



NOFA-NY Testimony for the 2025 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing: Agriculture & Markets/Parks & Recreation

January 27, 2025

Thank you for this opportunity to share the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York's (NOFA-NY) priorities for the fiscal year 2026 proposed budget.

Founded in 1983, NOFA-NY is the leading organization driving the growth of organic regenerative agriculture across New York State. We offer farmer-to-farmer education and technical support to farmers statewide, help connect consumers with local, organic products, and advocate for just and resilient food and farm systems. As a USDA-accredited organic certification body, NOFA-NY proudly certifies over 1,000 of New York's nearly 2,000 organic farms and businesses. Given NY's strong livestock industry, we are a leading certifier for organic livestock operations nationally.

New York State is a national leader in the organic agriculture sector, as confirmed by the latest USDA Organic Census. We're ranked 3rd in the nation for the number of organic farms and lead the country in the acreage of organic field crops, including hay, corn, and soy. In fact, no state surpasses New York when it comes to organic livestock, poultry farms, and dairy operations. As the organic industry experiences remarkable growth across the U.S. — especially in the Northeast — New York stands at the forefront, ready to expand its role as a national leader in the industry.

With past NYS contracts, we have launched efforts to expand access to organic certification and support for underserved farmers. We have increased our capacity to offer expert assistance on organic farming practices and certification, now with more accessible virtual support options. Our streamlined online certification portal, developed with the help of state funds, helps farmers save time and reduce paperwork. We thank the state legislature for supporting these vital initiatives and request continued support this year for our virtual farmer support services and further developing our ability to resource underserved farmers.

Organic & Climate Smart Technical Assistance

Our longstanding commitment to supporting organic and transitioning farmers in New York State is expanding. With FY26 funding, we aim to grow our virtual support services, expand USDA-funded technical assistance and community events, and build a more inclusive, effective, and climate-resilient network for NY farmers. The requested funds will enable us to meet the growing demand for our services, ensuring that farmers have access to the resources and assistance they need to thrive. Our programs and events are open to all farmers – certified organic or just wanting to learn about organic practices. With continued support from the NYS Agriculture and Markets Appropriations, we will work to foster a more resilient agricultural landscape that prioritizes sustainability, and equity within the organic sector and beyond.

This year, we're requesting a total of \$250,000 including:

- **\$160,000 to expand capacity to meet increasing demand for technical assistance support services.** The funding will also help cover software subscription fees for tracking engagement, support ongoing maintenance and upgrades to our Organic Certification database, and purchase new hardware for phone and virtual meeting capabilities. With the change of presidential Administrations this month, the future of one of our USDA-funded projects is uncertain. Without that USDA funding, we will be unable to operate our Climate Smart Farming and Marketing program as currently designed but we intend to continue offering on-the-ground and virtual technical assistance on organic and climate-smart practices to NY farmers, and support from this year's budget would enable us to continue that essential work at a smaller scale.
- **\$50,000 to supplement USDA funding for NOFA-NY events** including 15 free technical assistance events for farmers, three regional Farm Fest events to build community connections, and the 2026 Annual Winter Conference, which will feature a wide range of technical and informational sessions.
- **\$40,000 to expand access to our programs for underserved farmers** by offering scholarships and affinity spaces for black, Indigenous, and farmers of color at events, integrate language interpretation into more events, and begin translating certification materials into Spanish, with the long-term goal of creating a comprehensive language justice plan.

Organic Certification Cost Share Program

In the absence of a new federal farm bill, an additional \$800,000 in the Agriculture and Markets Appropriations budget would keep an important organic farming program for NY operations.

The USDA Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP) provides direct payments to organic farms and businesses to recover some of the expenses associated with renewing their annual certification. The public investment in the OCCSP serves as a modest acknowledgment of the additional resources required for organic certification. The program has been operating since the inception of USDA Organic (over 20 years ago) as a way for farms and businesses to recoup some of the direct costs associated with the annual certification process. While this robust certification process is at the core of consumer trust and program integrity in the organic label, it is not a simple process and farms and businesses must dedicate significant resources and time to ensure compliance. The time and resources that go into completing certification are essential for ensuring compliance with the USDA's rigorous regulations which are designed and regularly updated to ensure that organic practices support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity.

However, OCCSP is a so-called federal "orphan program" and was not funded through the farm bill extension that was included in December's continuing resolution. It is very unlikely that federal funding will be restored this year, leaving NY's nearly 2,000 organic operations with no relief for their costs of certification.

In NY, the program has been administered by both the Farm Service Agency and by the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets. Certified operations have been able to choose to work with either office to apply. In FY23, just under \$675,000 went through this program directly to NY farms and businesses. The reimbursement is 75% up to \$750 per certification scope¹. Organic operations have to apply each fall and receive a reimbursement check from either NYSDAM or FSA, depending on where they applied.

This program is important particularly for smaller farms because the reimbursement is a greater percentage of their annual expenses. With the uncertainty of the next farm bill and rising costs, losing this program will be a significant loss to NY organic farms. Because NYSDAM already has years of experience and the infrastructure to administer this program, securing NYS budget funding would

¹ There are 4 scopes that farms can be certified in: crops, livestock, handling, and wild crops. As an example, a dairy farm would typically be required to be certified in crops (for their pasture and feed) as well as livestock.

keep it running. **For 2025, we are requesting that \$800k be directed to the NYSDAM to administer the program.**

NY Soil Health and Climate Resiliency

Soil health is key to New York’s climate goals, and farmers across the state are eager to embrace practices that improve it. Increased investment in soil health initiatives is vital for strengthening food security, reducing emissions, and making our farmland more resilient to the extreme weather driven by climate change.

The Climate Resilient Farming Program and New York’s Soil and Water Conservation Districts, both funded through the Environmental Protection Fund, assist farmers in adopting climate-friendly practices like cover cropping and reduced tillage. These efforts are critical to transitioning our agriculture and food systems to meet the goals set by the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act.

The NYS Climate Resilient Farming Program is consistently oversubscribed. In the most recent round of funding (Round 8), requests totaled \$49 million, yet only \$15 million was available through the Department’s 2024 budget. Although federal funding has partially addressed this gap, its future remains uncertain under the new USDA leadership. As administrators of the Climate Resilient Farming Program and other conservation efforts, Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) also need increased funding to meet growing demand and to recruit and retain staff.

While the Governor’s budget proposes flat funding for these programs, we urge the legislature to **increase funding for the Climate Resilient Farming Program and Soil and Water Conservation Districts as part of an increase in the Environmental Protection Fund to \$500 million.**

As members of the NY Renews Coalition, NOFA-NY also urges the legislature to **invest in the Climate Action Fund** and ensure that Cap-Trade and Invest proceeds are directed to increased affordability for households and to resource community-led climate justice efforts throughout NY, including in rural farming communities.

Additional budget measures that NOFA-NY Supports

As a member of several coalitions and partnerships, NOFA-NY also urges the legislature to advance the following measures in the FY26 budget.

- \$25 million for Farmland Protection in the Environmental Protection Fund and \$1 million for Farmland For a New Generation in Aid to Localities (Alliance for New York’s Farmland)
- \$500,000 for Black Farmers United - New York in Agriculture and Markets Appropriations
- At least \$10 million for an expanded Farm to School Reimbursement Incentive program and maintaining at least \$1.5 million for the Farm to School Grants program (New York Grown Food for New York Kids)
- Include a state-funded food benefit for households with children that are ineligible for SNAP based on citizenship status (SNAP4All Coalition)
- Maintain Governor Hochul’s historic commitment to covering the cost of all school meals for NY students

Thank you again for your time and dedication to supporting NY’s farming future.