

North American Millets Alliance (NAMA) – FAQ

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1. What is NAMA? North American Millets Alliance is a social-benefit (non-profit) initiative dedicated to promoting millets as resilient crops and nutritious foods in the US and its neighbors. It has been described as a “neutral” party, as it advocates for millets in general, as well as the range of sectors and organizations working on one or more of them. NAMA is not currently incorporated.

2. Who is NAMA? The initiative is currently run by its three co-founders, Joni Kindwall Moore (RN), Jonathon Landeck (PhD), and Don Osborn (PhD). They are contributing their time on a volunteer / *pro-bono* basis.

3. When was NAMA created? The first discussions date back to autumn 2021. The current initiative was begun in January 2022.

4. Why now? The declaration by the UN General Assembly in March 2021 of the International Year of Millets (IYM) for the year 2023 was the impetus for developing this initiative.

5. Why North America? Basically, NAMA is intended first of all as a regional initiative to complement the globally oriented IYM, which will naturally will focus on the major millets-producing regions in Asia and Africa. Secondly, there are clear similarities in how millets are grown and used between Canada and the US, especially; and together with Mexico, they form a common trade market.

Millets are still relatively minor crops in North America, but the configurations of what millets are grown for what is somewhat particular to the region. Also, this region – especially the US – represents a small but significant import market for millets grown and processed elsewhere as food. Add to that the fact that there is some significant research being done here on millets, and one can argue that North America has a unique role, even if relatively small in terms of volume, to play in promotion of these grains.

6. Why "alliance"? The word alliance is used in the names of a range of organizations and associations of organizations dealing with grains, for example: [Common Grain Alliance](#), [Northeast Grainshed Alliance](#), [Maine Grain Alliance](#), [Specialty Soya and Grains Alliance](#), and [KANSAS WHEAT ALLIANCE INC.](#) While these tend to focus on value chains and marketing, we find the alliance concept appropriate for our current focus on networking among people and organizations that work in one way or another with millets, with the object of cooperation on raising broader awareness and interest in millets as crops and food.

7. Why "millets" and not just "millet"? Without getting into the etymology, the singular form "millet" in English plays a double role - as a singular (some particular millet), or as an uncountable or "mass" noun (millets in general). However, we find that the plural "millets" clearly and unambiguously communicates the fact that we are talking about a group of grains. Also, the plural form is increasingly used in communications about these grains, such as in the name, International Year of Millets.

8. What are "millets"? The term is used to cover a number of plants in the grass family (the same family as wheat, corn & rice) that have small round edible seeds. Most discussion currently focuses on about a dozen plants cultivated to some significant degree as grain and fodder crops:

- Pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*)
- Foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*)
- Finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*)
- Proso millet (*Panicum miliaceum*)
- Little millet (*Panicum sumatrense*)
- Kodo millet (*Paspalum scrobiculatum*)
- Barnyard millet (2 species of *Echinochloa*)
- Browntop millet (*Brachiaria ramosa*)
- Guinea millet (*Brachiaria deflexa*)

The following are sometimes or usually also considered millets ("millets-with-their-own-names"):

- Sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*)
- Fonio, or acha (2 species of *Digitaria*)
- Teff (*Eragrostis tef*)
- Job's tears, or adlay (*Coix lacryma-jobi*)

Of the last four, inclusion of sorghum and teff among the grains addressed by IYM, was apparently discussed and approved by the UN FAO (the UN's coordinating body for IYM).

There are also a number of other small millets that are or were cultivated only in certain localities, or in the distant past, which will be treated separately.

The "pseudocereals" – amaranth, buckwheat, and quinoa – are not millets.

9. What is the future of millets in North America? We expect that in the coming years, there will be more cultivation of millets for diverse uses, and more consumption of millets as food from diverse sources.

What does this mean? First, cultivation of millets has already been increasing in the region. The greatest proportion of acreage planted in millets, and the widest variety of species grown, are for animal forage and feed. As with any crops for such use, each millet may have its advantages and disadvantages, expanding the range of options for growers. But generally, millets are less demanding of water and inputs, which are big pluses in our changing climate.

Second, the general interest in healthy foods has included attention to millets, and that attention can't but increase as a result of the International Year of Millets (2023). However, since the variety of millets grown in the region is limited (in the US, only sorghum, proso, and teff are grown for comestible grain on commercial scales), imports will be the main source for many other millets, which are already available in specialty food stores & online. There are some nice tie-ins here with international programs to benefit smallholder farmers of millets.

Third, there will at the same time be increasing opportunities for specialty farming & small-scale processing operations in the region to meet emerging demand for millets as food.

10. What millets are currently farmed in North America? Although there are over a dozen different species of millets cultivated in various parts of the world, not all of them are grown in this region.

This post features a tentative list of millet species important enough to be discussed by state extension services in the US, plus remarks about millets in Canada and Mexico

In the following list for the US, all are grown for animal consumption, and sometimes other uses like cover crops and wildlife. Only three of these are also grown on commercial scales for grain for human consumption – sorghum, proso millet (what you see in bulk bins in the US labeled simply as "millet"), and teff.

- Sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*)
- Proso millet (*Panicum miliaceum*)
- Teff (*Eragrostis tef*)
- Foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*)
- Pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*)
- Japanese barnyard millet (*Echinochloa esculenta*)
- Indian barnyard millet, aka billion-dollar grass (*Echinochloa frumentacea*)
- Browntop millet (*Brachiaria ramosa*)

Finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*) has only been grown in field trials and one experiment we are aware of using the plant to feed dairy cattle. (Ornamental varieties of this and some others of the abovementioned millets are sometimes also planted in gardens in the US.)

Sorghum and proso are apparently the ones among these grains that are grown commercially in Canada, although some others like foxtail (for forage) are grown on smaller scales. In Mexico, sorghum is a significant crop, and both proso and foxtail are of note.

11. What millets are imported into North America? Probably every species of cultivated millet is imported into the region in one form or another, although generally in very small volume. Information on that diversity is based on observation in retail settings, plus descriptive info in bills of lading, since statistics do not disaggregate by type of millet. From that informal research, it appears that food-grade millets and products made with them (although the latter may not be tracked by main ingredients) come mainly from India and China, with some coming from Africa. These are destined for specialty food stores or for sale online. The US, in particular, represents a significant market for this "niche" trade.

A cursory research on importers of millets for retail from China (foxtail & proso) revealed that these US-based companies, which also deal in other foods, often had total value of \$0.5-1.0 million. (More fully characterizing this dimension of the millets import sector, including importers of products from other countries, would be useful.)

Statistics aggregation sites, some of which require paid subscription for full access, seem to tell a different story, perhaps because their focus is bulk trade. While the overall volume of imports to the US, for example, is quite small (on the order of \$1 million), the main sources are indicated as France, Canada, China, and South Africa. All this information varies somewhat by site (links in references). Again, these figures are for "millet," without disaggregation by species - a critical consideration, especially as the market grows.

And all the above does not include data on millets imports in Canada or Mexico.

Being able to more clearly and accurately document the millets import sector will be an important part of evaluating changes food habits and the impact of the International Year of Millets in the region.

12. What is NAMA planning to do? In addition to ongoing networking, NAMA is developing project proposals and concepts. A sample of these follows:

Project proposals (fundable):

- Webinars on millets & related topics
- Virtual conference
- Short information segments on millet-of-the-month (12 total)

Concepts (growing list of ideas for sharing and further development)

- Millet-of-the-month calendar, highlighting 1 (or 2 closely related) millet(s) monthly in 2023
- US land grant schools – showcasing selected millets in demo fields & in food services
- Press package, with information on millets in N. America (supplemental to FAO materials)
- Millets “triangle” diagram for better understanding millets as a group across contexts
- Schools - packages for teachers at selected grade levels within the K-12 range
- “Millets sampler box” making it easy for consumers to try meal-sized quantities of millets
- Work with food museums & chefs to spotlight traditional & new ways of eating millets

13. More questions and answers. This compilation is a work in progress. If you have more or different information than what appears above, we are eager to learn of it. Thank you.

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