

Are organic farms more drought resistant?

The supposed productivity gaps between organic and conventional farming may be a lot smaller than thought, according to a new analysis of more than 100 studies conducted by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley. And organic farming may be especially competitive during droughts like the one currently crushing California's massive agricultural sector.

The assertion that organic farms can compete with conventional ones—especially during droughts or other adverse weather—is not new.

Separately, the Farming Systems Trial at the Rodale Institute in Pennsylvania has been comparing the productivity of organic and conventional farms since 1981. The institute uses common organic farming methods in some plots and farms more conventionally in others, using popular pesticides and growing genetically modified organisms. It found that the organic plots outperformed the conventional ones, especially when things turned tough.

The organic plots were especially more resilient to droughts, and other weather events such as frost and flooding.

But of course, the notion that organic farming can feed the world has its skeptics.

"Such claims are absurd," molecular biologist Henry I. Miller said. Miller was the founding director of the FDA's Office of Biotechnology and a supporter of genetically modified foods. He is now a fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution.

Miller contends that genetic modification techniques have already given us drought-resistant crops, and argues that farmers have turned to conventional methods precisely because they are more efficient.

Some farmers are also skeptical, especially on the water issue. "Our organic producers achieve a yield, generally 40 percent less than conventional producers, but all of them require the same amount of water," said Joel Nelson, a California citrus grower and president of the California Citrus Mutual growers association.

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