

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 28, 2015

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The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Thank you for your continued leadership on behalf of our nation's farmers—both large and small. I write today to urge you to prioritize organic research as you award agriculture research grants in Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 and would encourage you to prioritize organic agriculture research in your FY 2017 budget.

While I was disappointed the omnibus spending bill did not fully fund the President's request for important research programs such as the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), I was ultimately proud to support a budget that increased AFRI funding from FY 2015 levels and continues important appropriated funding for the Organic Transitions Program and mandatory funding for programs like the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI). These critical investments affirm the importance and the value of expanding agriculture research and development. This increase will help support ongoing research being done in my home state of Connecticut. However, as USDA awards grants in FY 2016 it is critical that AFRI and SCRI grants support organic agriculture research projects and as the department plans for the future budget years these investments are continued.

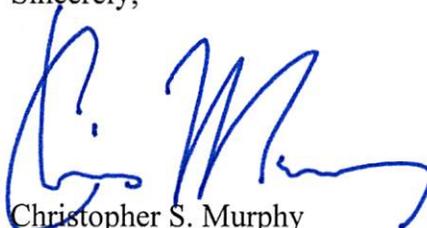
In order to help meet growing consumer demand, federal investment in agriculture research must include robust support for organic agriculture research projects. It is clear that consumer demand for organic food is high. According to the Organic Trade Association sales in organic products increased 11.5% in 2014 from the previous year.

However, investment in organic projects in hallmark agriculture research programs is not keeping pace with demand. According to the Connecticut based National Organic Coalition, the percentage of AFRI funding supporting organic research was 0.1% from 2010-2014. Further, only 2% of SCRI grants supported organic research projects in this same period, which is particularly alarming given that this research supports products like fruits and vegetables, a sector in which demand for organic products is particularly high.

It is also important to note that organic research often benefits conventional farmers as well. For example, all farmers can benefit from research on using crop rotations to break pest cycles or non-herbicide methods of weed control, even if the research is targeted to organic systems.

It is clear that consumer demand for organic products will continue to grow. Robust federal investments in organic research are critical for supporting existing farmers and making it easier for new farmers to make the transition to organic to help this growing market.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'C. Murphy', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator