



# 2023 Farm Bill Priorities of the California Caucus

The following priorities were formulated by California-based members of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. The purpose of this document is to summarize issues that are particularly important to California agriculture.

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) is an alliance of grassroots organizations that advocates for federal policy reform to advance the sustainability of agriculture, food systems, natural resources, and rural communities. The NSAC California Caucus is a group of 13 sustainable agriculture and farmer support organizations that are working together to ensure that the 2023 Farm Bill serves the needs of California's farmers. Together we work with 60,000 stakeholders including 15,000 farmers and voters across the state to build a thriving and sustainable agricultural economy.

Building on our ongoing work directly with farmers across the state, our organizations have conducted surveys, listening sessions, and focus groups to understand what issues are most salient and where federal investment can be most impactful. Large-scale investments in the next generation of farmers, especially Black farmers and other farmers of color, climate-smart farming practices, and organic and regenerative practices that can build resilience to the impacts of climate change are some of the key issues we will be pushing for in the 2023 Farm Bill.

Please refer to NSAC's comprehensive [2023 Farm Bill Platform](#) for title-by-title recommendations across farm bill programs and policies.

We were thrilled to see that the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act has \$40 billion for climate change mitigation and resilience efforts over the next ten years through key agriculture provisions, many of which mirror or support the elements we hope to see in the Farm Bill. We encourage our representatives in Congress to build on this momentum and continue to invest in these key programs at the scale needed to make a meaningful impact.



## 2023 FARM BILL PRIORITIES

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### Title II: Conservation

- For decades, the farm bill's farm Make key policy Improvements and increase funding for EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)
- Develop a conservation technical assistance initiative that invests in technical assistance for farming systems and practices that mitigate climate change
- Create a national program modeled on California's Alternative Manure Management Program

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### Title V: Credit

- Support Black farmers, Latina/o farmers, immigrant farmers, and other farmers of color through budget set-asides, loan forgiveness, and grants
- Improve access to credit for beginning farmers and ranchers and farmers and ranchers of color

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### Title VI: Rural Development

- Support regional meat slaughter and processing infrastructure, training, and technical assistance for small and mid-sized producers

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### Title VII: Research, Extension, and Related Matters

- Increase investment in organic agricultural research at ARS to expand the amount of high quality, long-term studies on organic agriculture production systems
- Increase investments in organic agricultural research through NIFA's competitive grant programs, like OREI, and increase funding for the SARE Program

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### Title X: Horticulture

- Invest in robust local food system infrastructure, including food hubs, farmers' markets, and other direct-marketing opportunities for farmers and ranchers
- Increase funding for the organic certification cost-share program and streamline administration to make cost share more accessible to organic producers
- Increase funding for the National Organic Program to absorb specific costs of organic enforcement in California that are currently paid by producers

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### Title XII: Miscellaneous

- Increase funding for the Farming Opportunities, Training, and Outreach (FOTO) Program
- Increase investment in USDA Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production grant programs to enhance local food security and provide agricultural opportunities for urban and suburban residents
- Ensure that disaster relief programs are able to assist farm workers impacted by climate change such as extreme heat, drought, and wildfire
- Implement civil rights reforms at the USDA

## DETAILED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Title II: Conservation

#### 1. Make key policy improvements and increase funding for EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Farm Bill conservation programs such as EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) help farmers and ranchers use less water, conserve water quality, and enhance wildlife habitat and other natural resources on and around their land. They are also the first line of defense for farmers and ranchers seeking to prepare for drought, flooding, and other extreme weather events. Conservation practices, such as nutrient management, cover cropping, crop rotations, organic management, and prescribed grazing help producers increase the resilience of their operations by protecting against soil degradation and erosion, building soil health, increasing water infiltration, and limiting nutrient loss. In the face of the increasing severity of the impacts of climate change, practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and sequester carbon should receive the highest incentives. An effective 2023 Farm Bill will:

- Maintain and make permanent the Inflation Reduction Act's growing investments in EQIP and CSP funding to meet demand from producers
- Add to the investments in the Inflation Reduction Act to reach an annual total of \$3 billion for EQIP and \$4 billion for CSP starting in FY2024
- Ensure that increased climate-focused investments from the Inflation Reduction Act prioritize the needs of small and medium-sized growers, BIPOC farmers, and projects with multiple environmental benefits

- Increase conservation program budget set-asides for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers to 30%
- Maintain the Conservation Reserve Program's Transition Incentives Program baseline funding to increase access to land for beginning, veteran, or socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers
- Make key climate adaptation and mitigation practices eligible for new and existing EQIP and CSP contracts
- Set aside two-thirds of all funding that goes to livestock-related contracts to support advanced grazing management that builds soil health and reduces greenhouse gas emissions
- Eliminate EQIP eligibility for confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs)
- Eliminate the lower organic payment cap in EQIP
- Standardize the EQIP Organic Initiative's state-by-state funding based on the proportion of organic producers in each state
- Create a set-aside for an Organic Initiative within the Conservation Stewardship Program, modeled on the EQIP Organic Initiative, that will actively support the work of organic producers
- Prioritize and increase USDA conservation program payments to farmers for implementing organic and other soil-building management systems

#### 2. Develop a conservation technical assistance initiative that invests in technical assistance for farming systems and practices that mitigate climate change

Building soil health and capturing carbon in soils is a key strategy for mitigating climate change. Farmers and ranchers need support to adopt more carbon-

## DETAILED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

sequestering practices, including organic farming, which builds long-term soil fertility and healthy soils that store water, plant nutrients, and carbon. These practices support diverse and vigorous above- and below-ground ecosystems that also provide natural controls of pests and diseases while dramatically reducing reliance on petroleum-derived pesticides and fertilizers that themselves are significant sources of greenhouse gasses.

As both the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) and USDA acknowledge the climate benefits of organic production and have established organic transition programs, more farmers should be given technical support for making the transition. We are excited that the state budget includes \$5 million for an organic transition program at CDFA with a 50% prioritization for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. We'd like to see Congress follow California's lead in supporting ongoing efforts to encourage and facilitate transition to organic management.

Developing and establishing a conservation technical assistance initiative will better equip farmers with the necessary resources to implement climate-smart agriculture and mitigate the impacts of drought and flood; restore wildlife habitat for pollinators, wildlife, and other natural pest controls; and improve soil health. With conservation technical assistance, farmers will be able to lead the fight against climate change and build resilient food and farming systems. An effective 2023 Farm Bill will:

- Set aside 1% of total farm bill conservation program mandatory funding each year for a major new conservation technical assistance initiative to assist producers in mitigating and adapting to climate change. The technical assistance would be

delivered by NRCS and by third parties and would prioritize assistance to underserved producers

- Make permanent the increased investments in conservation technical assistance that exist in the USDA's Organic Transition Initiative
- Provide sufficient funding for producers to implement the new Organic Management conservation practice standard
- Invest in training existing and hiring new technical assistance providers (TAPs) who have familiarity with the requirements of organic production systems and advance training for existing TAPs
- Codify the Direct Farmer Assistance portion of the USDA's Organic Transition Initiative, expanding the amount of technical and financial support
- Reward organic producers as early adopters of climate-smart agricultural practices and acknowledge organic agriculture as climate-smart. Include organic as a qualified system in any climate-smart verification or label that USDA develops

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### 3. Create a national program modeled on California's Alternative Manure Management Program

AMMP provides grants for implementing more cost-effective, non-digester dairy manure management strategies (including composting and pasture-based systems) that reduce methane emissions, improve water quality, and provide economic co-benefits to livestock producers. A similar California program that has been in place since 2017 has reduced an estimated 1.1 million metric tons of carbon dioxide from dairy farms, and producer demand continues to greatly outpace funding. We have the opportunity to scale up this approach by creating a new federal program based

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on the successful state program. An effective 2023 Farm Bill will:

- Establish mandatory yearly funding for a federal AMMP program modeled on the successful California program

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### Title V: Credit

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#### 4. Support Black farmers, Latina/o farmers, immigrant farmers, and other farmers of color, through budget set-asides, loan forgiveness, and grants

It is well documented that USDA policies and practices have steadily and systematically taken land from Black farmers and made it difficult for farmers of color to succeed, to effectively compete in agricultural markets, and to retain their land across generations. As farm owners are 93% white and average nearly 60 years in age, a radical change in the demographics of farm ownership is slowly underway, and there are opportunities to redress historical wrongs. Latina/o growers, for example, are the fastest-growing demographic among California farm operators. Other groups of socially disadvantaged farmers, as tracked by the USDA, include Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islanders.

In order to address a long history of discrimination and build the next generation of farmers, the 2023 Farm Bill should:

- Help farmers and ranchers to successfully utilize credit with training made possible by increasing funding to the Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach (FOTO) Program with annual discretionary funding of \$50 million in addition to \$50 million in existing mandatory funding, and

prioritize grants to help farmers and ranchers of color

- Ensure debt relief for farmers of color and others as captured by the language articulated in the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (H.R. 5376, Subtitle C - Rural Development and Agricultural Credit, SEC. 1006) (pp. 565 - 570)

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#### 5. Improve access to credit for beginning farmers and ranchers and for farmers and ranchers of color

Consolidation in the agricultural finance sector in California has resulted in farmers of color struggling to obtain financing, especially as they seek opportunities for land ownership. Surveys by the FDIC and Policy Map illustrate a 50% decline in small farm loans across California over a five-year period. Many farmers of color and beginning farmers rely on diversified crops and markets that are poorly understood by traditional lenders. Commercial lenders are focused on making larger, more profitable loans and often cannot provide small, affordable loans to meet the needs of smaller-scale farmers. The 2023 Farm Bill is an opportunity to:

- Assure that the needs of farmers of color and beginning farmers are a priority in shaping all credit and crop insurance programs

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### Title VI: Rural Development

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#### 6. Support regional meat slaughter and processing infrastructure, training, and technical assistance for small and mid-sized producers

Lack of access to federally inspected slaughterhouses is a significant barrier for small-scale and organic producers to bring their product to market. Fewer

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people are entering the slaughter and meat processing workforce because of the challenging working conditions. Organic livestock production and meat processing help sustain rural livelihoods and lower wildfire risk because grazing is a key fuel-reduction strategy. Investing in slaughterhouse infrastructure can help realize the economic and environmental potential of small-scale and organic ranching. Investing in slaughterhouse workforce training will enhance capacity for regional slaughter and subsequent access to local markets. An effective 2023 Farm Bill will:

- Establish a permanent USDA program to rebuild regional meat processing infrastructure that is scaled to serve small, mid-scale, and organic producers, including scale-appropriate guidance and assistance from FSIS; increased USDA cost-share for state inspection; a small plants grants program; meat processing training program grants; and expansion of cooperative interstate shipment

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### **Title VII: Research, Extension, and Related Matters**

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#### **7. Increase investment in organic agricultural research at ARS to expand the amount of high quality, long-term studies on organic agriculture systems of production**

Organic practices are a core component of climate-smart agriculture, and California is the leading producer of organic crops nationwide. Less than one percent, or \$12m of a total of \$1.6b in USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) in-house research money, focuses on the needs of organic producers. The ARS research station in Salinas, CA has the only dedicated organic researcher in the country and funding for that program is seriously underfunded. An effective 2023 Farm Bill will:

- Create a national organic research program at USDA-ARS, directed to focus on critical long-term challenges that organic producers continue to face, like weed and pest management, regionally appropriate cultivar development, and soil health and plant nutrition management
- Initial funding for this new national program should be set at \$100m, which would align funding for organic research at ARS with the market share of the organic sector, which is currently 6%

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#### **8. Increase investments in organic agricultural research through NIFA's competitive grant programs, like OREI, and increase funding for the SARE Program**

Competitive grant programs that support research in organic systems are also underfunded relative to the organic market share and to the opportunity to advance organic as a meaningful climate solution. In order to ensure that organic farmers are able to succeed, we must provide robust funding for research to optimize the climate benefits of organic agriculture under diverse crop and livestock types, growing conditions, and regions.

- Increase funding for the NIFA Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) by \$10m annually for 5 years, increasing (on a stair-stepped basis) mandatory funding from \$50m a year to \$100m a year by the end of the Farm Bill
- Provide permanent mandatory funding for the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program at \$60m per year and add climate resilience as a core priority of the program

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### Title X: Horticulture

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#### 9. Invest in robust local food system infrastructure, including food hubs, farmers' markets, and other direct-marketing opportunities for farmers and ranchers

It is imperative that the U.S. bolster local food systems to ensure resiliency against future ecological, epidemiological, and digital security threats. Robust local food systems strengthen local economies and protect food and nutrition security. Resiliency can be built by, among other things, expanding grants for agricultural processing, aggregation, and distribution facilities. This will reduce food miles, increase supply chain resilience, and create rural jobs. Complementary workforce training will also be important, as in the meat industry. An effective 2023 Farm Bill will:

- Create a new Local Agriculture Marketing Program (LAMP) subprogram for farm viability and local climate resilience centers to develop and expand markets for farm products that significantly improve soil health and carbon sequestration
- Create a new cooperative agreement procurement program and initiative at the USDA—the Fresh Produce Procurement Program—to partner with existing farmers, distributors, food hubs, food banks, and state programs, developed through the Pandemic Response Local Food Purchasing Assistance Program, to purchase, pack and deliver (including last mile delivery) fresh fruits and vegetables to food banks, schools, senior centers, youth-serving organizations, tribal governments, and nonprofits serving nutrition insecure populations. Fund this new program at \$100 million per year or more

- Scale up funding for LAMP by a factor of ten to help small and mid-size farmers provide fresh nutritious food to more Americans, through farmers markets, local and regional food enterprises, aggregators, food hubs, cooperatives, value chain coordination, and regional food-shed planning
- Create a food safety certification cost-share program to support access for small scale farmers to increase access to markets, and fund at \$10m per year

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#### 10. Increase funding for the organic certification cost-share program and streamline administration to make cost share more accessible to organic producers

Cost share has been an important tool for making organic certification affordable for small-scale and socially disadvantaged producers. Funding levels have not been increased since the 2008 Farm Bill, and they were cut by 33% in 2020. Organic cost-share reimbursements should be increased to keep pace with inflation and to meet producer demand. Cost share is over-subscribed in California. An effective 2023 Farm Bill will:

- Increase and make permanent \$52 million/year funding for the organic certification cost-share program to meet demand and account for inflation
- Increase the maximum annual organic certification cost-share payment to 100% of eligible expenses up to a maximum of \$1500 per certification scope



## DETAILED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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### 11. Increase funding for the National Organic Program to absorb specific costs of organic enforcement in California that are currently paid by producers

California is fortunate to have strong state-level enforcement through the State Organic Program (SOP). However, California producers do not receive equitable federal resources because they fund their own enforcement through fees paid to the SOP in addition to certification fees.

- Congress should increase the National Organic Program's budget to absorb costs currently carried by California's organic operations

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### Title XII: Miscellaneous

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### 12. Increase funding for Farming Opportunities, Training, and Outreach (FOTO) Program

In their first ten years, beginning farmers, and many farmers of color struggle to establish themselves in California agriculture. Yet the largest growing demographic of new farm operators in California are Latina/o farmers. Barriers to gaining stability are formidable, including limited access to affordable access and equipment, too few Spanish-speaking business advisors who understand agriculture. For example, many small business advisors are unable to address the unique needs of agriculture. Fortunately, the programs that were integrated into FOTO in 2019 (Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program and the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Program) exist to help ensure that USDA supports culturally relevant and scale-appropriate training and support programs for

beginning farmers and farmers of color. The 2023 Farm Bill needs to:

- Maintain mandatory funding for the Farming Opportunities, Training, and Outreach (FOTO) Program at \$50 million annually while repeating the prior discretionary annual funding of an additional \$50 million to strengthen investment in beginning farmers.

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### 13. Increase investment in USDA Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production grant programs to enhance local food security and provide agricultural opportunities for urban and suburban residents

Urban agriculture gives urban and suburban residents a chance to purchase foods from farmers not just in their state, but sometimes right in their very own neighborhoods. Many of these urban farms are operated by and for people of color, unlike the broader farming sector. It is also a prime opportunity to educate urban and suburban residents about the realities of farming. The 2018 Farm Bill established a small but impactful urban agriculture program, and we have the opportunity to grow this program in the next cycle. The 2023 Farm Bill must:

- Increase funding to the Urban Agriculture and Innovation Production grants program by ten times, to \$50 million per year. Pandemic relief funds injected \$70 million into the program simply to fund the backlog of applications, demonstrating the high demand for support
- Include technical assistance to navigate zoning restrictions, water access, and how to access city and county resources



## DETAILED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide for the establishment of tool and equipment sharing programs

### **14. Ensure that disaster relief programs are able to assist farm workers impacted by climate change such as extreme heat, drought, and wildfire**

As the impacts of climate change like drought, unpredictable weather, heat waves, and wildfire continue to strain food production and farm and ranch operations, we need to adopt practices that not only mitigate future impacts but also swiftly respond to current resulting hardship for our food producers, including farmers, ranchers, and farm employees. An effective 2023 Farm Bill will:

- Increase funding for disaster relief programs to address the impacts from climate change that lead to yield loss, job or income loss, property and infrastructure damage, among other impacts felt by farm owners, operators, and employees
- Ensure farm employees as well as operators and owners are eligible for crop insurance and other support programs, especially in the case of job loss due to reduced harvest
- Due to the western states' historic drought and worsening climate change, more working lands across the West may be retired, permanently taken out of production, due to lack of water. This change is an opportunity for conservation such as creating habitat and avoiding major sources of dust and noxious weeds. The Farm Bill should call for launching urgent research and development of existing or new conservation programs, related to the needs of producers and rural communities in western states where lands may be retired.

### **15. Implement civil rights reforms at the USDA**

Well-documented racist policies and practices—for example in the Pigford and Keepseagle lawsuits and settlements—have left farmers of color at a great disadvantage or forced out of family lands altogether for decades. The 2023 Farm Bill is an opportunity to:

- Establish an independent board to oversee civil rights within USDA to protect the rights of farmers and ranchers
- Provide well-staffed, long-term support for the USDA Equity Commission to understand discrimination against Black farmers and other farmers of color and and recommendations for action
- Ensure robust support for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights to assist individuals in navigating and resolving civil rights complaints within USDA

Learn more about NSAC  
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