

FEATURE



Photo credit: Big River Farms (MN)

Farmer Feedback Informs Farm Bill Plan

A year ago, the Organic Farmers Association began outreach to organic farmers to identify their farm bill priorities for the 2023 Farm Bill.

As the largest piece of legislation to fund our nation's food and agricultural system, the 2023 Farm Bill will directly influence farmer production and practices. It is essential to OFA that organic farmers have a strong voice in the policies presented. We aim to implement farmer voices in educating policymakers on how organic farmer priorities are essential to developing the upcoming farm bill.

Organic Farmers Association conducted outreach to farmers using a three-prong approach. They created a farm bill survey that invited farmers to submit their farm bill ideas when they had time. 149 farmers participated in this process. They collaborated with organic organizations to hold regional meetings with their organic farmer stakeholders and share that information back with OFA. OFA also collaborated with Organic Trade

Association and Swette Center at Arizona State University to hold a national organic farmer meeting on March 2, 2022, to ask farmers about four areas of interest. Eighty farmers participated in that meeting.

Four areas of discussion were covered in the different modes of farmer farm bill outreach: Farm & Market Viability, Organic Transition, USDA & NOP, and Continuous Improvement. Participation in the farmer meeting, local listening sessions, and farm bill survey yielded major takeaways detailed below.

FARM & MARKET VIABILITY

Questions and discussions in the topic of farm & market viability covered issues surrounding market development, label claims, and fraud prevention. Farm and market viability was of keen interest to organic farmers and inquired about areas where the organic market was hindered, thriving, and needing growth.

Takeaways from farmer feedback on this theme:

- 49% of participating farmers believe that the inconsistent enforcement of strong standards is one aspect that holds back growth in organic markets.
- Organic market viability is impacted by a lack of government support and misunderstanding by the USDA.
- Farm bill programs must better align with organic production to incentivize the market.
- Organic farming issues need more research into topics such as production practices, emerging pests, regional differences, and health and environmental benefits.



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ORGANIC TRANSITION

The topic of organic transition asked farmers how barriers can be overcome while also managing market impacts. The discussion and survey results revealed that for farmers transitioning to organic to be successful, they need support.

Takeaways from farmer feedback on this theme:

- 49% of participating farmers indicate a level of difficulty in navigating and identifying the various organic resources at USDA agencies.
- Cost-share programs must expand to reimburse transition expenses and minimize organic certification barriers.
- It is crucial to foster a support network of farmers and accessible technical assistance to achieve a high retention rate of organic farmers.

USDA & NOP

Discussions and questions in this theme explored organic standards development, certification, fees, and other federal services. In addition to developing and implementing organic standards, the U.S. government is responsible for increasing the effectiveness of USDA services offered to organic producers.

Farmer feedback summaries on this theme showed:

- 78% of participating farmers believe that farmers' voices are not adequately represented in the standards development process.
- Representation in positions of influence, like the NOSB, must include the voices of real organic farmers.
- Collaboration is needed between the NOP and NOSB for more oversight of certification agencies and standard consistency.
- The certification process must be streamlined and amended to be financially accessible.

Farmer feedback takeaways included:

- Organic standards must be strengthened to achieve continuous improvement that is consistent with consumer expectations.
- Compensation should be given to organic farmers for their positive conservation contributions.
- The reaches of organic farming can be amplified by promoting a comprehensive understanding of the industry and improving product access to a variety of consumers.

The farmer feedback from the meeting and farmer survey informed Organic Farmers Association's farm bill priorities. As the farm bill evolves, OFA will return to the farmers' feedback to direct decisions on what we will advocate for. The feedback from the national organic farmer meeting and the survey will be included in a report finalized in cooperation with the Organic Trade Association and Swette Center at Arizona State University. When it is finalized, you will be able to read the report on the OFA website.



CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The topic of continuous improvement promotes advancing environmental, human health, and social justice outcomes. Farmer sentiment reflected that continuous improvement should be defined in organic standards and the USDA should enhance its programs to advance outcomes related to the environment and food access.

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