

Barriers to Organic Agronomic Crop Production

Despite growing national demand for organic grains and oilseeds, the Southeastern U.S. continues to lag behind in certified organic agronomic crop production. Producers in this region are increasingly interested in transitioning from conventional farming, but they face a range of region-specific barriers that undermine the practicality and profitability of organic production. These challenges are heightened for large-acreage commodity crops such as soybeans, wheat, peanuts and more, which require significant investment in both production system changes and market access to be viable under organic certification.

Without targeted policy solutions such as regionally-tailored technical assistance, investment in organic handling and marketing infrastructure, organic agronomic crop production in the Southeast is likely to remain a missed opportunity for both growers and the broader organic supply chain.

Competition from Imports

Organic grain and oilseed producers in the U.S., especially in the Southeast, face intense price competition from imports, many of which are not held to the same verification standards.

A 2025 USDA report found that over 70% of organic soybeans and 40% of organic corn used for feed in the U.S. were imported—primarily from countries like India, Turkey, and Ukraine. These imports often undercut domestic prices, making it difficult for U.S. farmers to remain profitable despite higher production costs.¹

Further, fraudulent organic grain imports have been uncovered in recent years. For example, several large-scale cases revealed that conventionally grown grain was being falsely labeled as organic before entering the U.S. market.² While some regulatory tightening has occurred (like the USDA's Strengthening Organic Enforcement Rule in 2023), enforcement remains uneven and difficult to scale.³

This dynamic creates a large disincentive for domestic conventional producers to transition to organic, as they fear investing in a more expensive system only to be

priced out by cheaper, possibly fraudulent imports. Stricter organic import verification systems would likely diminish these undercuts for domestic producers.

Lack of Row Crop Organic Inputs

Unlike small-scale specialty crop operations, organic agronomic systems require scale-appropriate inputs—such as Organic Materials Review Institute-approved fertilizers and pest management tools—that are often not readily available in the Southeast.

Organic nitrogen sources like composted poultry litter or cover crop biomass can be inconsistent or prohibitively expensive. For example, sourcing sufficient legume cover crop seed for soil fertility across hundreds of acres can be both costly and logistically challenging.⁴

Weed suppression, especially for row crops like corn and soy, is difficult without synthetic herbicides. Organic producers rely heavily on mechanical cultivation, which requires both precision equipment and optimal soil conditions—hard to achieve in the heavier, rain-prone soils of the Southeast.

Infrastructure Gaps

The infrastructure for cleaning, storing, segregating, and marketing organic grains at scale is sorely lacking in the Southeast. Unlike in the Midwest where certified elevators and processing facilities are more common, most Southeastern grain elevators are not certified organic or are unwilling to dedicate infrastructure to relatively low-volume organic crops.⁵ With fraud prevention mechanisms like the Strengthening Organic Enforcement rule requiring end-to-end supply chain traceability, it's becoming increasingly critical for producers to preserve the integrity of their product.

This supply chain bottleneck has major implications. The absence of local infrastructure also discourages buyers and feed manufacturers from sourcing organic grain regionally, reinforcing dependence on high shipping costs and imports, further hindering market signals that might otherwise support a shift toward domestic organic production.

As a result, many southeastern organic agronomic producers must self-market, which demands time, knowledge of contracts, and storage capacity they may not have. In some cases, organic grain must be shipped hundreds of miles to the Midwest for processing or sale—cutting into profitability.

Climate Challenges

The southeastern U.S. is characterized by a warm and humid climate, which fosters the proliferation of pests, diseases, and weeds.⁶ Organic farming restricts the use of synthetic pesticides and herbicides, making pest and weed management particularly arduous. For example, perennial grasses like bermudagrass and invasive species such as palmer amaranth and nutsedge are prevalent in the region and pose significant control challenges under organic systems. The extended growing seasons and high humidity further exacerbate these issues, leading to increased labor and management requirements for organic farmers.

To mitigate these challenges, further investment is needed for climate-specific organic research that supports breeding programs focused on regionally-adapted organic crop varieties (such as heat-resistant small grains). USDA's Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) is already engaged in Southeastern field trials and system research on this issue.

In addition, incentives through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Conservation Stewardship Program and Environmental Quality Incentives Program support extended rotations and reduced tillage systems proven to work in high-moisture environments. These programs are essential for developing climate-resilient seeds and cultivars for the Southeast.

Conclusion

Expanding organic agronomic crop production in the Southeast represents a significant opportunity to strengthen regional food and feed supply chains and meet rising consumer demand. Without targeted investments and policy solutions, Southeastern producers will remain at a disadvantage compared to growers in other regions. Federal and state policymakers, certifiers and program administrators must prioritize regionally-adapted support, including research and technical assistance, infrastructure development and enforcement of organic import standards.

Addressing these barriers now will lay the groundwork for a more resilient and competitive organic sector.

Citations

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