



EARTH DAY EXTRAVAGANZA TO CELEBRATE FIRST STUDENT SUSTAINABILITY INNOVATION FUND COHORT

April 22, 2026

On Friday, April 24,
from noon to 4 p.m.,
the UMass Amherst
community will gather
on the Student Union

South Lawn for the annual Earth Day Extravaganza
(<https://www.umass.edu/earth-sustainability/events/earth-day-extravaganza-2026>), a massive collaboration across the
university organized by the Student Government
Association Sustainability Team, Sustainability RSOs,



Auxiliary Enterprises and Permaculture Program, School of Earth and Sustainability, Facilities Management and the New2U Store.

The Extravaganza will feature 165 vendors and organizations, the Student Farmers' Market and a Thrift Village. Interactive highlights will include a photo booth, the smoothie bike and emergent student-led creative activities.



Members of the Elevating the Carbon Farming Initiative team (L-R) Nicole Burton, Ellena Baum and Lisa Depiano.

A central feature of the afternoon will be the 1 p.m. recognition ceremony for the inaugural cohort of [Student Sustainability Innovation Fund](https://www.umass.edu/earth-sustainability/ssif) (<https://www.umass.edu/earth-sustainability/ssif>).

(SSIF) teams.

The SSIF is new living lab program designed to bridge the gap between academic research and campus operational resilience. By providing a dedicated, funded mechanism for students to pilot real-world solutions, the program empowers the next generation of leaders to address critical climate and ecological challenges. Supported by a cross-campus network of faculty and staff, SSIF ensures that student-led ideas are not just theoretical but are structurally supported for institutional implementation and long-term impact.

This recurring \$25,000 investment honors the university's sustained commitment to student-led innovation, providing a formal mechanism for students to focus on solutions and utilize the campus as a living laboratory.

“This fund is intended to support our students' active engagement in sustainability, which is one of the values that UMass Amherst has pursued for a long time,” says Tilman Wolf, senior vice provost for academic affairs.



Members of the Orchard Hill Habitat Restoration team (L-R) Aliza Fassler, Michael Amato and Stella Dee.

“At SES, we believe in harnessing the research network to help students activate their learning,” added Rob DeConto, director of SES. “By pairing each student innovation team with an operational partner and an academic advisor, we ensure these student-led ideas are supported by cutting-edge knowledge and institutional data.”

The winning teams include:

1. Elevating the Carbon Farming Initiative: Agroforestry in Action

- **Project Summary:** This project increases the diversity and resilience of the Carbon Farming Initiative plot by introducing moisture-appropriate tree species, such as persimmons and mulberry, to wetter site areas. The team is building out interactive data collection through an ArcGIS StoryMap to track tree cultivation and food production.
- **Students:** Ellena Baum (master's, Sustainability Science); Michael Amato (Ph.D., Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning); Stella Dee (Ph.D., Environmental Conservation)
- **Academic Mentor:** Professor Lisa DePiano (Stockbridge

School of Agriculture)

- Operational Leads: Nicole Burton (Agricultural Learning Center, Stockbridge School of Agriculture) and Dan Bensonoff (Auxiliary Enterprises)

2. Orchard Hill Habitat Restoration

- Project Summary: A student-led habitat restoration project in a high-priority area dominated by non-native species. By removing invasive plants and seeding native meadow mixes, the team aims to create a more resilient ecosystem that allows UMass Grounds to reduce mowing frequency and fossil fuel emissions.
- Students: Aliza Fassler (Ph.D., Environmental Conservation); Michael Amato (Ph.D., Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning); Tes Siarnacki (Ph.D., Environmental Conservation); Stella Dee (Ph.D., Environmental Conservation); Kayla Speros (undergraduate, Landscape Architecture)
- Academic Mentors: Susannah Lerman (Environmental Conservation), Michael Davidsohn (Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning) and Brian Kane
- Operational Lead: Todd Cournoyer (Facilities and Grounds)

3. Biogas-based Bioenergy with Carbon Capture Storage (BECCS) for Indoor Farming

- Project Summary: This solution tests a simple water dissolution system to extract CO₂ from biogas produced at the on-campus anaerobic digester. The captured CO₂ will supplement ambient levels in greenhouses to potentially

increase plant yields while reducing reliance on fossil fuels.

- Students: Maria Eduarda Tomielo Tonial

(undergraduate, Plant and Soil Science); Jayden Pacheco

(undergraduate, Biochemistry and Molecular Biology);

Suyeon (Lina) Kim (undergraduate, Biology); Abigail (Abby)

Hook (undergraduate, Microbiology); Sianna Espinal

(undergraduate, Environmental Science)

- Academic Mentor: Martin Hunter (Microbiology).

- Operational Lead: Dan Bensonoff (Auxiliary Enterprises).

4. The Long-Term Impact of Information Intervention on Sustainable Food Choices

- Project Summary: A solutions-focused randomized controlled trial evaluating how different messaging—such as environmental sustainability and animal welfare—impacts meat consumption. By tracking actual purchases over the year, the project identifies which narratives drive a transition to plant-based diets.

- Student: Johnny Rasnic (Ph.D., Resource Economics).

- Academic Mentor: Nathan Chan (Resource Economics).

- Operational Lead: Kathy Wicks (Dining Sustainability, Auxiliary Enterprises).

5. Assessing UMass Amherst's Transportation Baseline

- Project Summary: This team is running surveys and focus groups to collect data on student transportation emissions that are currently not measured by the university's standard accounting. The findings will inform future investments in low-carbon transportation shifts.

- Students: Olivia Soolman (undergraduate, Public Policy and Sustainable Community Development); Nick Marascio (undergraduate, Sustainable Community Development).
- Academic Mentors: Eve Vogel (Earth, Geographic, and Climate Sciences), Camille Barchers (LARP), Eleni Christofa (Civil and Environmental Engineering) and Eric Gonzales (Civil and Environmental Engineering).
- Operational Leads: Ezra Small (Sustainability Facilities Management) and Connie Englert (Transportation Services).

6. Monitoring Building Temperatures to Improve Campus Comfortability and Reduce Carbon Emissions

- Project Summary: Using a live website and temperature sensors, this project identifies energy-wasteful buildings based on student and faculty feedback. This data allows the university to target building adjustments that improve comfort while making strides toward CO2 emission goals.
- Students: George Powell (undergraduate, Political Science).
- Academic Mentors: Jon McGowan (Engineering) and Regine Spector (Political Science).
- Operational Leads: Ezra Small, Fidel Mazimpaka and Mike Jednick (Facilities and Grounds).

More information about the Earth Day Extravaganza can be found [here \(https://www.umass.edu/earth-sustainability/events/earth-day-extravaganza-2026\)](https://www.umass.edu/earth-sustainability/events/earth-day-extravaganza-2026). For more information about the SSIF, visit [umass.edu/earth-sustainability/ssif \(https://www.umass.edu/earth-sustainability/ssif\)](https://www.umass.edu/earth-sustainability/ssif).

