

ASU launches nationwide program to provide organic farming mentorships

Kernel program aims to grow the US organic economy, support new and seasoned organic producers

By Emma Glassman-Hughes, ASU News
September 28, 2026

For decades, American farmers have been unable to keep up with the demand for organic products. The financial, time and knowledge barriers to receiving USDA Organic certification have prevented unknown numbers of producers from transitioning their conventional operations to organic.

This has forced billions of dollars to be spent on foreign organic imports instead of domestic — stymieing nationwide goals of improving soil health and decreasing reliance on harmful synthetic pesticides.

Arizona State University's [Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems](#) is working to reverse this trend with the launch of a new organic mentorship program called [Kernel](#).

By equipping farmers, ranchers and handlers with the support they need to meaningfully transition their operations to organic, the project aims to drive some of the [\\$5.7 billion routed to organic food imports](#) as of 2024 back into U.S. pockets.

Kernel officially launches Oct. 1 and builds on the success of USDA's Transition to Organic Partnership Program, or TOPP, which will be discontinued Sept. 30.

During its first four years, the \$100 million TOPP mobilized organic transition support from more than 200 organizations coast to coast. This support provided networking and technical assistance, and it facilitated mentorship relationships between experienced organic producers and those who are trying to make the eco-friendly leap.

"The core part of (TOPP) that everybody loves was the mentoring program," said [Kathleen Merrigan](#), executive director of the center.

Kernel will carry forward that legacy, connecting mentors to mentees to encourage more organic food production on a national scale. This is important because learning the science of organic agriculture is often a difficult hurdle to get over for food producers new to this method of farming.

“A lot of people think organic farming is like going back to the olden days, but it’s not at all,” Merrigan said. “It’s a complex systems approach to production. It’s not easy and not always intuitive, so having someone with that experience is important.”

Then there’s the question of branding: Producers who are new to organic often need guidance on how to enter the market and what business pitfalls to avoid — not just best practices for growing crops and raising animals.

The process of transitioning to organic can be challenging, and even the best mentors won’t smooth it out completely. In particular, before producers can be certified organic, there’s a three-year turnover period in which they must stop using chemical inputs “cold turkey,” Merrigan said, to restore soil health. But, during that time, they can’t market their products as organic or charge premium prices.

Neither TOPP nor Kernel was designed to plug that hole, Merrigan said. But organic farmers know the benefits of sticking out that transition time are well worth it — and not just because of the cash.

“If they’re living on their farm or in proximity to it, they’re feeling better about the health of their family, their community, their farmworkers. They’re also feeling better about their role in fighting back on climate change and a whole lot of things,” she said. “It’s very fulfilling.”

Kernel’s budget will continue to support mentorship relationships established through TOPP. And, alongside regional partners including California Certified Organic Farmers, Florida Organic Growers, Oregon Tilth, Midwest Organic Services Association, Organic Crop Improvement Association and the Northeast Organic Farming Association Interstate Council, the Swette Center will expand mentor and mentee recruitment efforts to bring even more organic hopefuls and experts into the fold.

“CCOF (California Certified Organic Farmers) worked closely with the Swette Center and TOPP leaders to successfully create a national organic mentorship program that reached over 600 mentees across the U.S.,” said Jessy Becket Parr, chief program officer of California Certified Organic Farmers. “We are excited to join with other regional partners and collaborate with the Swette Center to build upon TOPP’s success.”

Financial support for Kernel comes through a generous gift dedicated to advancing Principled Innovation across ASU. In 2023, ASU introduced [Practice Principled Innovation](#) as its ninth design aspiration, embedding character and values into decision-making.

Jacqueline Smith, ASU vice president for principled innovation and impact, noted that, by promoting mentor/mentee relationships nationally, Kernel is advancing ASU’s efforts both near and far.

“By supporting mentorship for organic farmers, we are helping strengthen the relationships and share the knowledge needed to build more resilient food systems for farmers and consumers alike,” she said.

Over the next five years, the bulk of Kernel's budget will go toward compensating mentors, who are eligible to receive \$1,000 for each mentee they take on, up to \$5,000. This will allow for approximately 2,000 total mentor/mentee pairings, according to Merrigan.

But most of the mentors don't do it for the money, she said. One example is Wisconsin's George Siemon, one of the founders of the multibillion-dollar organic cooperative Organic Valley. As a mentor, Siemon has traveled to Arizona to support aspiring organic livestock producers.

"George doesn't need to do this; he doesn't need to come down to Arizona," Merrigan said. "But like a lot of people who have been in the organic industry a long time, they see how important it is, how it meets our sustainability goals, how it can provide a good livelihood for next-gen farmers and their families. He's investing in the future — not his future, but the future of his grandkids."

Ultimately, she said, "plentiful, homegrown U.S. organic food is the goal," and mentorship fostered by Kernel is one critical piece of that larger puzzle.

"The kernel is the part of the seed that represents future growth," she said. "Given the aging of the American farmer, we need to grow organic and provide economic opportunity for the next generation of producers who will, in turn, feed us healthy, nutritious food."

Jane Coghlan contributed to this article.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



A new organic farming mentorship program called Kernel is launching to support farmers, ranchers and food handlers nationwide. The program is led by the ASU Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems. Photo courtesy of Joe Dobrow/ASU

Text image(s)



Kathleen Merrigan