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A Review of Organic Farming for Sustainable Agriculture in Northern India

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Abstract

In the post-independence era, India faced the formidable challenge of feeding its burgeoning population. To meet this demand, the adoption of high-yielding varieties coupled with intensive use of irrigation, fertilizers, and pesticides became the norm. While this approach led to a food surplus, it also raised concerns about soil health, environmental pollution, pesticide toxicity, and the overall sustainability of agricultural practices. In response, scientists and policymakers are now revaluating agricultural methods, shifting towards more sustainable practices with an emphasis on biological inputs over heavy chemical reliance. Organic farming emerges as a viable alternative, capable of delivering high-quality food without compromising soil health or the environment. However, a key question looms: Can large-scale organic farming meet the food needs of India's substantial population? This review explores the production of certified organic products, spanning a diverse range from basmati rice, pulses, honey, tea, spices, and coffee to oilseeds, fruits, cereals, herbal medicines, and their value-added derivatives. Additionally, it encompasses non-edible organic products such as cotton, garments, cosmetics, and functional body care items. The article critically examines the production of these organic crops and products in the context of promoting sustainable agriculture in northern India.

Key Words: Organic, Sustainable Agriculture, Plant Nutrients.

I Introduction

The organic farming movement in India traces its roots back to the pioneering work of Howard , who formulated and conceptualized many of the principles embraced by subsequent advocates of this movement. Organic farming, as a production system, consciously avoids or significantly reduces the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, growth regulators, and livestock feed additives. Central to organic farming are the objectives of environmental, social, and economic sustainability . Key characteristics include the preservation of long-term soil fertility by maintaining organic matter levels, promoting soil biological activity, employing judicious mechanical interventions, achieving nitrogen self-sufficiency through legumes and biological nitrogen fixation, efficient recycling of organic materials—such as crop residues and livestock waste—and pest control through crop rotations, natural predators, biodiversity, organic manuring, and resistant varieties. There is a pronounced emphasis on maintaining soil fertility by returning all wastes, primarily through compost, to minimize the gap between nutrient additions (NPK) and removal from the soil. The escalating pressure of a growing population has compelled many nations to resort to the use of chemicals and fertilizers to enhance farm productivity in order to meet the escalating food demands. However, the prolonged and excessive use of chemicals has resulted in hazards to human and soil health, along with environmental pollution. In response, farmers in developed countries are increasingly urged to transition their conventional farms to organic ones. Europe, for instance, implements government policies aimed at promoting the organic sector through subsidies, consumer education, and support in the form of research, education, and marketing.

Agricultural practices in India have a history dating back over 4000 years, with organic farming deeply ingrained in the country's traditions. As mentioned in Arthashastra, farmers in the Vedic period possessed significant knowledge of soil fertility, seed selection, plant protection, sowing seasons, and crop sustainability in diverse lands [4]. Ancient Indian farmers adhered to natural laws, contributing to the maintenance of soil fertility over extended periods.

1.1 Organic Sources of Plant Nutrients

Currently, optimistic estimates suggest that approximately 25–30 percent of the nutrient requirements of Indian agriculture can be fulfilled by diverse organic sources. The supplementation of entire nitrogen (N) through farmyard manure (FYM) sustains crop productivity at levels exceeding the use of conventional nitrogen fertilizers. While estimates of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (NPK) availability from organic sources are based on total nutrient content, the certainty of these sources meeting crop nutrient requirements is not as assured as with mineral fertilizers. However, the combined use of chemical fertilizers and various organic sources has demonstrated the capacity to sustain higher crop productivity and improve soil quality over the long term [3].

These organic sources, beyond supplying N, P, and K, also convert unavailable elemental nitrogen, bound phosphates, micronutrients, and decomposed plant residues into forms accessible for plant absorption. The application of organic sources promotes the growth and activity of mycorrhizae and other beneficial organisms in the soil, alleviates the increasing incidence of secondary and micronutrient deficiencies, and sustains high crop productivity and soil health [6]. Farmers, in turn, can achieve lucrative returns from organically produced crops, especially when integrated into high-value crop rotations, such as aromatic rice (*Oryza sativa* L.), table peas (*Pisum sativum* L.), and onions (*Allium cepa* L.) [7], due to their high demand in domestic, national, and international markets.Nutrient concentrations in FYM are typically small and vary significantly depending on the source, conditions, and duration of storage. The nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium contents of fresh FYM range widely from 0.01 to 1.9 percent on a dry weight basis due to the variable nature of manure production and storage [8, 9]. Tandon [10] reported that well-rotted FYM, on average, contains 0.5 percent nitrogen, 0.2 percent P_2O_5, and 0.5 percent K_2O. Gaur [11] stated that the application of 25 tons per hectare of well-rotted FYM can contribute 112 kg nitrogen, 56 kg P_2O_5, and 112 kg K_2O per hectare. Numerous researchers worldwide have demonstrated various benefits of FYM application on soil properties and crop productivity [12].

Farmers commonly use straw from harvested crops as animal feed or bedding. Typically, straw serves as bedding to capture urine, enhancing nitrogen cycling. Wet straw and manure from animal sheds are collected daily and stored or composted on the farmer's premises. The composted manure is applied either immediately or stored until the next crop season, depending on the farmer's socioeconomic conditions. Specific soil, water, and nutrient management strategies, such as reduced tillage and the use of raised beds, which avoid the detrimental effects of puddling on soil structure and fertility, can enhance water and nutrient-use efficiencies while increasing crop productivity [13].

II Literature Review:

Effect of Organic Nutrition on Crop Productivity The incorporation of organic matter into the soil is a well-established practice known to enhance crop yields. Sharma and Mitra reported that the application of organic materials led to increased grain and straw yields in rice cultivation. Ranganathan and Selvaseelan found that the application of spent mushroom and rice straw compost, while comparable to FYM, resulted in a 20 percent increase in rice grain yields over those using NPK fertilizer. Singh et al. observed that the application of 7.5 tons of FYM per hectare significantly enhanced grain and straw yields compared to unfertilized fields. All yield-contributing characteristics of rice exhibited improvement with increasing rates of FYM. Organic farming involving dhaincha (*Sesbania aculeata* L.) demonstrated substantial enhancements in the grain yield of rice and chickpeas [17, 18].

Stockdale *et al.* [2] highlighted the benefits of organic farming, noting advantages for both developed nations (such as environmental protection, biodiversity enhancement, and reduced energy use and CO_2 emissions) and developing countries (including sustainable resource use, increased crop yield without overreliance on costly inputs, and environmental and biodiversity protection). Numerous studies have reported higher earthworm activity in organically managed fields compared to conventional agriculture. In the biodegradation process, earthworms and microbes collaborate to produce vermicompost, the worm fecal matter enriched with worm casts. Vermicompost provides essential macro-elements such as nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), potassium (K), calcium (Ca), and magnesium (Mg), as well as microelements like iron (Fe), molybdenum (Mo), zinc (Zn), and copper (Cu) [20]. Vermicompost typically contains 0.74 percent nitrogen, 0.97 percent phosphorus, and 0.45 percent potassium.

Studies in low-input agriculture have shown that crop productivity under organic farming is comparable to or even exceeds that under conventional farming. Tamaki et al. reported superior growth of rice under continuous organic farming compared to conventional methods. An agroeconomic study of maize cultivation with compost and liquid manure top dressing in low-potential areas demonstrated significantly better performance compared to current conventional farmer practices, resulting in maize grain yields being 11–17 percent higher. In organically managed fields, the productivity of crops during the initial year tends to be lower compared to subsequent years, owing to the gradual increase in soil fertility levels resulting from the continuous addition of organic materials in the organic management system . Similarly, Surekha observed a gradual increase in grain yield over time with the use of organic fertilizers.Chan *et al.* illustrated that, in three different regions, organic rice production required 46, 25, and 22 percent more inputs compared to conventional rice production. However, the rice yield achieved was only 55, 94, and 82 percent of conventional rice production, respectively. Despite the lower yield, the cost is compensated by the higher premium prices of organically grown crops in the market.Vegetables exhibit a high responsiveness to organic sources of nutrients, proving to be profitable for farmers. Kalembasa reported that the application of 15 kg of vermicompost per square meter resulted in the highest yield in tomato crops. Singh *et al.* investigated the response of chilli (*Capsicum annuum* L.) to vermicompost and found that its application increased microbial activities, positively influencing crop performance with higher numbers of branches and fruits.Tomar *et al.* achieved the highest yield (97 g plant^{-1}) in brinjal (*Solanum melongena* L.) through vermicompost. The application of vermicompost has shown to increase leaf area in carrot (*Daucus carota* L.) plants . Studies by Manjarrez *et al.* demonstrated that the foliar area and photosynthetic rate of chili increased with vermicompost application under greenhouse conditions. *Atiyeh et al*. observed that the substitution of 20 percent of commercial horticultural medium with vermicompost significantly increased plant height and root and shoot biomass in tomato crops. Ribeiro *et al*. noted that dry matter content increased with an increasing dose of vermicompost in sweet pepper cv. Nacional Ag. 506. Atiyeh *et al*. conducted an experiment with tomatoes in a standard commercial greenhouse container medium and found that substituting 20 percent of the medium with vermicompost resulted in the highest marketable yield (5.1 kg per plant). Shreeniwas *et al*. conducted a field experiment on ridge gourd (*Luffa acutangula* L. Roxb.) and observed that increasing levels of vermicompost (0, 5, 10, and 15 t ha^{-1}) enhanced fruit weight and fruit volume.

In brinjal, Rao and Sankar found that organic manure had a significantly better effect on leaf number, leaf area index, dry matter production, and other growth characteristics compared to inorganic fertilizer. Samawat *et al*. reported a significant effect of vermicompost on root and fruit weight of tomatoes. Where vermicompost was applied at 5 t ha^{-1} or 10 t ha^{-1}, there was increased shoot weight and leaf area of pepper plants (Capsicum annuum L.) compared to inorganic fertilizers. Choudhary *et al.* achieved the highest yield and available nitrogen for tomato cv. S-22 and cabbage (*Brassica oleracea* L.var. capitata) cv. Golden Acre with vermicompost at 200 g/plant + FYM at 250 g/plant. The maximum potassium and soil organic carbon were obtained with vermicompost at the rate of 100 g plant^{-1} + FYM at 500 g plant^{-1}. Hashemimajd *et al.* [40] revealed that vermicompost produced from raw dairy manure (RDM) assimilated higher shoot and root dry matter of tomatoes than the control (soil + sand).Patil *et al.* found that the total yield of potato (*Solanum tuberosum* L.) tubers significantly increased with the application of vermicompost at 4 t ha^{-1} and FYM at 25 t ha−1. Sawicka *et al.* noted that the cultivation system strongly influenced the proportion of commercial potato tubers and those with a diameter of 4–6 cm in the total yield. Haase *et al.* suggested that tubers from organically grown potatoes may be expected to have sufficiently high tuber dry matter concentrations (19%) for processing into French fries without affecting the texture of the fries, as long as the concentration exceeds 23%. However, when a combined nitrogen and potassium fertilizer was applied, the dry matter concentration of tubers for crisps (cv. Marlen) fell short of the required minimum of 22%.

Mourao *et al.* reported that organically grown potatoes, specifically cv. Virgo, yielded 66% of the conventional crop, while Raja yielded 46.6%. The nitrogen uptake of the organic crop (tubers and foliage) was 37.0 kg/ha for Raja and 50.5 kg/ha for Virgo, compared to 21.1% and 27.8% of nitrogen uptake, respectively, with mineral fertilizer. The addition of organic amendments and earthworm casting to the soil has proven effective in controlling diseases in peas (*Pisum sativum* L.), mustard (*Brassica juncea* L. Coss.), and chickpeas (*Cicer arietinum* L.) during the winter season. Nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, and magnesium accumulation also increased with higher doses of vermicompost, as well as with fertilizers.

Singh [46] observed that the application of vermicompost at 13–20 q ha^{-1} increased the yield of peas (23.62 q ha^{-1}) and groundnuts (*Arachis hypogaea* L.) (12.16 q ha^{-1}). Jat and Ahlawat found that the application of 3 t vermicompost ha^{-1} to chickpeas improved dry matter accumulation, grain yield, and grain protein content in chickpeas. It also enhanced soil nitrogen and phosphorus, bacterial count, dry fodder yield of succeeding maize (Zea mays L.), and the total nitrogen and phosphorus uptake by the cropping system over no vermicompost. Baswana and Rana [48] reported the highest pod yield of peas (93.96 ha^{-1}) when FYM (1 t ha^{-1}) + poultry manure (1 t ha^{-1}) along with mulch treatment was applied, followed by FYM (2 ha^{-1}) + biofertilizers with mulch treatment. Similar trends were observed for biological yield and harvest index. Dayal and Agarwal [49] noted that the seed

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yield of sunflowers (*Helianthus annus* L.) increased with a higher rate of vermicompost (10 t ha^{-1}), with the best combination being 5 t $ha^{-1}$of vermicompost. Somasundaram *et al.* reported increased soluble protein content and nitrogenase activity in maize, sunflowers, and green gram (*Vigna radiata* L.) with biogas slurry. Higher nitrogen accumulation at all growth stages in maize, sunflowers, and green gram was observed under biogas slurry with panchagavya. Additionally, a higher yield of maize and sunflowers was recorded under biogas slurry with panchagavya (a preparation of five cow products: dung, urine, milk, ghee, and curds). Silwana *et al.* underscored the importance of organic manure and its sustained efficacy in enhancing maize-bean (*Phaseolus vulgaris* L.) intercrop productivity for small-scale farmers in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. Sangakkara *et al.* observed that the incorporation of organic matter increased soil water retention, promoting robust root growth and resulting in higher maize yields. This impact was more pronounced in maize than in cowpea, particularly when using gliricidia leaves. Seo and Lee reported a considerable increase in soil organic nitrogen due to the presence of hairy vetch. Dry matter yields of maize were higher in the presence of hairy vetch than with ammonium nitrate, especially at nitrogen rates exceeding 160 kg ha^{-1}. Adiku *et al*. found that fertilized maize-grass and maize-pigeon pea (*Cajanus cajan* L. Millspaugh) rotations sustained relatively high maize yields, contributed significant residue to the soil, and minimized soil carbon loss. Oliveira *et al*. [55] demonstrated that the application of earthworm compost at 27 and 29 t ha^{-1} led to the highest average head weight (700 g) and yield (38 t ha^{-1}) in cabbage cv. Matsukaze. Datta *et al*. confirmed that seed inoculation with *Rhizobium leguminosarum* bv. phaseoli and the incorporation of FYM one week before sowing rajmash (*Phaseolus vulgaris* L.) increased yields. Inoculated seeds enhanced nitrogen fixation, and FYM incorporation resulted in a net positive nitrogen balance compared to the control. Over four years of study, there were no significant differences in marketable yields between organic and conventional farming systems for various vegetable crops, including tomato, beans, cabbage, and zucchini (*Cucurbita pepo* L.). Organic farming exhibited yields 10 percent and 3 percent higher, respectively, than conventional farming. Sarangthem and Salam demonstrated that the application of decomposed urban waste, enriched with vermiculture, significantly increased bean yields. Renuka and Sankar reported a two-and-a-half-fold increase in tomato yield with the application of organic manures compared to inorganic fertilizer (18.44 tonnes). Samawat *et al*. highlighted the significant impact of vermicompost on the number of fruits in tomatoes, with a fourfold increase in fruit numbers in the 100 percent vermicomposted treatment compared to the control.

III Methodology

3.1 Effect of Organic Nutrition on Quality Parameters of Crops

Yadav and Vijayakumari [62] conducted an experiment to evaluate the impact of vermicomposted vegetable waste on the biochemical characteristics of chili. They observed higher protein levels at 60 (113 mg g^{-1}) and 90 days after sowing (DAS) (79 mg g^{-1}). Carbohydrate content was elevated in the vermicomposted treatment at 60 DAS (15.34 mg g^{-1}). Chlorophyll (2.61 mg g^{-1}) and total chlorophyll (3.62 mg g^{-1}) contents peaked at 60 DAS, while chlorophyll a (1.01 mg g^{-1}) was higher at 90 DAS compared to inorganic fertilizers. In a separate study, Haase *et al.* [43] proposed that tubers from organically grown potatoes may possess sufficiently high tuber dry matter concentrations (19 percent) for French fry processing without compromising texture when concentrations exceed 23 percent. Similarly, the application of FYM at 10 t ha^{-1} alone increased the economic yield and quality parameters, including hulling percentage, milling percentage, and protein and amylose content of rice cv. Saket4 [63]. Mourao *et al.* [44] found that organically grown potatoes, specifically cv. Virgo, yielded 66 percent of the conventional crop, while Raja yielded 47 percent. The nitrogen uptake of the organic crop (tubers and foliage) was 37.0 kg/ha for Raja and 50.5 kg/ha for Virgo, respectively, accounting for 21 and 28 percent of the nitrogen uptake by the same cultivars grown with mineral fertilizer. Although foliage nitrogen content increased for conventional crops, the difference between nitrogen content of organic and conventional tubers was not significant, as well as for potassium (K), calcium (Ca), and magnesium (Mg). Maheswari *et al.* [64] investigated the effect of foliar organic fertilizers on the quality and economics of chili, noting the highest ascorbic acid content (175.23 mg/100 g) with vermiwash: water at a 1:5 ratio.

3.2 Effect of Organic Nutrition on Soil Fertility

Minhas and Sood [65] highlighted that organic matter, upon decomposition, releases macro- and micronutrients into the soil solution, enhancing plant availability and uptake. Organic farming exhibits the ability to sustain higher crop productivity, improve soil quality, and manipulate soil properties on a long-term basis. After four years, organic and low-input farming practices were found to increase organic carbon, soluble phosphorus, exchangeable potassium, and pH, while maintaining a relatively stable electrical conductivity (EC) level [66, 67]. Standard composting processes, which often result in substantial organic material loss as CO_2, may not contribute significantly to the organic pool [68]. Bulluck *et al*. [69] reported that compost utilization raised soil pH from 6.0 (without compost) to 6.5 (with compost), leading to a 29 percent reduction in broadleaf weed population and a 78 percent reduction in grassy weed population. Soil organic matter degradation can diminish nutrient-supplying capacity, especially in soils with high initial organic matter content in rice-wheat cropping systems [70]. Organic farming has been shown to enhance organic matter content, labile nutrient status [71], and various soil physicochemical properties. The addition of carbonaceous materials such as straw, wood, bark, sawdust, or corn cobs improves composting characteristics by reducing water content and increasing the C:N ratio. However, under Indian conditions, joint composting of manure slurries with plant residues has proven more viable and profitable than separate composting. The use of farmyard manure (FYM) and green manure has been effective in maintaining high levels of zinc (Zn), iron (Fe), copper (Cu), and manganese (Mn) in rice-wheat rotations [72].

Laxminarayana and Patiram [73] concluded that the decline in soil pH may be attributed to organic compounds added in the form of green and root biomass, producing more humus and organic acids upon decomposition. Urkurkar *et al.* [74] reported that supplying 100 percent nitrogen (120 kg ha^{-1} for rice and 150 kg ha^{-1} for potatoes) in a rice-potato cropping system, with one-third each from cow dung manure, neem cake, and composted crop residue, significantly increased organic carbon (6.3 g kg^{-1}) compared to the initial value (5.8 g kg^{-1}). However, phosphorus and potassium availability did not show perceptible changes after completing five cropping cycles under both organic and integrated nutrient approaches.

3.3 Effect of Organic Nutrition on Soil Biological Properties

Compost, rich in bacteria, actinomycetes, and fungi, not only introduces microorganisms into the soil but also stimulates their activity [75, 76]. Additionally, compost plays a pivotal role in nematode control and mitigates the impact of pesticides through sorption. Sorption, a crucial interaction between soil/organic matter and pesticides, influences their degradation and transport in soil. Pesticides bound to soil organic matter or clay particles are less mobile and bioavailable but also less accessible to microbial degradation, making them more persistent [77–79]. The infusion of carbon through compost augments heterotrophic bacteria and fungi in the soil, enhancing the activity of soil enzymes responsible for converting nutrients from unavailable to available forms. The application of FYM with rhizobium and coinoculation of phosphate-solubilizing bacteria (PSB) with rhizobium has been shown to boost soybean (*Glycine max* L. Merr.) production [80]. Organic farming practices impact soil biophysiochemical properties, with higher densities of bacteria, protozoa, nematodes, and arthropods observed in organic farming soils compared to conventional farming soils [81]. Bulluck *et al*. [82] reported that organic fertility amendments enhance beneficial soil microorganisms, reduce pathogen populations, increase total carbon and cation exchange capacity, and decrease bulk densities, ultimately improving soil quality. The National Academy of Agricultural Sciences (NAAS) recommends a holistic approach involving integrated nutrient management (INM), integrated pest management (IPM), and the adoption of region-specific cropping systems as an alternative organic farming strategy for India. Initial forays into organic farming should focus on high-value crops such as spices, medicinal plants, fruits, and vegetables [83]. Singh and Bohra [84] noted that a rice-pea-black gram (*Vigna mungo* L.) cropping system exhibited a higher population of bacteria, actinomycetes, and fungi compared to a rice-wheat cropping system. In field experiments, the use of phosphate-solubilizing microorganisms like *Aspergillus awamori*, *Pseudomonas striata*, and *Bacillus polymyxa* significantly increased the yield of various crops, such as wheat, rice, and cowpea (*Vigna sinensis* L.), when combined with rock phosphate, resulting in a saving of 30 kg P_2O_5 ha^{-1}.

Vegetable crops, in particular, responded favorably to Azotobacter inoculation compared to other field crops. Despite this, the yield increase in wheat, maize, jowar (*Sorghum bicolor* L. Moench), cotton (*Gossypium* spp.), and mustard crops using *Azotobacter chrooccocum* culture was 0–31 percent higher than the control [85]. In low-input agriculture, organic farming demonstrated comparable crop productivity to conventional methods. The integrated use of rice straw compost + Azotobacter and PSB was found to be more effective than rice straw alone [86]. Azotobacter produces growth-promoting substances that enhance seed germination, foster extended root systems, and contribute to improved soil aggregation [87]. The seed inoculation of chickpea with rhizobium + PSB increased dry matter accumulation, grain yield, and grain protein content in chickpea, along

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with improving dry fodder yield in succeeding maize and total nitrogen and phosphorus uptake by the cropping system, compared to no inoculation and inoculation with rhizobium alone.

IV Results and Discussion:

Table 1: Key Findings from the Review on Organic Farming for Sustainable Agriculture in Northern India

Aspect	**Findings**
Soil Health	Organic farming improves soil health by maintaining higher levels of organic matter and fostering soil biological activity through the use of compost, green manures, and crop rotations.
Environmental Impact	Reduces environmental pollution and pesticide toxicity by minimizing the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, promoting a healthier ecosystem and protecting water quality and biodiversity.
Economic Viability	Initial yields may be lower, but long-term benefits include reduced input costs and premium prices for organic products, supporting farmer livelihoods and rural development.
Crop Diversity & Resilience	Encourages crop diversity, enhancing resilience to pests and diseases, and contributing to food security by providing a variety of crops that can withstand different environmental conditions.
Consumer Health Benefits	Organic products are free from synthetic chemicals, making them safer for consumption, and often have higher nutritional quality with increased levels of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants.
Ecosystem Interactions	Supports beneficial plant-microbe interactions and inhibits competing plant species, contributing to the resilience and stability of ecosystems.

Aspect	**Findings**
Challenges	Includes the need for greater awareness and education among farmers, robust certification systems, and reliable markets for organic products.

V Conclusion

In conclusion, the adoption of organic farming practices emerges as a sustainable pathway, offering a dual advantage of providing high-quality food while safeguarding soil health and the environment. It is imperative to tailor organic production to regional specifics, identifying crops and products with international market demands. Recognizing the current commitments to ensure food and nutritional security, a gradual transition to organic practices, focusing on specific crops or products, is a pragmatic approach. The phased implementation of organic farming not only mitigates risks but also presents opportunities for employment, fostering regional prosperity and contributing to a harmonious environment. This strategic shift towards organic practices lays the foundation for resilient agricultural systems, ensuring the well-being of both the land and its inhabitants. As we move forward, organic farming stands as a promising avenue, offering a sustainable and balanced approach to meet the demands of a growing population while nurturing the long-term health of our agricultural landscapes.

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