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## UC Organic Agriculture Institute develops programs

Issue Date: [March 10, 2021](#)

**By Kathy Coatney**



Organizers say a newly established Organic Agriculture Institute within the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources division will increase the university's capacity to provide research and technical assistance to the state's organic sector.

Established last year, the institute is led by Houston Wilson, who also serves as an assistant Cooperative Extension specialist in the Department of Entomology at UC Riverside.

Wilson said the institute will be developing a research and extension program for the organic production of tree nuts, tree fruits, raisins and rice in California, and eventually intends to expand this work to all organic crops.

"Organic ag has historically been under-supported, both in terms of funding and university positions or efforts focused on organic agriculture—so there's very much a need for research and extension across multiple production areas for all of these different crops," he said.

As the institute gets off the ground, Houston said it will work to establish partnerships and collaborations with key organic agriculture stakeholders, conduct an assessment to identify and prioritize research and extension needs, and use that assessment as the basis for developing targeted research and extension projects.

"As director of the UC OAI, my role is really one of facilitating and supporting these activities," he said.

"In addition to research and extension, we also want to support educational efforts to help train the next generation of organic ag scientists, as well as provide expertise where needed for policy advocates or other groups that are looking for information on organic agriculture," Wilson said.

"These are all activities that the university has traditionally carried out for agriculture, but for the first time here, the focus is explicitly on organic agriculture," he said.

In January, Wilson submitted a proposal to a federal funding program, the Organic Research and Extension Initiative, seeking funds to support the needs assessment for organic research and extension in California.

As part of this effort, he said a series of meetings will be held in different parts of the state, involving farmers, consultants, certifiers, UC personnel and others, to identify and prioritize the research and extension needs in the initial crops the institute plans to address.

Wilson said he also hopes to establish a network of organic agriculture stakeholders, calling it the California Organic Agriculture Knowledge Network, or Cal OAK Network.

The entire process will take about 18 months, he said, and when completed, a series of targeted research and extension proposals will be generated to address the most pressing needs. The collaborative research and extension teams leading those projects will likely be formed through partnerships that stem out of connections made through the Cal OAK Network, he said.

With this information, Wilson said, the institute plans to go back to OREI and other potential funders to seek support for the collaborative projects.

The Cal OAK Network was created not only to bring people together, but as a way to facilitate sharing knowledge of all the work that's been done on organic agriculture to date and that has contributed to California's leading role in the sector, he explained.

"It's incredible how much has been achieved in California in the absence of funding and targeted UC efforts in this area," Wilson said. "As we wade into this arena, we want to find ways to collaborate to support and enhance the groups that have already been working on these issues for decades."

Glenda Humiston, vice president for UC ANR, said a UC effort such as this has been long overdue.

What UC brings to the table, she said, is research, extension and education regarding the problems of organic agriculture, as well as the ability to leverage additional funding into this area.

The UC institute was founded with a \$500,000 endowment from Clif Bar & Co., which makes organic foods and beverages, with funding matched by the UC Office of the President.

Clif Bar has also established endowed organic agriculture research positions at universities including the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Washington State University.

Humiston noted that Clif Bar needs tens of thousands of pounds of organic product to make its bars, so it started the endowments to further that goal.

"As we continue to experience funding cuts from our federal and state general funds for Cooperative Extension, it is critical that we establish endowments where anybody can donate money to them," Humiston said, adding, "Clif Bar has committed to us that they are going to work with their other partners to try to get more funding in here. We hope many others will join them."

In addition, she said, UC Cooperative Extension has retained its first official organic specialist, Joji Muramoto at the UC Santa Cruz campus.

Institute director Wilson said the new UC OAI ultimately wants to expand its work to all organic agriculture in California.

"We hope to start reaching out to partners and pulling together the Cal OAK Network sometime this spring," he said, "and, pending COVID-19 restrictions, would like to start convening people later this year in the fall, winter and spring of 2022—whenever we can start getting people together again in some form." More information about the UC OAI may be found at [organic.ucanr.edu](http://organic.ucanr.edu).

(Kathy Coatney is a reporter in Bend, Oregon. She may be contacted at [kacoatney@gmail.com](mailto:kacoatney@gmail.com).)

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**LATEST ISSUE**

**Farm Bureau Extension**  
Rios, Johnson discuss key topics during online conversation  
Page 9

**Weed control in rice**  
Specialists say new options are cutting on rice weeds emerge  
Page 7

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APRIL 21, 2021

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# AgAlert

California Farm Bureau

**FIELD CROPS  
VEGETABLES**

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**Drought spreads water shortages throughout state**

**By Christine Sacco**

The state of California remains locked in agricultural water scarcity, according to a report released by the California Farm Bureau. The report says that water shortages are spreading throughout the state, with some areas experiencing shortages for the first time in decades. The report also notes that the drought is causing significant economic damage to the agricultural sector, with many farmers and ranchers facing financial hardship. The report calls for increased water conservation efforts and for the state to take action to address the drought crisis.

See M0720, Page 10

**Dairy farms count on food-service demand**

**By Christine Sacco**

Despite the challenges of the current market, dairy farmers are looking to food service as a key source of demand for their products. The California Farm Bureau reports that food service demand has remained strong, even in the face of the economic downturn. This is due to the fact that many food service establishments, such as restaurants and hotels, are still open and operating. Dairy farmers are therefore encouraged to continue to focus on the food service market as a way to maintain and grow their business.

See M0720, Page 10

**Actions aim to broaden farmers' insurance options**

**By Christine Sacco**

The California Farm Bureau is working to broaden the insurance options available to farmers. The organization is currently in the process of negotiating with several insurance companies to provide more competitive rates and better coverage options for farmers. This is an important step for farmers, as they need to be able to protect their investments and their livelihoods. The Farm Bureau is committed to ensuring that farmers have the best possible insurance options available to them.

See M0720, Page 10

**Inside**

From the Editor's Desk ..... 4-5  
 Farm Bureau News ..... 7  
 Dairy News ..... 11  
 Field Crops ..... 12-13  
 Vegetables ..... 14-15  
 California ..... 16-17

See M0720, Page 10

## OPINION

## SPECIAL REPORTS

- DAIRY & LIVESTOCK
- FIELD CROPS
- TREES & VINES
- VEGETABLES

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- STORING FOR THE FUTURE
- CALIFORNIA WATER CRISIS

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- TECHNOLOGY
- IRRIGATION
- ORGANIC FARMING

## SPECIAL SECTIONS

- BY THE NUMBERS
- WORLD AG EXPO

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