

# Organic farming will do the most good

Greg Bowman, [Agweek](#)

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KUTZTOWN, Pa. — To best feed the world a growing number of researchers, development experts, farming groups and environmentalists are calling for new emphasis on sustainable agricultural practices that make a sharp break from current policies.

A newly released Rodale Institute research paper reviewing replicated research shows that the latest scientific approaches in organic agriculture offer affordable, immediately usable and universally accessible ways to improve yields and access to nutritional food in developing countries. “The Organic Green Revolution” paper is available online at [www.rodaleinstitute.org/files/GreenRevUP.pdf](http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/files/GreenRevUP.pdf) .. A recent report cited in the paper from the UN Environmental Programme noted that not only can organic agriculture feed the world, but it may be the only way we can solve the growing problem of hunger in developing countries. UNEP says its extensive study “challenges the popular myth that organic agriculture cannot increase agricultural productivity.” In an analysis of 114 farming projects in 24 African countries, UNEP reported that organic or near-organic practices resulted in a yield increase of more than 100 percent.

An Organic Green Revolution, using integrated farming practices such as cover crops, organic no-till and composting, not only substantially improves yields but it also protects and restores soil and environmental health.

“Yield data just by itself makes the case for a focused and persistent move to organic farming systems,” explains Dr. Tim LaSalle, co-author of the report and CEO of the Rodale Institute, a 60-year-old research and education nonprofit. “When we also consider that organic systems are building the health of the soil, sequestering CO<sub>2</sub>, cleaning up the waterways, and returning more economic yield to the farmer, the argument for an Organic Green Revolution becomes overwhelming. Since these methods build the soil it also increases drought and flood resistance as well as adaptability to climate change,” LaSalle says.

The term “Green Revolution” took hold in the 1960s to describe the combination of fertilizer, hybrid varieties and pesticides applied to single-crop fields to achieve maximum yield. Yet “the so-called Green Revolution was anything but green,” LaSalle says.

“Initial production benefits have declined and societal costs increased. A paradigm shift, rather than incremental change, is therefore needed in the way we grow, buy and eat our food. The Organic Green Revolution provides that needed shift,” he says.

A number of independent research studies shows that the commodity-oriented Green Revolution has not, and cannot, feed the world sustainably, the paper reports. Some 923 million people are seriously undernourished, 25,000 people die each day from starvation.

The Rodale Institute paper cites a major 2008 study which assessed results from 286 farms in 57 countries, finding that small farmers increased their crop yields by an average of 79 percent by using environmentally sustainable techniques, including organic farming and crop rotation. Organically managed soils have more physical soil structure, preventing erosion; more permeability, for healthier microorganism growth; and more availability of nutrients, which are vital for crop productivity.

Furthermore, these soils sequester carbon in soil from carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, making organic farming the most available strategy to fight global warming.

The data and analyses compiled in the “Organic Green Revolution” report make a compelling case that organic agricultural practices are established, commercially successful and applicable at any scale of operation as shown by farmers across the United States — from family market farms to commercial operations of thousands of acres. Regenerative organic techniques can adapt to virtually any location, make best use of local inputs, and creatively transform carbon-based waste streams into valuable products.

Updating government agricultural policy that currently perpetuates unsustainable practices to a strategy appropriate to these times by providing incentives for ecological restoration could include paying farmers and other land managers for the soil carbon they store rather than the volume of commodities that they produce.

-- Greg Bowman

*Editor's Note: Bowman is managing editor of Rodale Institute's New Farm magazine.*