

ORGANIC VOICE



ORGANIC FARMERS ASSOCIATION

NO. 6 • SEPT 2022



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President's Letter

When I sat down to write my letter to you, we were getting a good soaking morning rain. Not too heavy but enough to wet the soil and seep into the ground. August was a bit wetter than usual, we didn't have to irrigate as much in the gardens. Maine generally gets enough water; either in snowfall or rain but this summer we were about 7" below average for the late spring/early summer. You wouldn't know it to look at our landscape, the trees are green and the fields are green but anywhere that hasn't been irrigated looks pretty brown or has suffered from lack of water. There won't be much of a second crop of hay this year.

When I moved to Maine after almost five years working on farms on the west coast years ago, I thought "great, I'm back in the east and don't need to worry about water!" Well since then we've put in two wells and a pond. Luckily, we received some cost-share funding from the Maine Department of Agriculture so now we have a reliable water source when needed, up to a point.

It used to be that late July and early August were the driest periods. The weather is usually hot (at least for us Mainers) and there isn't much precipitation except for an occasional thunderstorm. This year and last though, the spring started out dry and stayed dry through much of the growing season. That's hard on farms with a limited water supply who are used to using irrigation to get through two to four weeks of dry weather to now need a water supply for two to three months.

The crazy thing though is that I've also seen summers lately when it doesn't seem to stop raining and getting fieldwork done is really difficult. I don't like fields that resemble chocolate pudding, and neither did my tractors or our workers.



I don't mean to complain; I know many folks in other parts of the country have had it much worse with extreme drought, fires but also excessive rain and floods, in some cases in the same areas within weeks of each other. I think most farmers have gotten to a point where we recognize the changing weather patterns and can accept that our climate may be changing. The Federal Government is putting money toward climate change, some of it going to agriculture conservation, including organic.

At Organic Farmers Association, we believe that organic farming with its dependence on crop rotation, green manuring, and soil building can and should be a leader in how to approach mitigating climate change and the detrimental effects of weather extremes. As we move into a midterm election and anticipate a new farm bill in the next year or so OFA will continue to advocate for organic farming as an important part of our future, the future of agriculture, and our country's ability to grow our food. Thank you for being a member and for farming the way you do!

Sincerely,

David Colson, President
New Leaf Farm, Durham, Maine



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FALL LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

By, Patty Lovera, Policy Director

PROGRESS ON STALLED ORGANIC STANDARDS!

Animal Welfare: After years of delay, including lawsuits triggered by the USDA's decision not to finish an earlier proposal, the **Organic Livestock and Poultry Standards (OLPS)** proposed rule is finally moving! In early August, the [USDA released a proposed rule to update the organic standards for how livestock are raised](#). The proposed rule would not allow porches in chicken houses to qualify as outdoor access but does request input from the public on how long it should give current operations to come into compliance with tighter standards. OFA is doing an in-depth analysis of the proposed rule and will share more details about what topics need farmer input during the public comment period. The comment period will be open until early October.

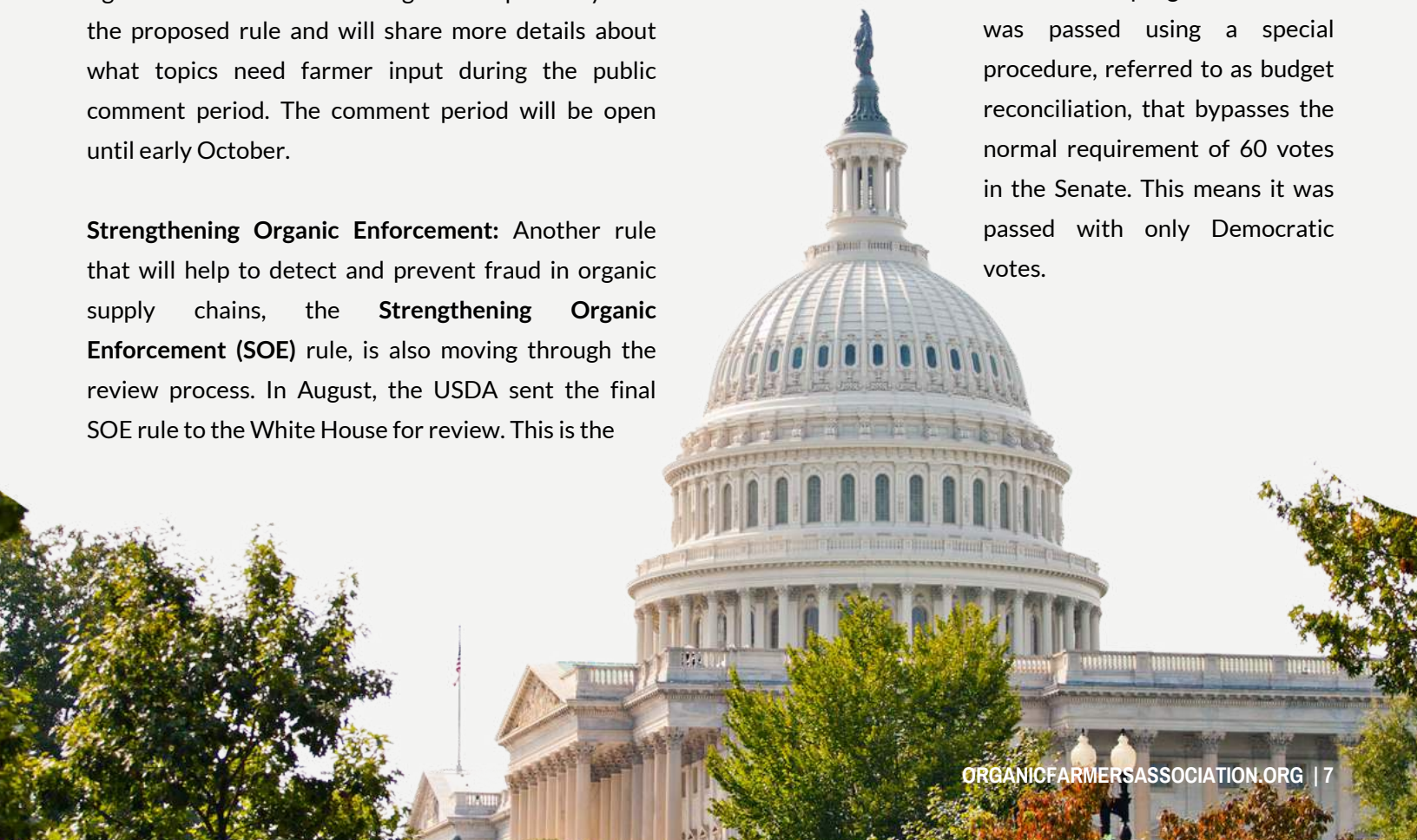
Strengthening Organic Enforcement: Another rule that will help to detect and prevent fraud in organic supply chains, the **Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE)** rule, is also moving through the review process. In August, the USDA sent the final SOE rule to the White House for review. This is the

final version of the proposed rule that was open for public comment during the summer of 2020. Once the White House review process is complete, the USDA can publish the final rule.

CONGRESS INJECTS FUNDING INTO CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

After more than a year of stops and starts, the **Inflation Reduction Act** was signed into law in August. The new law is a large spending package that covers prescription drug costs, corporate tax rates, and climate change, including a historic infusion of money into several USDA

conservation programs. The law was passed using a special procedure, referred to as budget reconciliation, that bypasses the normal requirement of 60 votes in the Senate. This means it was passed with only Democratic votes.



The Inflation Reduction Act will provide \$18.1 billion over four years for several USDA conservation programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program, with a focus on practices that address climate change. It would also provide \$2 billion over several years for the Rural Energy for America Program to provide loans and grants to agricultural producers and rural businesses for renewable energy systems. Organic is mentioned as one of many purposes for increased conservation spending, and OFA will be working with our allies to make sure that USDA uses this new funding in ways that work for organic farmers.

This increased funding for conservation programs has also triggered a lot of debate about how it will impact the next Farm Bill. The current Farm Bill expires in 2023, and Congress has started the process of debating what should be in the next version of the bill. With the new funding provided by the reconciliation bill, the process of writing the Farm Bill could provide another opportunity for Congress to instruct the USDA on how to focus conservation program funding and priorities.

This summer, OFA worked with our allies in the organic community to refine our Farm Bill proposals, on fixing organic certification cost-share, supporting organic research, tackling fraud in organic supply chains, and other issues. We will be releasing a list of priorities for the next Farm Bill this fall.

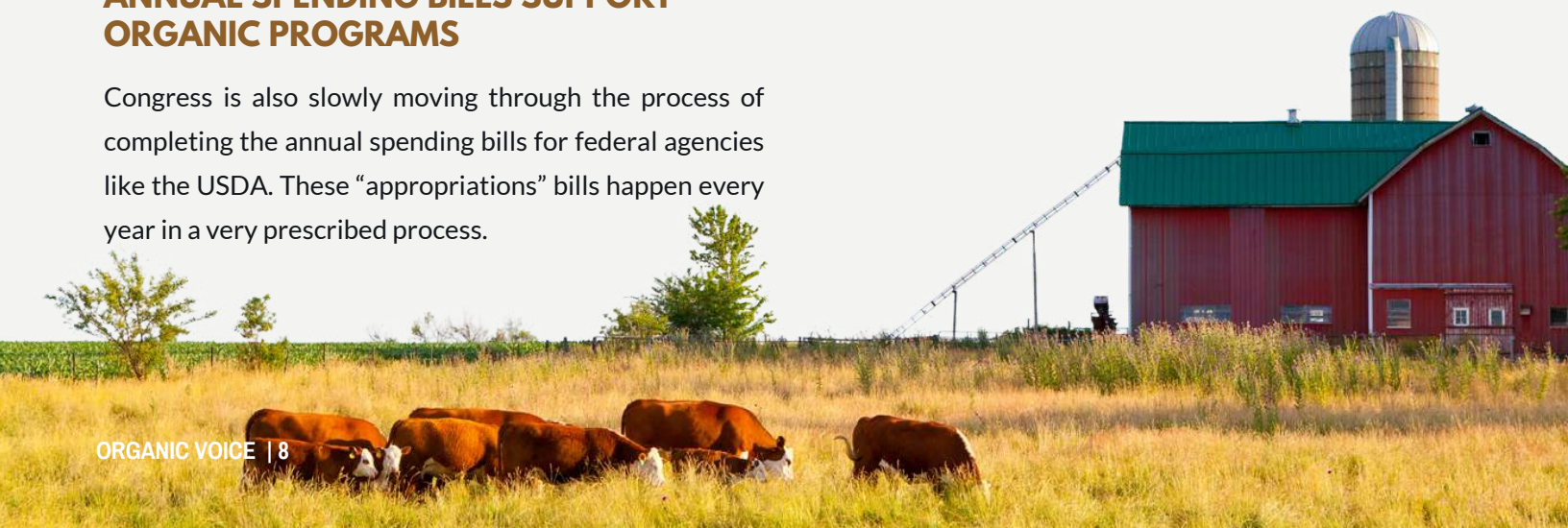
ANNUAL SPENDING BILLS SUPPORT ORGANIC PROGRAMS

Congress is also slowly moving through the process of completing the annual spending bills for federal agencies like the USDA. These “appropriations” bills happen every year in a very prescribed process.

In the appropriations bills that have been drafted for the USDA for Fiscal Year 2023 (which starts on October 1st), organic programs are faring well so far. In July, the full House passed a bill that would increase funding for the National Organic Program and included language to direct the NOP to strengthen its enforcement of organic soil health requirements. At the end of July, the Senate Appropriations Committee released their draft bill, which also included an increase in funding for the NOP and good report language encouraging the USDA to focus on enforcement. The bill still has to be passed by the full Senate, and then any differences between the House and Senate versions will have to be reconciled. It is unlikely that Congress will get all of these steps completed before the October 1st deadline, and will have to pass an extension to let federal agencies continue to run on this year’s budget levels.

USDA SUPPORT FOR ORGANIC TRANSITION

On June 1st, Agriculture Secretary Vilsack gave a speech on the USDA’s plans to transform the American food system, focusing on increasing resilience in food supply chains. One of the plans he announced was for USDA to establish a program, funded with \$300 million, to assist farms that are transitioning to organic certification. On August 22nd, USDA released more details on the Organic Transition Initiative, which will provide \$300 million to three areas.



1 TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

\$100 million for “wrap around technical assistance” for farms going through the transition process. The USDA plans to “build partnership networks in six regions across the U.S. with trusted local organizations serving direct farmer training, education, and outreach activities...The organizations will connect transitioning farmers with mentors, building paid mentoring networks to share practical insights and advice.”

2 CONSERVATION & CROP INSURANCE

\$100 million for direct assistance to farmers through conservation and crop insurance programs. The Natural Resources Conservation Service will develop a new organic management conservation practice standard and offer financial and technical assistance to producers who implement the practice, and increase

organic expertise at each of its regional technology support centers. USDA will also create a new Transitional and Organic Grower Assistance Program at the Risk Management Agency, which will support transitioning and certain certified organic producers’ participation in crop insurance, including coverage of a portion of their insurance premium.

3 ORGANIC SUPPLY CHAINS

\$100 million to improve organic supply chains. USDA will focus on key organic markets where the need for domestic supply is high, or where additional processing and distribution capacity is needed for more robust organic supply chains. More details on this initiative will be released later this year.



Patty Lovera is Policy Director of Organic Farmers Association. She makes sure that the policy priorities of certified organic farmers are represented in Washington, D.C.



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All FSA county offices will process this program & some certifiers or state agencies do. Provide a receipt of your certification fee payment and proof of certification. Contact your certifier for the needed documentation.

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ORGANIC AND TRANSITIONAL EDUCATION AND CERTIFICATION PROGRAM (OTECP)

This program will reimburse up to 25% (**\$250**) **per category (Crops, Livestock, Wild Crops & Processing)** for 2022 certification fees AND reimburse for education (did you attend a conference?), soil tests, and myriad costs related to organic transition (up to \$750 for transition).

This program is only available at your FSA office. 2022 expenses (10/1/2021 - 9/30/2022) with receipts must be submitted before Oct 31.

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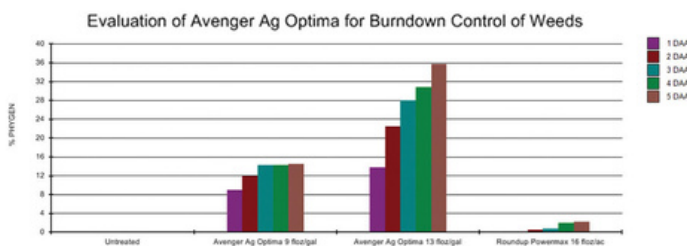


Figure 1. Evaluation of percent total weed damage in plots from 1 to 5 days after application.



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PROPOSED ANIMAL WELFARE STANDARDS

Written By,
Harriet Behar

**PUBLIC COMMENTS
NEEDED BY OCT 11**

Even though the NOP organic standards state that all organic livestock should have access to the outdoors, an opportunity to express their natural behavior and have living conditions that lessen stress to promote health and well-being, these rules have not been universally implemented by all USDA organic operations. Large organic poultry operations have provided small “porches” and have convinced the NOP and certifiers that this is the same as providing outdoor access. Operations that do provide outdoor access, with living vegetation, shade, food and water have a significant economic investment that others have avoided. The NOP has acknowledged that there has been a “market failure” with many organic producers providing quality humane living conditions and others mirror standard confined animal practices, creating confusion in the marketplace.



The Obama administration published a final rule in January 2017 to make organic regulations more in line with other animal welfare certifications. The Trump administration withdrew the rule later that same year, and it was not implemented. In the past five years and prior to 2017, many organic livestock producers have felt the need to pay for additional animal welfare certifications, to differentiate themselves from other organic operations and more clearly communicate to consumers the humane aspects of their operations.

TAKE ACTION

The newly proposed Organic Livestock and Poultry Standards is very similar to the January 2017 version. Farmers can have a significant impact on what this final regulation will look like by submitting comments to the USDA Agriculture Marketing Service (AMS) by October 11, 2022. Giving examples of how you currently meet the standards, or inconsistencies between you and other operations that you believe is damaging to the integrity of the organic label and your specific operation can be useful in convincing the NOP to strengthen this proposed rule. Thanking the NOP for the many areas of the rule that are well written, is also a good idea. You can find the regulation and how to submit public comments at: <https://www.regulations.gov/commenton/AMS-NOP-21-0073-0001>.



SOME PROBLEMS WITH THE RULE

★ **IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE:** A significant difference between the 2017 version and the 2022 version of this rule, is a proposed implementation timeline for avian outdoor access. The NOP has proposed either a 5-year or 15-year implementation timeframe for operations currently certified as organic. Many organic advocacy groups have spoken out against both the 5- and 15-year implementation timeframe. It can be argued that to be fair to all crop and livestock operations that make investments and capital improvements when they transition to organic, providing a three-year “transition” to providing true outdoor access is the only fair way to approach this implementation. The NOP should prioritize the majority of organic livestock operations that for years have upheld humane animal standards to provide outdoor access and allow animals to express their natural instincts, and have suffered unfair competition with operations that do not provide their poultry meaningful outdoor access. Rapid implementation is needed to remedy this situation as quickly as possible.

★ **NATURAL LIGHT REQUIREMENT:** Birds should not be allowed to be kept in darkness during the daytime. This statement from the 2017 version was removed: Natural light must be sufficient indoors on sunny days so that the inspector can read and write when all lights are turned off. Confinement raised ducks are commonly kept in dimly lit or dark conditions in buildings with no windows. Numerous humane animal standards require sufficient natural light during the day along with artificial light of limited duration as the days get shorter. Organic farmers advocating for improvement in this area can make a difference.

★ **VEGETATIVE COVER OF OUTDOOR ACCESS:**

The new regulation only requires half the outdoor access area to be soil and that soil should have “maximal vegetative cover” appropriate for the season, climate, geography, and species of livestock. This is another area where more specificity is needed.

What does “maximal vegetative cover” look like on your farm? What do you do to promote healthy height and density to provide a quality forage area?

Rotation, renovation, reseeding, and irrigation are used to provide lush vegetation that provides for healthy livestock as well as protection of soil and water quality. Areas of gravel and concrete should be limited to areas of high usage or possible erosion, such as right next to the doors, at roof driplines, walkways, and food and water areas. The vegetated area needs to be as close as possible to the building, and not be around the corner of the building where the birds might never use it. The vegetation should be managed in a way so it can regenerate and not permanently be denuded.

★ **TEMPERATURE:** As written now, the birds can be temporarily confined inside when the outside temperature is below 40 degrees and above 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Most birds can tolerate a larger temperature range. In many areas of the country, this keeps the birds confined for a significant portion of the year. **Can you give examples of what you do on your farm and its effect on your birds?**

★ **BIRD DENSITY:** Both the indoor and outdoor sq ft per bird requirements are at the lower end of the humane certifications. Outdoor areas for broilers is set at 1-1.25 sq ft per bird, for mature layers it is set at about 1.5 sq ft per hen, and for pullets it is set at about 1 sq ft per hen. Indoor areas for mature layers is set at 1-1.5 sq ft per bird depending on the type of housing and for broilers 1-1.25 sq ft per bird. The actual numbers in the regulation are based upon the average weight of the birds in the flock, so these numbers are approximate. European standards require approximately 42 sq ft per bird, but this can be accomplished through repeated rotations in a variety of areas over a full season, encouraging producers to continually move their flocks. This lessens parasite and disease problems, provides for healthier vegetation, and protects soil and water quality from the damage of overstocking. **What suggestions do you have for stocking rates and forage management?**


★ **SWINE TAIL DOCKING & NEEDLE TEETH CLIPPING:** Needle teeth clipping and tail docking in pigs is not typically allowed in humane standards. In this regulation, they are only allowed when documented that “alternative steps to prevent harm fail.” This area could be strengthened with more descriptive wording to provide more space and better living conditions which remove the need for these alterations. **Swine producers are encouraged to provide further descriptions that have worked in their operations.**



★TEMPORARY CONFINEMENT OF YOUNG DAIRY

CALVES: Should young dairy calves be allowed to be temporarily confined indoors for up to six months or until weaned? There is an allowance for this, as long as the calves can see, hear and smell other calves. Youngstock benefit from being outdoors, especially when seasonally appropriate. **Should there be a requirement for some outdoor access for these young animals?**



The NOP has acknowledged that consumers will pay more for livestock products where poultry are truly outdoors as well as all species being managed under humane requirements. Consumers deserve a speedy implementation to lessen the current market confusion and the profusion of labeling claims. The organic label should consistently uphold consumer expectations of healthy environmental and animal production practices. **Your voice is important to this process!** 

Harriet Behar, Sweet Springs Farm (WI), is an organic farmer and has been an organic inspector since 1989. She serves on the Organic Farmers Association Policy Committee and Governing Council.



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FEATURE

REVITALIZING THE MID-DELTA MISSISSIPPI RIVER WITH ORGANIC



Shawn Peebles

is an organic farmer located in Eastern Arkansas . Before running his current organic farm, Shawn farmed 7,000 acres of conventional corn and soybeans on extremely tight margins that were finally too much to sustain. In December 2017, he was forced to sell all his farm equipment, and after the sale, he was still under a blanket of farm debt. Farming was in Shawn's genes, but he had just lost everything he had been working for his whole adult life. He knew he had to make a change if he was going to be able to continue farming.

A fortuitous conversation with a family friend elder organic farmer, Jody Taylor, at the local farm supply store, changed his life. Taylor, hearing what had happened to Shawn's farm, introduced the idea of organic farming as the way of the future. He pulled out a scratch piece of paper from his pocket to show Shawn the current organic soybean and corn commodity prices, which were double the conventional prices. Shawn was shocked and began to see the possibility of getting back into farming and out of debt. Taylor ended up renting Shawn 200 organic acres to test organic corn and soybean farming. He made more money that year than he ever had conventionally. Shawn was convinced organic management would offer him a strong future in farming and made the switch.

A few years later Seneca Foods, one of the largest processors of fruits and vegetables in the U.S., discovered Shawn had organic land and asked him to grow organic vegetables for them. The finances were motivating and so he pivoted again, diversifying his existing organic commodity farm to include organic vegetables. Now Shawn farms 2,000 certified organic acres where he grows



millions of pounds of vegetables destined for processing or directly to grocery stores: sweet potatoes, pumpkins, black-eyed peas, green beans, squash, edamame, and anything else a major processor wants in organic volumes. Yet, expanding his business in this new direction was difficult to near impossible within our traditional agribusiness support network.

Shawn found that traditional agricultural lenders in the mid-Mississippi Delta region did not understand large-scale vegetable farming and were reluctant to finance the equipment, transportation crates, land expansion, and labor needed for diversified vegetable farming. This is true in many other parts of the United States, where agricultural lenders don't have the benchmarks or historical data to assess risk for diversified cropping systems. Many of the crops Shawn is interested in growing (i.e., edamame) seem foreign to most agricultural lenders, so they do not understand provided financials and are reluctant to take on the risk with a loan. Because finding traditional capital to expand his farm has been so challenging, Shawn has

created a workaround by requiring paid contracts with his buyers before he puts crops in the ground. He explains, “everything that we produce on this farm is pre-contracted. Right now we grow Black Eyed Peas for Eden Foods in Minnesota, we have a contract with AVS for edamame, and one with Matthew’s Farm in Wynne, Arkansas for sweet potatoes destined for Krogers and Walmart – they market ‘em all over.” His processors pay a down payment on the contract before seeds are purchased and then the rest once the contracted crop is harvested, essentially filling the role of a traditional bank, supporting farmers throughout the season.

Shawn’s farm is now diversified with organic vegetables and commodity grain crops and is financially successful. He employs over 60 full-time employees and hundreds more seasonal staff. During the peak season, he runs 24 hours, every day of the week. In his rural area, the farm’s business and the employees he supports are essential contributors to the local economy and demonstrate a successful model for how to repopulate and revitalize rural Arkansas and rural areas across the United States.

“...traditional agricultural lenders in the mid-Mississippi Delta region, did not understand large-scale vegetable farming and were reluctant to finance the equipment, transportation crates, land expansion, and labor needed for diversified vegetable farming.”

Much of the area’s grocery stores carry produce grown in California, but Arkansas *can* grow its own food *and* provide produce for the broader region.

The mid-Delta region is excellent farmland with plenty of water, good climate, fertile soil, and a



history of diversified vegetable production, that is until the 1970s when farm policy and agricultural experts began encouraging a transition to fence-row-to-fence-row commodity crops. There used to be a thriving vegetable economy when his dad was farming. Shawn described, “if you go back 40 years ago, you had produce companies all over the delta. Birdseye was here. They were in Searcy ... We had another one, Bush Brothers – Bush Baked Beans – they were in Blytheville. We were all growing crops for them at those times, so it was very diversified. Plus, every farmer raised watermelons in this area. It was normal that if you were farming, you had at least 100 acres of melons.” This region has the potential to diversify again. Shawn has proved that the land is a good fit for diversified organic vegetable production. The pandemic has proven that we need more local food and farming infrastructure. Shawn’s farm success and the impact on the rural economy can and should be used as a model for the upcoming farm bill.

In the 1970s, Secretary of Agriculture Butz destroyed much of the diversified farming practices throughout the United States. The 2023 farm bill gives our current Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, an opportunity to work with Congress to create policies in the farm bill that are needed to revitalize our local food infrastructure, increase regional food security and sovereignty and support independent diversified organic farm businesses. 🌱

Kate Mendenhall is the Executive Director of Organic Farmers Association and runs Okoboji Organics diversified organic livestock farm in Northwest Iowa.



Organic sweet potato field, sweet potato harvesting, and the final sweet potato from Peebles Organic farm in Augusta, Arkansas.





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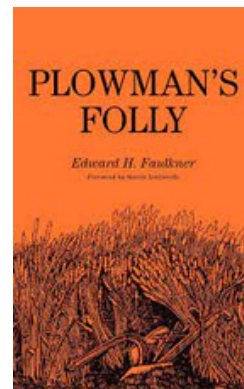


Organic Farmers Say Yes to No-Till

By Judith Redmond
Photo from Full Belly Farm

One of the sternest rebukes to the agricultural practice of tilling the soil was published in 1943, in a book by Edward Faulkner titled *Plowman's Folly*: "From one point of view, we have been creating our own soil problems merely for the doubtful pleasure of solving them... It can be said with considerable truth that the use of the plow has actually destroyed the productiveness of our soils." Faulkner's ideas were considered mad by most agriculturalists, but eventually

Time magazine called his concept "one of the most revolutionary ideas in agriculture history" and today, organic farmers are continuing to travel that same revolutionary path.



Faulkner died in 1964, at a time when he might have observed some tentative adoption of reduced tillage in corn, as new broad-spectrum, environmentally damaging herbicides like Atrazine and 2,4-D became available. Adoption of no-till practices in soybeans and cotton has been rapid on conventional farms in midwestern US states since 1990, closely associated with the development of herbicide-tolerant genetically modified crops that allow farmers to replace fall tillage with multiple post-emergence applications of herbicides in the spring.

Many benefits from no-till and reduced-till systems have been reported in the scientific literature: reduced soil compaction, improved soil structure, an increase in soil organic matter in upper levels of the soil profile, reduced soil erosion, increased soil-water retention, fuel savings, and even labor savings because it is cheap to apply herbicides compared to the cost of up to 20 passes with the tractor that might be employed in a typical tillage system in one season.

While the use of organic mulches derived from crop stubble and sometimes winter cover crops (the essence of no-till systems) has become common in the eastern and midwestern US, there has been less adoption of no-till in the vegetable-growing centers of California where the absence of suitable equipment to operate on soil covered by organic mulches is just one of many impediments. For thirty years, Dr. Jeffrey Mitchell, Professor of Extension at UC Davis, has been trying to expand the practice of no-till for row crops in California through his research and outreach. He has reported increases in soil carbon under no-till mulches compared to conventionally-tilled plots. This is the crux of yet another much-touted benefit of no-till: It may help to mitigate climate change by

sequestering carbon in the soil profile.

But what of the dependence on genetically modified crops and synthetic herbicides in no-till? Innovative scientists and organic farmers around the county are mobilizing to develop no-till systems that can be used in organic systems. Rodale Institute has been working on this since the 1990s. Their redesign of the roller-crimper was a breakthrough. Instead of using herbicides to terminate the cover crop, their implement flattens the cover crop, breaking the stems and creating a dense mat of mulch. The Rodale invention led to the adoption of no-till organic systems in thousands of acres of corn, soybeans, orchards, and vineyards.

Dr. Mitchell got his hands on one of the Rodale roller-crimper devices to see how it would work in California's organic row crops. Unfortunately, early efforts were frustrating because grasses in the cover crops simply popped back up even after multiple crimping passes. In 2018, a collaboration of farmers plus Dr. Mitchell and Dr. Cynthia Daley of Chico State University received a USDA Conservation Innovation Grant to support visionary on-farm and farmer-led

Rodale Institute designed the roller-crimper in the 1990s to terminate a cover crop by crimping the stem rather than terminating with herbicide.



efforts to develop no-till systems for organic vegetables. The group, which together includes many decades of experience growing organic row crops, is an incredible band of dedicated innovators, inventors, and think-out-of-the-box practitioners who hold fast to organic and sustainability principles.

The three farms are Phil Foster Ranches (250-acres of organic fruits and vegetables in San Juan Bautista/Hollister), Park Farming Organics (1700-acres of processing tomatoes, grains, beans and vegetables in the Sacramento Valley), and Full Belly Farm (400-acres of vegetables, fruits, nuts, grains and flowers in the Sacramento Valley). They are joined by Tom Willey of T&D Willey Farms who recently wound up a forty-some-year organic vegetable production career in the San Joaquin Valley. The project adopted a pioneering structure in that the farmers manage their own experiments and consult with the researchers on the team to document results and discuss challenges.

Recent experiments on Phil Foster's farm responded to the observation that many of the no-till organic trials in the project had been lower yielding. The group's working explanation was that in wet environments of the Midwest and Southeast where no-till fields do not show a drop in yield, the crop stubble left on the soil surface is breaking down and passing nutrients into the soil. But in the arid west, where most farmers are using drip irrigation, the layer of mulch and compost was not breaking down, in fact it was hoped that it might mulch the soil sufficiently to prevent weed competition.

In the Foster Ranch experiment, flail-chopped cover crop plus compost was left on the surface of



Phil Foster operates two ranches near San Juan Bautista and Hollister, California pictured in a field of cover crops. (Photo credit: Chico State Center for Regenerative Agriculture)



Scott and Ulla Park of Park Farming Organics farm 1,700 acres in Meridian, CA with a team of 16 fulltime employees. Photo credit: Park Farming Organics



400 acre Full Belly Farm in Guinda, CA is run by six farm owners with the help of 80-plus employees. Pictured right to left are owners Paul Muller, Dru Rivers, Amon Muller, Jenna Muller, Judith Redmond (founding owner now retired) and owner Andrew Brait. Not in the photo: owner Rye Muller. Photo credit: Full Belly Farm.

Eco Farm's *Dirt First!* series hosted the project partners in 2021 to share year 2 report findings. Click on the video to learn about continued innovations in reducing/eliminating tillage in field-scale organic vegetable crops. Phil Foster Ranches, Full Belly Farm, and Park Farming Organics discuss cover-crop biomass digestion under plastic and weed barrier fabric, seasonal grazing trials, novel equipment, and investigation of fungal-to-bacterial ratios. They also share research on the Carbon-to-Nitrogen ratio's influence on the long-term fate of carbon in farm soils.



Click on the video to the left to watch Tom Willey's August 2, 2022 presentation "To Till or Not to Till, That is the Question," given at the 2022 Annual Conference of the Soil and Water Conservation Society in Denver, CO. Willey describes successes and challenges from the no-till national Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) project

The video on the right features Paul Muller from Full Belly Farm describing his no-till management site where they are trying to improve soil quality and sequester more carbon. No-till management aligns with Full Belly's goal to integrate farm production with sustainable long-term environmental stewardship. Achieving healthy soil is the foundation for the farm, helping plants resist disease and pests as well as supporting high nutrition.



drip-irrigated beds and covered with plastic mulch. The theory was that the cover crop would decompose under these conditions, and more nutrients would be available for the crop. In fact, yields almost doubled compared with adjacent fields treated similarly, but without plastic mulch. A full-scale trial of this approach in 2021 also showed a strong advantage for the use of plastic. When questioned on the appropriateness of plastic in organic agriculture, Mr. Willey replied, "I'm thinking of the plastic as a proof of concept. We are at a certain stage in our experiments and the plastics seem to work. Soon we may move into biodegradable row covers."

Other experiments of no-till for organic row crop production are taking place around the arid west. In research reported by the non-profit Community Alliance with Family Farmers, six small-scale farms (less than five acres each) used a no-till system developed by Singing Frogs Farms of northern California, in which deep compost is used to mulch crops. The approach was described as "accessible" for new, small-scale farmers who might not have access to tractors.

No-till broccoli planting at Full Belly Farm.



Foster Ranch trials demonstrated higher yield vine growth on top of the plasticulture covering the cover crop (top). The plasticulture also aided increased fungal activity to break down the cover crops (bottom).

These efforts by organic farmers to push the envelope towards greater and greater levels of sustainability are inspiring. As stated by Tom Willey, "Climate disruption challenges agriculture to adopt greater reliance on natural systems versus concentrated inputs that emit larger amounts of greenhouse gases through manufacture and use. It is of paramount importance that we develop high-carbon soils with enhanced water holding capacity and active microbial communities to buffer the increased crop stress that climate change will bring." 🌱

Judith Redmond is a founding owner, now retired, of Full Belly Farm in Guinda, CA. She was a founding member of OFA and serves on the OFA Governing Council representing California organic farmers.





photo credit: © Lisa Muziger

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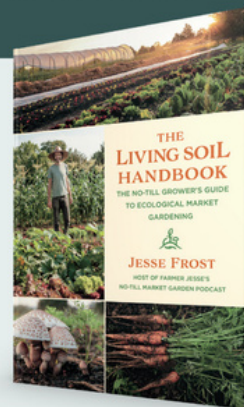
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I'm actually a licensed professional acupuncturist and came back to the family farm when there was a death in the family. My husband, Tom, and I were able to give it a go at that time.

Why did you choose to be certified organic?

I wanted to convert to growing organic fruits because being in the health profession, I wanted to have less conventional sprays used around where we were raising our son. At that time, customers also wanted to eat foods that were grown organically certified.



What are the toughest challenges you face as an organic producer?

The toughest challenge is educating the public about what "certified organic" means and that we still need to spray our fruit trees, but just with sprays that are acceptable by the certifying authorities in order to bring the highest quality fruit to the buyer. We use an integrated pest management system, monitoring for pests, and only spraying when necessary, using organic sprays.

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We do farmers' market, online sales (local), wholesale to stores, and private sales.

What are the most valuable lessons you've learned since you started?

One valuable lesson is to grow things that you enjoy growing and that is appropriate for the terrain, weather, etc. Another valuable lesson is to do your research and be thorough before even starting. Apprenticeship if possible. It's the long game.

What is most rewarding about being an organic farmer?

There are many rewards to being an organic farmer. Among those things are getting close to nature and feeling joy that you are connected to this wonderful earth, fulfillment, and pride in growing some things you like to eat, loving the whole process, and learning something about another living thing as well as yourself. And of course, feeling happy that you can eat the fruits, etc with the skin on.

What is one thing that would help more Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian farmers transition to organic?

The one thing that I think could help most conventional farmers, including BIPOC, transition to organic farming is becoming educated about how it can help the soil and water and other natural resources (including our pollinators) live and thrive without killing things unnecessarily.



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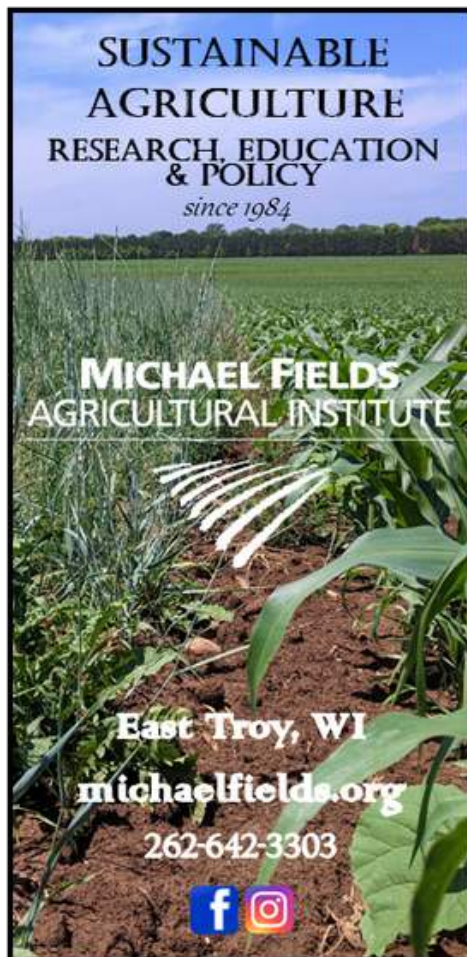
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