.
Professor, Agriculture and Natural
Resources
Berea College

David Cleveland, Ph.D.
Professor, Environmental Studies
University of California, Santa Barbara

Anne-Marie Codur, Ph.D.
Research Fellow, Global Development and
Environment
Tufts University

Jerry Cohen, Ph.D.
Gordon and Margaret Bailey Professor,
Horticultural Science
University of Minnesota

Roseanna Cohen, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Community Agroecology Network

Janet I. Collett, Ph.D.
Associate, Museum of Comparative
Zoology
Harvard University

Martha H. Conklin, Ph.D.
Professor, School of Engineering
University of California, Merced

Daniel Cooley, Ph.D.
Professor, Stockbridge School of
Agriculture
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Ken Cousins, Ph.D.
Senior Research Lead
Earth Economics

Lyle Craker, Ph.D.
Professor, Stockbridge School of
Agriculture
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Nigel Crawford, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology
University of California, San Diego

Nancy Creamer, Ph.D.
Director, Center for Environmental Farming
Systems; Distinguished Professor,
Sustainable Agriculture and Community
Based Food Systems
North Carolina State University

Jeffery Creque, Ph.D.
Agroecologist, Rangeland and
Agroecosystem Management
Carbon Cycle Institute

Steve Culman, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Soil Fertility,
Environment and Natural Resources
Ohio State University

Alan Cunningham, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Chemistry
Monterey Peninsula College

William Curran, Ph.D.
Professor, Weed Science
The Pennsylvania State University

Aaron Daigh, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Soil Science
North Dakota State University

Gwilym Davies, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Environment and
Natural Resources
The Ohio State University

Luise Davis, Ph.D.
Freshwater Ecologist

Franck Dayan, Ph.D.
Professor, Bioagricultural Sciences and Pest
Management
Colorado State University

Kathryn De Master, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Environmental Science,
Policy and Management
University of California, Berkeley

Mick DeGraeve, Ph.D.
Science Director, Environmental Sciences
Great Lakes Environmental Center

Marie-Helene Delmestre, Ph.D.
Retired Professor, Biology
University of Puerto Rico

Marcia DeLonge, Ph.D.
Agroecologist, Food and Environment
Program
Union of Concerned Scientists

Lisa Coffield Depaoli, Ph.D.
Research Associate, Department of
Anthropology
University of Pittsburgh

Adam Diamond, Ph.D.
Professorial Lecturer, School of
International Service
American University

Tim Dichiara, Ph.D.
Farmer
Davis Creek Farm

Tim Dickinson, Ph.D.
Senior Curator Emeritus
Royal Ontario Museum

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

Carolyn Dimitri, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Nutrition, Food Studies
and Public Health
New York University

David Dornbos, Jr., Ph.D.
Professor and Chair, Biology
Calvin College

Raymond Drapek, Ph.D.
Researcher, Pacific Northwest Research
Station
USDA Forest Service

Francis Drummond, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology and Ecology
University of Maine

Michael Duffy, Ph.D.
Professor, Economics
Iowa State University

Luis Duque, Ph.D.
Research Associate, Plant Science
The Pennsylvania State University

Leslie Duram, Ph.D.
Professor, Geography and Environmental
Studies
Southern Illinois University

Michael Dwyer, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow
Center for International Forestry Research

Neal Eash, Ph.D.
Professor, Biosystems Engineering and Soil
Science
University of Tennessee

Sanford Eigenbrode, Ph.D.
University Distinguished Professor, Plant,
Soil, and Entomological Sciences
University of Idaho

Eric Elton, Ph.D.
STEM Director
The Bryn Mawr School

Morrissey Ember, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Plant and Soil Sciences
West Virginia University

Paul English, Ph.D.
Environmental Epidemiologist
California Department of Public Health

A. Ercelan, Ph.D.
Advisor, Research and Documentation
Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum

Richard Y. Evans, Ph.D.
Specialist in Cooperative Extension, Plant
Sciences
University of California, Davis

Chunlei Fan, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Biology
Morgan State University

Joshua Farley, Ph.D.
Professor, Community Development and
Applied Economics
University of Vermont

Richard S. Feldman, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Environmental Science
Marist College

Tracy S. Feldman, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
St. Andrews University

Ted R. Feldpausch, Ph.D.
Lecturer, Life and Environmental Sciences
University of Exeter

Margaret Fitzsimmons, Ph.D.
Professor, Environmental Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz

Jonathan M. Flood, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Economics
Towson University

Mark Flynn, Ph.D.
Software Developer
HydroBio Inc.

Steven Fonte, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Soil and Crop Sciences
Colorado State University

Rick Foster, Ph.D.
W. K. Kellogg Chair for Food, Society, and
Sustainability
Michigan State University

Chuck Francis, Ph.D.
Professor, Agronomy and Horticulture
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Jennifer Fraterrigo, PhD
Associate Professor, Natural Resources and
Environment
University of Illinois

Ed Frederickson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Agriculture
Eastern Kentucky University

Zachary Freedman, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Plant and Soil Sciences
West Virginia University

William Friedland, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Sociology
University of California, Santa Cruz

Phillip Fujiyoshi, Ph.D.,
Biological Science Technician
USDA Agricultural Research Service

Heather Gall, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Agricultural and
Biological Engineering
The Pennsylvania State University

Ryan E. Galt, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Human Ecology
University of California, Davis

Richard H. Gammon, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Chemistry and
Oceanography
University of Washington

Amy Ganguli, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Animal and Range
Science
New Mexico State University

Brad Gaolach, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Extension
Washington State University

John Gay, Ph.D.
Life Member, Clare Hall
Cambridge University

David Geiser, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant Pathology and
Environmental Microbiology
The Pennsylvania State University

Samuel Geleta, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology
Salisbury University

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

John Gerber, Ph.D.
Professor, Sustainable Food and Farming
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Cristy Getz, Ph.D.
Associate Cooperative Extension Specialist,
Environmental Science, Policy and
Management
University of California, Berkeley

Bob L. Gillespie, Ph.D.
Coordinator, Agriculture and Natural
Resources
Wenatchee Valley College

Marian Glenn, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology and Environmental
Studies
Seton Hall University

Stephen R. Gliessman, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Agroecology
University of California, Santa Cruz

Miguel Gómez, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Applied Economics
Cornell University

Robin Gómez, Ph.D.
Professor, Weed Science and Cropping
Systems
University of Costa Rica, San José

Enrique Gomezdelcampo, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Environment and
Sustainability
Bowling Green State University

David Gonthier, Ph.D.
Post-Doctoral Fellow, Biology
University of California, Berkeley

Noel Antonio González Valdivia, Ph.D.
Agronomist, Adaptación Humana y Manejo
de Recursos
ECOSUR

Fred Gould, Ph.D.
Distinguished Professor, Entomology
North Carolina State University

Sharon Gourdjji, Ph.D.
Agricultural Modeling Scientist, Decision
and Policy Analysis
Centro Internacional Agricultura Tropical

Garrett Graddy-Lovelace, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, School of International
Service
American University

Elizabeth Graser-Lindsey, Ph.D.
Agricultural and Soil Scientist

Claudio Gratton, Ph.D.
Professor, Entomology
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Tim Griffin, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Director,
Agriculture, Food and Environment
Tufts University

Julie Grossman, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Soil Agroecology
University of Minnesota

Kulbhushan Grover, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Plant and
Environmental Sciences
New Mexico State University

Vernon Grubinger, Ph.D.
Professor, Agricultural Extension
University of Vermont

Daniel Gruner, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Entomology
University of Maryland

Steve Guldán, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant and Environmental
Sciences
New Mexico State University

Doug Gurian-Sherman, Ph.D.
Director, Sustainable Agriculture,
Sustainable Agriculture Program
Center for Food Safety

Julie Guthman, Ph.D.
Professor, Division of Social Sciences
University of California, Santa Cruz

Andrew P. Gutierrez, Ph.D.
Professor, Environmental Science, Policy
and Management
University of California, Berkeley

Jessica Gutknecht, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Soil, Water, and
Climate
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Iago Hale, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Biological Sciences
University of New Hampshire

Scott Haley, Ph.D.
Professor and Wheat Breeder, Soil and
Crop Sciences
Colorado State University

John E. Hall, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Microbiology-
Immunology, School of Medicine
West Virginia University

Steven Hall, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Ecology, Evolution and
Organismal Biology
Iowa State University

Steve Hallett, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Horticulture and
Landscape Architecture
Purdue University

Cyd Hamilton, Ph.D.
Visiting Scientist, Biological Sciences
Division
Oak Ridge Associated Universities

Michael W. Hamm, Ph.D.
C.S. Mott Professor of Sustainable
Agriculture; Director, Center for Regional
Food Systems
Michigan State University

Andrew Hammermeister, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor and Director, Organic
Agriculture Centre of Canada
Dalhousie University

Marion Harris, Ph.D.
Professor, Entomology
North Dakota State University

Herman B. Hartman, Ph.D.
Emeritus Professor, Biological Sciences
Duquesne University

Catherine H. Haustein, Ph.D.
Professor, Chemistry
Central College

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

Emily Heaton, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Agronomy
Iowa State University

Herbert R. Heinicke, Ph.D.
Independent Technical Consultant

Chad Hellwinckel, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Agricultural Economics
University of Tennessee

Daniel Herms, Ph.D.
Professor and Chairperson, Entomology
The Ohio State University

Hans R. Herren, Ph.D.
President and CEO
Millennium Institute

Kevin Hicks, Ph.D.
Emeritus Research Leader, Agricultural
Research Service
United States Department of Agriculture

Clare Hinrichs, Ph.D.
Professor of Rural Sociology, Agricultural
Economics, Sociology & Education
The Pennsylvania State University

Peter Hobbs, Ph.D.
Adjunct Professor, Soil and Crop Sciences
Cornell University

Elisabeth Hoinacki, Ph.D.
Owner/Operator
Goodfoot Farm

John Holland, Ph.D.
Head of Farmland Ecology
Game and Wildlife Conversation Trust

Eric Holt-Gimenez, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Institute for Food and Development Policy

Steven Lee Hopp, Ph.D.
Adjunct Associate Professor, Environmental
Science
Emory and Henry College

Philip Howard, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Community
Sustainability
Michigan State University

Robert Howarth, Ph.D.
The David R. Atkinson Professor, Ecology
Cornell University

Casey Hoy, Ph.D.
Kellogg Endowed Chair, Agricultural
Ecosystems Management; Professor,
Entomology
Ohio State University

Ruth Hufbauer, Ph.D.
Professor, Bioagricultural Sciences and Pest
Management
Colorado State University

Joseph M. Hunt, Ph.D.
Senior Visiting Scientist, Center for Health
and Global Environment
Harvard University

Malcolm J. Hunter, Jr., Ph.D.
Professor, Wildlife, Fisheries, and
Conservation Biology
University of Maine

John Idowu, Ph.D.
Extension Agronomist and Associate
Professor, Extension Plant Sciences
New Mexico State University

Alastair Iles, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Environmental Science,
Policy and Management; Faculty Co-
Director, Berkeley Food Institute
University of California, Berkeley

Marcia Ishii-Eiteman, Ph.D.
Senior Scientist, Grassroots Science
Program
Pesticide Action Network North America

Laura Jackson, Ph.D.
Director and Professor, Tallgrass Prairie
Center
University of Northern Iowa

Louise E. Jackson, Ph.D.
Professor and Extension Specialist, Land,
Air and Water Resources
University of California, Davis

Randall Jackson, Ph.D.
Professor, Agronomy
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Johanna Jacobi, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of
Environmental Science, Policy, and
Management
University of California, Berkeley

Edward Jaenicke, Ph.D.
Professor, Agricultural Economics
The Pennsylvania State University

David Paul Janos, Ph.D.
Professor and Cooper Fellow, Biology
University of Miami

Meghann Jarchow, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Biology
University of South Dakota

David Jenkins, Ph.D.
Department, Biology
University of Central Florida

David C. Johnson, Ph.D.
Project Specialist, Senior
Research Scientist/Molecular Biologist
Institute for Sustainable Agriculture
Research
New Mexico State University

Lucille Lewis Johnson, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Anthropology and
Environmental Studies
Vassar College

Lucinda B. Johnson, Ph.D.
Center Director, Natural Resources
Research Institute
University of Minnesota, Duluth

Jay Jones, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology
University of La Verne

Kristal Jones, Ph.D.
Assistant Research Scientist, SESYNC
University of Maryland

Nicholas Jordan, Ph.D.
Professor, Agroecology
University of Minnesota

William L. Johnson, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Animal Science
North Carolina State University

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

Hugh Joseph, Ph.D.
Adjunct Assistant Professor, Nutrition
Science and Policy
Tufts University

Peter C. Kahn, Ph.D.
Professor, Department of Biochemistry and
Microbiology
Rutgers University

Anne Kapuscinski, Ph.D.
Professor, Sustainability Science,
Dartmouth College

Heather Karsten, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Plant Science
The Pennsylvania State University

Jason Kaye, Ph.D.
Professor, Ecosystem Science and
Management
University of Minnesota

Diana Kearns, Ph.D.
Entomologist, Plant Program Area
Oregon Department of Agriculture

Rebecca Kelly, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Earth and Planetary
Sciences
Johns Hopkins University

Tom Kelly, Ph.D.
Director, UNH Sustainability Institute
University of New Hampshire

Amber Catherine Kerr, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Researcher, John Muir
Institute of the Environment
University of California, Davis

Andre Kessler, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Ecology and
Evolutionary Biology
Cornell University

Colin Khoury, Ph.D.
Researcher, Decision and Policy Analysis
International Center for Tropical
Agriculture

Linda Kinkel, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant Pathology
University of Minnesota

Fred Kirschenmann, Ph.D.
Distinguished Fellow, Leopold Center for
Sustainable Agriculture
Iowa State University

Matthew Kleinhenz, PhD
Professor, Horticulture and Crop Sciences
The Ohio State University

Gerald E. Klonglan, Ph.D.
Emeritus Professor, Sociology
Iowa State University

Karlheinz Knickel, Ph.D.
Independent Researcher and Consultant,
Sustainability Strategies and Innovation
SD Innovation

David Koetje, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology
Calvin College

Randy Kolka, Ph.D.
Research Soil Scientist, Center for Research
of Ecosystem Change
US Forest Service Northern Research
Station

James Kotcon, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Plant Pathology
West Virginia University

Kokoasse Kpombrekou-A, Ph.D.
Professor, Agricultural and Environmental
Sciences
Tuskegee University

Claire Kremen, Ph.D.
Professor, Environmental Sciences Policy
and Management; Faculty Co-Director,
Berkeley Food Institute
University of California, Berkeley

Sara Kross, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Wildlife, Fish
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis

Janet Kubler, Ph.D.
Senior Research Scientist, Biology
California State University, Northridge

Sunil Kumar, Ph.D.
Research Scientist II, Natural Resource
Ecology Laboratory
Colorado State University

Subbu Kumarappan, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Agricultural Technical
Institute
Ohio State University

Hugh M. Lacey, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Philosophy
Swarthmore College

Jonathan Latham, Ph.D.
Executive Director
The Bioscience Resource Project

William Lamp, Ph.D.
Professor, Entomology
University of Maryland

Johannes Lehmann, Ph.D.
Professor, Soil and Crop Sciences
Cornell University

Eric Lehnhoff, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Entomology, Plant
Pathology and Weed Science
New Mexico State University

Laura Lengnick, Ph.D.
Owner and Lead Scientist
Cultivating Resilience, LLC

Deborah Letourneau, Ph.D.
Professor, Environmental Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz

Joel S. Leventhal, Ph.D.
Research Geochemist
US Geological Survey

David LeZaks, Ph.D.
Senior Specialist, Ecosystems Practice
Delta Institute

William C. Liebhardt, Ph.D.
Retired Program Director, Sustainable
Agriculture Research and Education
University of California, Davis

Matt Liebman, Ph.D.
Professor, Agronomy; H. A. Wallace
Endowed Chair for Sustainable Agriculture
Iowa State University

Noa Lincoln, Ph.D.
Assistant Researcher, College of Tropical
Agriculture and Human Resources
University of Hawaii, Manoa

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Xuanli Liu, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Agricultural Research
Fort Valley State University

Ben Lockhart, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant Pathology
University of Minnesota

Terry Loecke, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Environmental Studies
University of Kansas

Joanne Logan, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Biosystems
Engineering and Soil Science
University of Tennessee

Ann A. Lopez, Ph.D.
Director, Environmental Science
Center for Farmworker Families

Jennifer M. Lorang, Ph.D.
Research Associate
Oregon State University

Philip Loring, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, School of Environment
and Sustainability
University of Saskatchewan

Glynis Lough, Ph.D.
Deputy Director, Food & Environment
Program
Union of Concerned Scientists

Paulo E. Lovato, Ph.D.
Rural Engineering
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Carolyn Lowry, Ph.D.
Post-Doctoral Researcher, Natural
Resources and Environment
University of New Hampshire

Dave Love, Ph.D.
Associate Scientist, Environmental Health
and Engineering
Johns Hopkins University

Jonathan Gary Lundgren, Ph.D.
Research Entomologist
USDA - Agricultural Research Service

Jonathan Lynch, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant Science
The Pennsylvania State University

Jennifer MacAdam, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Plants, Soils and
Climate
Utah State University

Graham MacDonald, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Geography
McGill University

Fred Magdoff, Ph.D.
Emeritus Professor, Plant and Soil Science
University of Vermont

Carol Mallory-Smith, PhD
Professor, Crop and Soil Science
Oregon State University

Frank Mangan, Ph.D.
Extension Professor, Stockbridge School of
Agriculture
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

James Manley, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Economics
Towson University

Satvinder Mann, Ph.D.
Dean, Post-Graduate Studies
Punjab Agricultural University

Teresa Mares, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Department of
Anthropology
University of Vermont

Emily Marquez, Ph.D.
Staff Scientist
Pesticide Action Network

Belinda Martineau, Ph.D.
Grant Writer, Institute for Social Sciences
University of California, Davis

Alejandro Nicolas Martinez-Garcia, Ph.D.
Professor Doctor, Ingenierias
Instituto Tecnológico del Valle de Morel

Caroline Masiello, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Earth Science and
Chemistry
Rice University

Avraam Mavridis, Ph.D.
Researcher, GIS and Agroenvironment
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Bruce Maxwell, Ph.D.
Professor, Agroecology, Land Resources
and Environmental Sciences
Montana State University

Michael Mazourek, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Plant Breeding and
Genetics
Cornell University

Robert Mazur, Ph.D.
Professor, Sociology
Iowa State University

Kathleen McAfee, Ph.D.
Professor, International Relations
San Francisco State University

John F. McClelland, Ph.D.
Research Associate
Iowa State University

Nathan McClintock, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Urban Studies and
Planning
Portland State University

Earl McCoy, Ph.D.
Professor, Integrative Biology
University of South Florida

Gordon McCurry, Ph.D.
Senior Hydrogeologist
Geomega Inc.

Carl N. McDaniel, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Biology
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Marc McDill, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Forest Management
The Pennsylvania State University

Devan McGranahan, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Range Science
North Dakota State University

Mary A. McKenna, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Biology Department
Howard University

Michael McManus, Ph.D.
Emeritus Scientist
USDA Forest Service

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To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

Mohammad Reza Mehrvar, Ph.D.
Cereals Agronomist
Seed and Plant Improvement Institute

Margaret Mellon, Ph.D.
Consultant
Mellon Associates

Fabian Menalled, Ph.D.
Professor, Land Resources and
Environmental Sciences
Montana State University

Joan P. Mencher, Ph.D.
Professor Emerita, Anthropology
City University of New York

V. Ernesto Mendez, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Agroecology
University of Vermont

Kristin Mercer, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Horticulture and Crop
Science
Ohio State University

Doug Merrey, Ph.D.
Independent Consultant

Laura Merrick, Ph.D.
Lecturer, Agronomy
Iowa State University

Thomas Michaels, Ph.D.
Professor, Horticultural Science
University of Minnesota

Albie Miles, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Sustainable
Community Food Systems
University of Hawai'i

Neville Millar, Ph.D.
Senior Research Associate
Michigan State University

Michelle Miller, Ph.D.
Associate Director, Center for Integrated
Agricultural Systems
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Bruce Milne, Ph.D.
W. K. Kellogg Endowed Chair, Sustainable
Environmental Systems; Professor, Biology
University of New Mexico

Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Public Health, Food
Studies and Nutrition
Syracuse University

Kirk A. Moloney, Ph.D.
Professor, Ecology, Evolution and
Organismal Biology
Iowa State University

David Montgomery, PhD
Professor, Earth and Space Sciences
University of Washington

Alfonso Morales, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Urban and Regional
Planning
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Emily Moran, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Life and Environmental
Sciences
University of California, Merced

Carlo Moreno, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow, Agroecology and
Biology
University of Texas—Pan American

Katlyn Morris, Ph.D.
Lecturer, Plant and Soil Science
University of Vermont

David Mortensen, Ph.D.
Professor, Weed and Applied Plant Ecology
The Pennsylvania State University

Gerald Moser, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow, Plant Ecology
Justus-Liebig-University Giessen

Barry Muchnick, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Environmental Studies
St. Mary's College of Maryland

Maria Mueller-Lindenlauf, Ph.D.
Agriculture, Economics and Management
University of Applied Science Nürtingen

Kranti Mulik, Ph.D.
Agricultural Economist, Food and
Environment Program
Union of Concerned Scientists

Joji Muramoto, Ph.D.
Associate Researcher, Environmental
Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz

Colin Murphy, Ph.D.
Science and Technology Policy Fellow
California Council on Science and
Technology

Kevin Murphy, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Crop and Soil Sciences
Washington State University

Helene Murray, Ph.D.
Executive Director, Minnesota Institute for
Sustainable Agriculture
University of Minnesota

Gary Paul Nabhan, Ph.D.
W. K. Kellogg Endowed Chair, Sustainable
Food Systems; Professor, Biology
University of Arizona

Ed Nater, Ph.D.
Professor, Soil, Water, and Climate
University of Minnesota

Roni Neff, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Environmental Health
and Engineering
Johns Hopkins University

Jay Nelson, Ph.D.
Professor, Biological Sciences
Towson University

David Newburn, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Agricultural and
Resource Economics
University of Maryland

Elizabeth A. Newell, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology
Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Donna R. Newman, Ph.D.
Research Associate, Molecular Biomedical
Sciences
North Carolina State University

Duy Nong, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow, Agricultural and
Resource Economics
Colorado State University

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To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

Joseph Norman, Ph.D.
Senior Postdoctoral Fellow
New England Complex Systems Institute

Edwin Nuijten, Ph.D.
Senior Researcher
Louis Bolk Institute

Suzanne O'Connell, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Horticulture
University of Georgia

Jeffrey O'Hara, Ph.D.
Agricultural Economist, Food and
Environment Program
Union of Concerned Scientists

Megan O'Rourke, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Horticulture
Virginia Tech

John O'Sullivan, Ph.D.
W. K. Kellogg Endowed Chair, Sustainable
Agriculture, Local and Community Food
Systems; Director, Center for
Environmental Farming Systems
North Carolina A&T State University

Lawrence Oates, Ph.D.
Research Scientist, Agronomy
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Patty Oikawa, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow, Environmental
Science, Policy, and Management
University of California, Berkeley

Sherry L. Olson, Ph.D.
Atmospheric Chemist

Todd Ontl, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Forest
Resources and Environmental Science
Michigan Technological University

Damian Parr, Ph.D.
Research and Education Coordinator,
Center for Agroecology
University of California, Santa Cruz

Bob Parsons, Ph.D.
Professor, Community Development and
Applied Economics
University of Vermont

Raj Patel, Ph.D.
Research Professor, Lyndon B. Johnson
School of Public Affairs
University of Texas, Austin

Lucas Patzek, Ph.D.
Agriculture Extension Faculty
Washington State University

Bryce F. Payne, Jr., Ph.D.
Independent Consulting Soil Scientist

Stephen Pearce, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Soil and Crop Sciences
Colorado State University

Gregory Peck, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Horticulture
Cornell University

Ivette Perfecto, Ph.D.
Professor, Natural Resources and
Environment
University of Michigan

L. Brian Perkins, Ph.D.
Research Assistant Professor, Food Science
University of Maine

Dan Petersen, Ph.D.
Professor, Horticulture
University of Cincinnati

Larry Phelan, Ph.D.
Professor, Entomology
Ohio State University

Jennifer G. Phillips, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Bard Center for
Environmental Policy
Bard College

Stacy Philpott, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Environmental Studies;
Heller Chair, Center for Agroecology and
Sustainable Food Systems
University of California, Santa Cruz

Valentin Picasso, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Agronomy
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Leslie Pick, Ph.D.
Professor and Department Chair,
Entomology
University of Maryland

Christopher Pollock, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Institute of Biological,
Environmental and Rural Sciences
Aberystwyth University

Christine M. Porter, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Public Health; Food
Dignity Project Director and Principal
Investigator
University of Wyoming

Ana Prados, Ph.D.
Research Assistant Professor, Joint Center
for Earth Systems Technology
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

DeAnn R. Presley, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Agronomy
Kansas State University

Daniel Press, Ph.D.
Executive Director, Center for Agroecology
University of California, Santa Cruz

Linda Prokopy, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Forestry and Natural
Resources
Purdue University

John Quinn, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Biology
Furman University

Shankar Raman, Ph.D.
Senior Scientist, Rainforest Research
Station
Nature Conservation Foundation

Mark Rasmussen, Ph.D.
Director, Leopold Center for Sustainable
Agriculture
Iowa State University

Bill Raun, Ph.D.
Regents Professor, Plant and Soil Sciences
Oklahoma State University

Martha K. Reynolds, Ph.D.
Research Scientist II, Institute of Arctic
Biology
University of Alaska Fairbanks

John Reganold, Ph.D.
Regents Professor, Soil Science
Washington State University

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To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

Clarilton Ribas, Ph.D.
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

David B. Richman, Ph.D.
College Professor Emeritus, Entomology,
Plant Pathology and Weed Science
New Mexico State University

Linda K. Riebel, Ph.D.
Adjunct Faculty, Transformative Social
Change
Saybrook University

Hugh Roberts, Ph.D.
Vice President
The Sustainability Fund

Dina Roberts, Ph.D.
Faculty, Environmental Studies
The Evergreen State College

G. Phillip Robertson, Ph.D.
University Distinguished Professor
Michigan State University

Dianne Rocheleau, Ph.D.
Professor, Geography
Clark University

Rodrigo Rodriguez-Kabana, Ph.D.
Distinguished Professor, Entomology and
Plant Pathology
Auburn University

Mary Rogers, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Horticultural Science
University of Minnesota

Thomas P. Rooney, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Biological Sciences
Wright State University

Carl Rosen, Ph.D.
Professor, Soil, Water, and Climate
University of Minnesota

Don Ross, Ph.D.
Research Professor, Plant and Soil Science
University of Vermont

Bradley Rowe, Ph.D.
Professor, Horticulture
Michigan State University

Deborah Rudnick, Ph.D.
Chair
Bainbridge Island Watershed Council

Rebecca Ryals, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Research Associate, Institute
for Study of Environment & Society
Brown University

Matthew Ryan, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Soil and Crop Sciences
Cornell University

Paolo Sabbatini, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Horticulture
Michigan State University

Christopher Salice, Ph.D.
Director, Environmental Science and
Studies
Towson University

Ricardo Salvador, Ph.D.
Director and Senior Scientist, Food and
Environment Program
Union of Concerned Scientists

Michael Sands, Ph.D.
Senior Associate
Liberty Prairie Foundation

Antonio F. Sarmiento Galan, Ph.D.
Professor, Instituto de Matematicas
Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico

Dvera Saxton, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Anthropology
California State University, Fresno

Annemiek Schilder, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Plant, Soil, and
Microbial Sciences
Michigan State University

Sigrid Schmalzer, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, History
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Mindi Schneider, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, International Institute
of Social Studies
Erasmus University

T. Schreiber, Ph.D.
Adjunct Professor, Environmental Studies
Keene State College

Eduardo C. Schroder, Ph.D.
Professor, Agronomy and Soils
University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez

Michelle Schroeder, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Crop Science
North Carolina State University

Lisa Schulte Moore, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Natural Resource
Ecology and Management
Iowa State University

Amber Sciligo, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of
Environmental Science, Policy, and
Management
University of California, Berkeley

Michael S. Scott, Ph.D.
Associate Dean, Henson School of Science
and Technology
Salisbury University

Kate M. Scow, Ph.D.
Professor, Soil Science and Microbial
Ecology
University of California, Davis

Ramsey Lee Sealy, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Horticulture and Plant
Pathology
University of Arkansas

Jeff Sharp, Ph.D.
Professor and Director, Environment and
Natural Resources
The Ohio State University

Adam Sheingate, Ph.D.
Professor, Political Science
Johns Hopkins University

Brian R. Shmaefsky, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology
Lone Star College, Kingwood

Ilyas Siddique, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Plant Production
Federal University of Santa Catarina

Belinda Sikes, Ph.D.
Senior Environmental Scientist, Pesticide
Regulation
California Environmental Protection Agency

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

J. Robert Serrine, Ph.D.
Community Food Systems Educator,
Greening Michigan Institute
Michigan State University Extension

Carol Skinner, Ph.D.
Retired Associate Professor, Biology and
Health Services
Edinboro University of Pennsylvania

John Sloan, Ph.D.
Watershed Scientist, National Great Rivers
Research and Education Center
Lewis and Clark Community College

Richard Smith, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Natural Resources and
the Environment
University of New Hampshire

Alvin Smucker, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant, Soil, and Microbial
Sciences
Michigan State University

Sean Michael Smukler, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Land and Food Systems
University of British Columbia

Sieg Snapp, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant Soil and Microbial Science
Michigan State University

William Snyder, Ph.D.
Professor, Entomology
Washington State University

Daniela Soleri, Ph.D.
Associate Research Scientist, Geography
University of California, Santa Barbara

John A. Sorrentino, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Economics
Temple University

Christine Sprunger, Ph.D.
Post-Doctoral Fellow, Earth Institute
Columbia University

Doreen Stabinsky, Ph.D.
Professor, Global Environmental Politics
College of the Atlantic

Laurel Standley, Ph.D.
Principal
Clear Current LLC

Kim Steinmann, Ph.D.
Senior Environmental Scientist (Specialist),
Pest Management and Licensing
California Department of Pesticide
Regulation

Jim Stewart, Ph.D.
Vice President
PODenergy, Inc.

Alexandra Stone, Ph.D.
Vegetable Cropping Systems Specialist
Oregon State University

Cory Straub, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Biology
Ursinus College

David B. Straus, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Chemistry
State University of New York

Donald D. Stull, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Anthropology
University of Kansas

Rebecca M. Summer, Ph.D.
Senior Geomorphologist
Gila Resources Information Project

Sara Syswerda, Ph.D.
Field Station Director, Education
Department
Pierce Cedar Creek Institute

Eugene Takle, Ph.D.
Professor, Agronomy
Iowa State University

Andrew D. Taylor, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Biology
University of Hawaii at Manoa

Robert Taylor, Ph.D.
Eminent Scholar and Professor, Agriculture,
Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology
Auburn University

Tracy Teal, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Microbiology and
Molecular Genetics
Michigan State University

Janice Thies, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Crop and Soil Sciences
Cornell University

Dawn Thilmany McFadden, Ph.D.
Professor, Agricultural and Resource
Economics
Colorado State University

Paul Thompson, Ph.D.
W.K. Kellogg Chair, Agricultural, Food, and
Community Ethics
Michigan State University

L. Ann Thrupp, Ph.D.
Executive Director, Berkeley Food Institute
University of California, Berkeley

Tom Tomich, Ph.D.
W.K. Kellogg Endowed Chair, Sustainable
Food Systems; Founding Director,
Agricultural Sustainability Institute
University of California, Davis

Christina Tonitto, Ph.D.
Ecosystem Scientist, Institute for Food,
Agriculture and Development
Cornell University

Kathryn W. Tosney, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair, Biology
University of Miami

William Tracy, Ph.D.
Professor, Agronomy
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Jun Tsuji, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology
Siena Heights University

Katherine Tully, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Plant Science and
Landscape Architecture
University of Maryland

John Tyndall, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Natural Resource
Ecology and Management
Iowa State University

Norman Uphoff, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Government and
International Agriculture
Cornell University

Hector Valenzuela, Ph.D.
Professor, Plant and Environmental
Protection Services
University of Hawaii, Manoa

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

Renee Van Buren, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology
Utah Valley University

Harold Van Es, Ph.D.
Professor, Crop and Soil Sciences
Cornell University

John Vandermeer, Ph.D.
Distinguished Professor, Ecology and
Evolutionary Biology
University of Michigan

Dennis vanEngelsdorp, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Entomology
University of Maryland

Kathleen Mead Vandiver, Ph.D.
Director, Community Outreach and
Education Core, Center for Environmental
Health Sciences
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Marc P. Vayssières, Ph.D.
Air Pollution Specialist, California
Environmental Protection Agency
California Air Resources Board

William Vencill, Ph.D.
Professor, Crop and Soil Sciences
University of Georgia

Stephen Ventura, Ph.D.
Professor, Environmental Studies and Soil
Science
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Sven Verlinden, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Plant and Soil Sciences
West Virginia University

Sara Via, Ph.D.
Professor, Biology and Entomology
University of Maryland, College Park

Jeffrey Volenec, Ph.D.
Professor, Department of Agronomy
Purdue University

Kim Waddell, Ph.D.
Senior Program Officer, Gulf Research
Program
National Academies of Science

Richard L. Wallace, Ph.D.
Professor, Environmental Studies
Ursinus College

Rob Wallace, Ph.D.
Visiting Scholar, Institute for Global Studies
University of Minnesota

Matt D. Wallenstein, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Ecosystem Science and
Sustainability
Colorado State University

Mollie Walton, Ph.D.
Director, Land and Water Program
Quivira Coalition

Michelle Wander, Ph.D.
Professor, Natural Resources and
Environmental Science
University of Illinois

Thomas Wassmer, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Biology
Siena Heights University

Ann Waters-Bayer, Ph.D.
Chair, Agroecology Association

Daniel N. Weber, Ph.D.
Senior Scientist, Children's Environmental
Health Sciences
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Donald C. Weber, Ph.D.
Research Entomologist, Invasive Insect
Biocontrol and Behavior Lab, Agricultural
Research Service
United States Department of Agriculture

Leroy S. Wehrle, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, Economics
University of Illinois

Ray Weil, Ph.D.
Professor, Soil Science
University of Maryland

Stuart Weiss, Ph.D.
Chief Scientist
Creekside Center for Earth Observation

Rick Welsh, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair, Public Health, Food
Studies and Nutrition
Syracuse University

Paula Westerman, Ph.D.
Scientist, Agricultural and Environmental
Sciences
University of Rostock

Thomas Whitlow, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Horticulture
Cornell University

Mary Wiedenhoef, Ph.D.
Professor, Agronomy
Iowa State University

John D. Wiener, Ph.D.
Research Faculty, Environment and Society
Program
University of Colorado, Boulder

Carol Williams, Ph.D.
Research Scientist, Agronomy
University of Wisconsin

David Wilson, Ph.D.
Professor, Molecular Biology and Genetics
Cornell University

Jane Wolfson, Ph.D.
Professor Emerita, Environmental Science
and Studies
Towson University

C. Wesley Wood, Ph.D.
Professor and Director, West Florida
Research and Education Center
University of Florida

Julia Wright, Ph.D.
Deputy Director, Centre for Agroecology
and Food Security
Coventry University

Baoshan Xing, Ph.D.
Professor, Environmental and Soil
Chemistry
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Anthony Yannarell, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Natural Resources and
Environmental Sciences
University of Illinois

Stephanie Yarwood, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Environmental Science
and Technology
University of Maryland

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

Brenda L. Young, Ph.D.
Professor, Global and Local Sustainability
Daemen College

Thomas Yuill, Ph.D.
Professor and Director Emeritus,
Pathobiological Sciences
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Benjamin Zaitchik, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Earth and Planetary
Sciences
Johns Hopkins University

Eglee L. Zent, Ph.D.
Associated Professor, Human Ecology
Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research

Yaron Ziv, Ph.D.
Senior Lecturer, Life Sciences
Ben Gurion University

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.

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