Do industrial agricultural methods actually yield more food per acre than organic ones?

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If we choose to eschew the practices of industrial farming, does that mean we'll have to expand our land base to grow the same amount of food? Can organic yield as much as conventional farming?

Nitrogen is the one giant hurdle that has always stood in the way of organic farming producing as much food as conventional farming. Creating nitrogen fertilizer organically takes space.

It's important to be efficient in our land use with farming. But that doesn't mean that we all need to stop worrying and love industrial farming. Organic production has a lot to contribute and industrial farming has a lot of room for improvement. In the most recent issue of *Daedalus*, ecosystem scientist G. Philip Robinson pointed to the sheer waste involved in nitrogen use. Approximately 83 percent of nitrogen we apply is wasted, ending up, not as food, but as atmospheric gas, or water pollutant. Surely we can do better. We can also improve our systems for deriving nitrogen biologically.

As we strive toward sustainability, context always matters. In many places it will make sense to maximize production, so as to spare forests elsewhere. In some places, organic makes more sense — where there's an abundance of manure, or no synthetic fertilizers available, or where there's plenty of land best used for farms.

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