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. 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. 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.

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, 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.

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

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

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

Miguel Altieri, Ph.D.
Professor of 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

Georg K.S. Andersson, Ph.D.
Researcher, Centre for Environment and Climate Research
Lund 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.
Research Ecologist, NYC Urban Field Station
NYC Department of Parks and Recreation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason Bradford, Ph.D.
Managing Director
Farmland LP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Barney Caton, Ph.D.
Agroecologist

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement
Michael Jahi Chappell, Ph.D.
Director of Agroecology and Agricultural Policy
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Luise K. Davis, Ph.D.

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

Marie-Helene Delmestre, Ph.D.
Professor of 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

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

Michael Duffy, Ph.D.
Professor of Economics
Iowa 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

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

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

Richard S. Feldman, Ph.D.
Associate Professor Environmental Science, Department of Environmental Science and Policy
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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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To add your name to this statement, please visit [www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement](http://www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement).
Marian Glenn, Ph.D.
Professor of Biology and Environmental Studies
Seton Hall University

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

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

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

Sharon Gourdji, Ph.D.
Agricultural Modeling Scientist, Decision and Policy Analysis
Centro Internacional Agricultura Tropica

Elizabeth Graser-Lindsey, Ph.D.

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

Doug Gurian-Sherman, Ph.D.
Director of 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 in the Graduate School, Department of Environmental Science, Policy and Management
University of California, Berkeley

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alastair Iles, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of 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

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

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

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

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

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

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 of Biology and Biochemistry, Department of Biology
University of La Verne

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

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To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.
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To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.
Carl N. McDaniel, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus of Biology
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Devan McGranahan, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Range Science,
School of Natural Resource Sciences
North Dakota State University

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

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

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

Doug Merrey, Ph.D.
Independent Consultant
Iowa State University

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

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

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

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

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

Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Food Studies
Syracuse University

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Edwin Nuijten, Ph.D.
Senior Researcher
Louis Bolck 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

Sherry L. Olson, Ph.D.
Atmospheric Chemist

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Richard Podlesnik, Ph.D.
Former Professor, Department of Management
Fort Lewis College

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.
Christine M. Porter, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joy Schochet, Ph.D.

Eduardo C. Schroder, Dr. P.H.
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 of Natural Resource Ecology and Management
Iowa State University

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

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

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

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

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

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

Doreen Stabinsky, Ph.D.
Professor of 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

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.
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
Rebecca M. Summer, Ph.D.
Senior Geomorphologist
Gila Resources Information Project
Sara Syswerda, Ph.D.
Field Station Director, Education
Department
Pierce Cedar Creek Institute
Andrew D. Taylor, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Biology
University of Hawaii at Manoa
Robert Taylor, Ph.D.
Eminent Scholar and Professor of
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, Ph.D.
Professor, Agricultural and Resource Economics
Colorado State University
Paul Thompson, Ph.D.
W.K. Kellogg Chair in 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 in 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
John Tyndall, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Natural Resource Ecology and Management
Iowa State University
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
Kathleen Mead Vandiver, Ph.D.
Director, Community Outreach and Education Core, Center for Environmental Health Sciences
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Marc P. Vayssieres, 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
Kim Waddell, Ph.D.
Senior Program Officer, Gulf Research Program
National Academies of Science
Richard L. Wallace, Ph.D.
Professor of 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
Michelle Wander, Ph.D.
Professor, Natural Resources and Environmental Science
University of Illinois
Donald C. Weber, Ph.D.
Research Entomologist, Invasive Insect Biocontrol and Behavior Lab
USDA - Agricultural Research Service
Daniel N. Weber, Ph.D.
Senior Scientist, Children’s Environmental Health Sciences
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee
Leroy S. Wehrle, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus of Economics
University of Illinois
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
Mary Wiedenhoeft, Ph.D.
Professor of Agromony
Iowa State University

Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.

To add your name to this statement, please visit www.ucsusa.org/agroecologystatement.
Carol Williams, Ph.D.
Research Scientist, Agronomy
University of Wisconsin

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

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

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

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