

ORGANIC VOICE



ORGANIC FARMERS ASSOCIATION

NO. 9 • JUNE 2023



STRENGTHENING ORGANIC ENFORCEMENT AT LAST!

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- Organic Integrity & NOP Enforcement
- Keeping Organic Rooted in Soil
- Dismantling Corporate Consolidation
- Improving USDA Programs for Organic Farmers
- Climate Change

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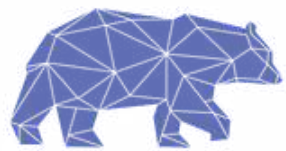


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President's Letter

Happy summer season, I hope yours is off to a good start. This will be the forty first season on our farm and as I prep beds, add compost, and amendments, the routine of it seems familiar and satisfying. I didn't grow up on a farm but started gardening or landscaping with my folks, who were big do-it-yourselfers. After high school, I spent a year working on a dairy farm before spending a year at a two-year Ag school. I learned a lot at both the job and the school but had been interested in organic farming for years. After hearing from one agronomy teacher that "soil's mostly there to hold up the plant while we feed it with chemical fertilizers," I left that school and took another path eventually earning a degree in Biological Agriculture in a cobbled-together bit of coursework because no one was teaching this type of farming back then.

Fast forward about five years of working on organic farms and learning how to put theory into practice, I was able, with support from my folks, to put down roots on our small farm here in Maine in the early 80s. We were first certified organic by the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) in 1985.

So why am I telling you all this? Well, I've been thinking a lot about those early days of the organic movement, which is what it was. Our certification happened five years before the U.S. passed the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) and a good 17 years before the National Organic Program (NOP) took over the coordination of organic certification. During all my years in school, on farms, selling produce in Maine, or working on the board of our certification nonprofit, nowhere in that time did we ever consider that organic farming didn't mean a soil-based production method.



Through the years I've grown produce in fields, wood framed beds, large and small hoop houses, even extending the season for a few crops through the winter, and they've all been grown in the soil.

Although the OFPA doesn't specifically state, "must be grown in the soil" back when the law was being written and we were commenting on the ins and outs of the proposed rule, it never occurred to me to insert that phrase.

The primary reasons that OFA was started was to give organic farmers a voice in policy and to advocate for the issues of concern to farmers. One issue that has been constant through all this time has been the allowance of hydroponic production in organic. OFA continues to push to have hydro removed from organic certification. We strongly believe that allowing hydro makes the rule weaker, makes it much more difficult to convince new farmers to certify, and reduces our credibility with consumers. Please stand with OFA and our partners in asking the USDA to do the right thing and end the use of hydroponic production in organic regulations. See page 8 for a way to sign on your support.

Sincerely,

David Colson, President
New Leaf Farm, Durham, Maine



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Ben Bowell, Oregon Tilth
Brooke Gentile, Organic Association of Kentucky (OAK)
Ed Maltby, Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (NODPA)
Sam Hilborn-Naluai, Rodale Institute

STAFF

Executive Director Kate Mendenhall
Policy Director Lily Hawkins
Racial Equity Manager Ryann Monteiro
Membership & Outreach Coord Amber Lippon

CONTRIBUTORS

Writers: Lily Hawkins, Harriet Behar, Judith Redmond, Dave Runsten, Sam Hilborn-Naluai and Nicolas Podoll
Editor: Kate Mendenhall

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Send comments & inquiries to:

Organic Farmers Association
PO BOX 709, Spirit Lake, IA 51360 USA
202-643-5363
info@OrganicFarmersAssociation.org

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POLICY UPDATE

Lily Hawkins, Policy Director

WORK ON 2024 SPENDING BILLS IS UNDERWAY

Amid heated debate over raising the debt ceiling so that the federal government can continue to run essential programs, Congress is starting the annual process of putting together the “appropriations” bills that set the spending levels for each federal agency, including USDA.

This spring, OFA submitted testimony asking for increased funds for programs that benefit organic producers, including the National Organic Program, the Organic Transition Program, and research programs.

OFA SUPPORTS ORGANIC-FRIENDLY FARM BILL MARKER BILLS

Work on the 2023 Farm Bill is well underway with the introduction of many marker bills this spring.

OFA is supporting several marker bills that have already been introduced that, if included in the final text of the Farm Bill, will create and improve programs that are crucial to organic farmers.

OPPORTUNITIES IN ORGANIC ACT (S. 1582 & H. 3650)



The Opportunities in Organic Act will build on USDA's Organic Certification Cost Share Program and Organic Transition Initiative to remove barriers to organic production in several important ways:

- 1** Allow cost-share payments that cover 100% of certification costs, up to \$1500 per scope (Crops, Livestock, Wild Crops, Processing).
- 2** Provide flexible funding for organizations to support organic transition, particularly for smaller

scale producers, producers of color, and underserved regions; these organizations may provide a wide range of services, including culturally and regionally relevant assistance with the certification process and recordkeeping, inspector training, and mentorship programs.

3 **Flexible funding for organic operations to offset costs and reduce barriers associated with the transition process**, ranging from learning new farming and ranching techniques to business planning, equipment, and processing infrastructure.

4 **Improve technical assistance available through public agencies, universities, and NGOs** by providing resources for organic-relevant technical expertise, capacity, and partnerships at public institutions and organizations, including support for education, outreach, and market expansion, so producers in any part of the country will have access to professional assistance that will help them build healthy soil, manage pests naturally, and protect natural resources.

WHAT IS A MARKER BILL?

The Farm Bill is a HUGE package of legislation made up of many chapters, each with numerous sections and policy ideas. Marker bills are smaller bills that are not meant to pass on their own, but are introduced to promote and build support for a policy idea in the hopes that idea will be included in a major omnibus package like the Farm Bill. Marker bills help build grassroots and congressional support for policies.

STRENGTHENING ORGANIC AGRICULTURE RESEARCH ACT (H. 2720)



Investing in organic research has significant benefits for all farmers, as well as for rural communities and ecosystems. The Strengthening Organic Agriculture Research Act, or SOAR Act, will provide additional funding for several important organic research programs. We're hoping to see a Senate-side version of this bill in the near future.

- 1** **Increase funding for the Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI).** The SOAR Act would provide stair-stepped budget increases to OREI, from \$60 million in 2024 to \$100 million in 2028.
- 2** **Provides Congressional authorization and direction for the Researching the Transition to Organic Program**, currently known as the Organic Transition Research Program (ORG), with an authorization for appropriations of \$10 million a year from 2024-2026 and \$20 million from 2027-2028.
- 3** **Increase funding for the Organic Production and Market Data Initiative (ODI)** providing \$10 million over the life of the Farm Bill, doubling the farm bill funding for this important USDA initiative. The data produced through the ODI aids in the development of risk management products and targeted market development.
- 4** **Directs ERS to conduct a full, systematic evaluation of the economic impact organic agriculture has on rural and urban communities**, taking into account economic, ecological, and social factors.



MARKER BILLS IN THE WORKS

In addition to the marker bills that have already been introduced, OFA is participating in conversations that we hope will lead to the introduction of strong marker bills to support organic producers:

- ✓ Improve data collection, build a functioning safety net, and invest in regional infrastructure for organic dairy.
- ✓ Improve **crop insurance** access and functionality for organic producers.
- ✓ Ensure **continuous improvement of the organic standards**.

CLICK TO ACT NOW

URGE YOUR MEMBERS OF
CONGRESS TO SUPPORT ORGANIC
FARMERS IN THE 2023 FARM BILL!



INSIDE USDA

As Congress continues work on the 2023 Farm Bill and begins the annual Appropriations process, USDA has announced a number of new programs and funding opportunities.



RESTORATION OF COST SHARE FUNDING FOR 2023

In May, USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) announced they will restore reimbursement rates for the Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP), which provides reimbursements to organic farms and handling operations, to 75 percent of the certified organic operation's eligible expenses, up to a maximum of \$750 per scope (crops, wild crops, livestock, & processing/handling). This brings the amount of funding back up to the maximum allowed by the 2018 farm bill, after a 2020 reduction to 50 percent of the certified organic operation's eligible expenses, and a maximum of \$500 per scope.

Organic certification provides producers a way to validate the valuable ecosystem services they provide. Restoring reimbursement levels will help small farmers transition to organic and maintain their certification. However, the costs associated with certification and inspection have continued to rise since the passage of the 2018 farm bill, and OFA is working with other advocates and organizations to

OFA
Farm Bill
Priorities



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urge Congress to further increase funding for the Organic Certification Cost Share Program through the 2023 Farm Bill, allowing FSA to reimburse 100 percent of eligible costs up to \$1500 per scope of certification.

NRCS ANNOUNCED \$75 MILLION TO ASSIST PRODUCERS TRANSITIONING TO ORGANIC

This Spring, NRCS announced that they would invest \$75 million in conservation assistance for producers transitioning to organic as part of the Organic Transition Initiative (OTI). The majority of the funding will be used to provide direct assistance to farmers adopting the new EQIP organic management standard, which provides support for organic conservation practices such as composting, outdoor access for livestock, and organic nutrient management.

The remaining \$5 million will be dedicated to partnering with technical experts to develop regional networks and support NRCS staff in providing organic training and expertise. USDA is accepting proposals for these partnerships until June 11, 2023. You can read more details on the funding opportunities [here](#).

ORGANIC DAIRY MARKETING ASSISTANCE PROGRAM LAUNCHES

On Friday May 19, USDA announced the launch of the Organic Dairy Marketing Assistance Program (ODMAP) to assist organic dairy farmers through this period of economic hardship. Organic dairy producers must apply for the program at their local USDA Service Center with documentation showing their 2022 production and proof of organic certification.

OFA recognizes that the ODMAP program will not be enough to save organic dairies from going out of business, and on the first day of the application period, OFA and allies sent a letter signed by 25 groups to USDA requesting the following:

- Immediate distribution of the remaining 25% of the initial estimate of marketing costs for 2023
- A subsequent round of disbursements to reflect the higher cost of marketing for organic milk.
- Improved data collection for organic milk

Since the letter was sent to USDA on May 24th, groups have continued to sign on in support of further disbursement of ODMAP funds to organic dairy producers. The current list of signatories can be seen [here](#). 

Lillian Hawkins is Policy Director of Organic Farmers Association. She ensures the policy priorities of certified organic farmers are represented in Washington, D.C.



organic is soil based.

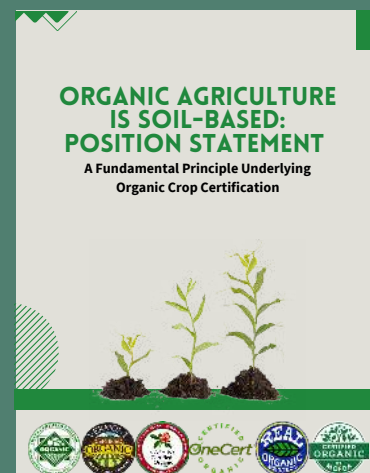
A group of organic certifiers has refused to certify hydroponic operations because they do not believe it is allowed under the National Organic Standards. The USDA National Organic Program disagrees and has issued non-compliances to these agencies.

OFA farmer members voted to oppose organic certification of hydroponic production and urge the NOP to revoke the organic certification of such operations. ([See the full policy position here.](#))

Organizations and farmers are signing on with the organic certification agencies who have received non-compliances to support organic agriculture based in soil-production.



Click to sign on your support for soil-based organic.



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STRENGTHENING ORGANIC ENFORCEMENT AT LAST!

By Harriet Behar

The Organic Farmers Association applauds the release of the final Strengthening Organic Enforcement rule, a significant improvement to the USDA organic regulations. **All operations will need to be in full compliance by March 2024.** Spurred by a few high-profile cases of fraudulent organic sales, this new regulation closes many loopholes and seeks to enhance the quality of organic audits and oversight.

Organic farmers will see these changes in the certification process and the organic supply chain, as well as being required to do their part in the prevention of fraud.

TYPES OF OPERATIONS NOW REQUIRING CERTIFICATION

A variety of operations that were exempt from organic certification will now be required to go through the organic certification process annually. Operations that trade or facilitate trade, including importers and brokers that own organic product, even if they do not take physical possession of the organic product, are now required to have oversight through the organic certification process.

The exemptions to organic certification are limited to very small operations, retail stores that do not process organic products, warehouses that store products in tamper-proof sealed containers, and brokers that do not take ownership or possession of products. These exempt operations still must follow rules that require recordkeeping and legal labeling of organic, prevent commingling with nonorganic products and prevent contamination of organic items. Transportation companies are not required to be certified, but those certified organic entities hiring these companies must make sure the integrity of the organic products is maintained during transport.



Importers and brokers who facilitate trade of organic goods will now be required to be certified. Import certificates will also be required for ALL organic products coming into the U.S. and will be checked by Customs and Border Protection.

NEW SUPPLY CHAIN TRACKING

Import certificates for all organic product coming into the U.S. are being integrated with Customs and Border Protection (CBP) so CBP officials are aware to look for this organic status on incoming shipments. Organic certification agencies are required to collect and oversee production and purchasing information and share this with other certifiers in the supply chain for full transparency. The National Organic Program maintains a listing of all organic operations and their products, entitled the Organic Integrity Database (OID), which will be improved to manage this data. The acreage of every certified organic operation will be updated yearly, but only certification agencies can view that information. As part of this transparency, all certifiers will use one organic certificate template, so those certificates will have the same information, the same terminology describing the items, and the same place on the certificate to find the information. When an operation has lost organic status, this information must be posted to the public OID within 72 hours.



NEW REQUIREMENTS FOR CERTIFIERS

Certifiers are required to work together on fraud investigations and to do supply chain traceability audits on high-risk operations and products on a regular basis. Other information, such as where inputs are purchased and production yields, may be shared among certifiers to verify organic status, but this information is protected under this rule as confidential and is not to be released to the public.

NEW REQUIREMENTS FOR FARMERS

Organic farmers are required under the new regulation to do their part to deter and detect fraud in the supply chain. All organic operations, including farmers, must have a fraud prevention plan in their Organic System Plan (OSP).

Certifiers are now reviewing the OSPs they provide their farmer clients and will be adding a new section where the farmer will describe what systems they have in place to verify and prove the organic status of all purchased organic labeled feedstuffs, seeds, livestock, or other items used to produce their own organically labeled products.

Records must be maintained and kept that verify the organic status throughout the growing season, the life of the animal, or any movement of crops or animals (off-farm storage or custom heifer pasturing for instance). Proof of organic certification of the last entity in the supply chain before the farmer received that product must be kept, as well as the farmer providing their organic status when the product is sold. The point of this requirement is to keep every link in the supply chain transparent and traceable. For bulk products, the name of the most recent certified organic operation that owned and/or handled that product, must be present on the documentation that goes with that bulk item.

New Recordkeeping for Farmers

Strengthening Organic Enforcement Act

NEW OSP SECTION: Proof of Organic Status of all Purchased Organic Inputs

Description of systems in place to verify and prove the organic status of all purchased organic labeled feedstuffs, seeds, livestock or other items used to produce your own organically labeled products.

NEW RECORDS: Organic Status through Growing Season/ Animal Life

Records must verify the organic status throughout the growing season, the life of the animal, or any movement of crops or animals.

NEW RECORDS: Organic Status of Last Entity in Supply Chain

Proof of organic certification of the last entity in the supply chain before the farmer received that product. The farmer must also provide their organic status when the product is sold.

NEW RECORDS: Bulk Products

The name of the most recent certified organic operation that owned/and or handled that product, must be present on the documentation that goes with that bulk item.



NEW REQUIREMENTS FOR INSPECTORS

All inspections will now include a traceability audit which shows the organic status from purchase or growing through sale and a balance audit which tracks that enough organic product was present or produced to justify the volumes of final organic product sold. This would include enough approved seed to grow a crop, enough organic feed purchased for the number of animals on the farm, or enough acreage with reasonable yields for the number of bushels or boxes sold.

Certification agencies must conduct more unannounced inspections equaling at least 5% of all of the certifier's clients, with no more than 4 hours of notice given before the inspector arrives. Certification inspections must be done at least once during the calendar year, even if the timing is different between years. There have been operations that have gone 14-16 months or even longer between inspections - this will no longer be allowed.

To lessen paperwork, OSP updates are allowed to be streamlined to only require yearly updates to the operation's OSPs where there have been changes, such as seed purchased or what crops are grown in which fields, but not what equipment is present, if nothing new has been purchased.

HIGHER STANDARDS FOR CERTIFICATION STAFF & INSPECTORS

The SOE rule has greatly enhanced the qualifications for personnel working within the organic certification system. All inspectors need at least 2,000 hours of experience relevant to the areas they will be inspecting before they are allowed to inspect those specific types of operations. New organic inspectors must complete at least 50 hours of training in their first year prior to performing organic inspections independently. Experienced inspectors must have at least 10 hours of training every year, and if they are

inspecting a new area, such as starting to visit dairy farms, they need another 5 hours of training. People reviewing OSPs, organic inspection reports, organic materials and other certification duties within the certification office must have knowledge, skills and experience to perform their duties, including understanding the various types of traceability and balance audits present in the organic inspection reports. At least 50 hours of training is needed to start this work, with 10 more hours of training annually. Once every three years, every inspector will be accompanied on at least one inspection by a certification agency staff member to evaluate their expertise on-site; they will also be required to undergo an annual evaluation.

NEW REGULATIONS FOR GROWER GROUPS

Grower group certification, common in many developing countries, is rare in the U.S. This rule clarifies that it is allowed domestically.

Grower group certification works best for farmer-cooperatives of small growers and allows for one certificate for the group rather than each individual. But the group must act as one entity. In a grower group certification, the group is reviewed internally by the group and the inspections may cover a few group-member farms each year, but not every operator.

Most grower groups support organic coffee or chocolate farmer cooperatives in developing countries.

SOE clarifies how domestic producers can utilize this type of certification.



There is no monetary or size limit to who can participate in a grower group, which is most typically present in developing countries with very small landowners to provide a pathway for their low-income farms to achieve organic certification.

While OFA supports the grower group certification model and sees a lot of positive ways it can support small-scale domestic growers, the new rule does pose some concerns. An example of OFA concern under this rule would be applying it to large vertically integrated poultry operations, where each operation is run by an individual family, and they all purchase feed and birds from the same company that then buys their eggs or birds. These individual operations could gross a million dollars a year, but might never have an on-site inspection. Many international grower groups are farmer cooperatives, but there is no requirement for this type of producer control or input into the management of the grower group in the Strengthening Organic Enforcement rule.

RISE IN CERTIFICATION COSTS?

OFA is concerned the implementation of the rule will cause the cost of organic certification to rise significantly. While the NOP has assured OFA that this rule is not intended to negatively affect small operations, it is something OFA will be watching. The highest risk for fraud comes from larger operations because they put more product into the marketplace, and small farms should not bare the financial burden of their increased impact on market integrity.

OFA expects the requirement for training will most likely lead to higher inspection fees, as well as the salaries paid to certification agency personnel. More time will be given to each organic certification, both at inspection and during review to do the detailed and comprehensive audits, leading to higher costs as well. For this reason, OFA has asked Congress to provide more money to the organic certification cost share program, to provide up to \$1500 per type of production, instead of \$750 annually and 100% reimbursement rather than capping it at 75%.

STRONG ORGANIC ENFORCEMENT IS NEEDED

Organic popularity in the marketplace continues to grow. The stronger oversight found within this rule offers both fraud deterrents as well as confidence that those doing certification activities are skilled enough to detect fraud. Those doing the hard work of organic production deserve strong enforcement of the organic label. 🌱

Harriet Behar runs organic Sweet Springs Farm in Gays Mills, Wisconsin. She serves on the OFA Governing Council and Policy Committee and has been involved with federal, state, and local policy advocacy for over 30 years.



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Fehr Family
West Bend, Iowa
fehrtrefflermm@gmail.com
+1 (712) 480-2496

James L. Byers and Sons
Mercersburg, PA
Byersorganicdairyllc@outlook.com
+1 (223) 205-8171

Matt Miller
Bristow, Iowa
mattmill2@netins.net
+1 (515) 971-9707

Nate Johnson
Trout Lake, WA
farmgateherbs@gmail.com
+1 (509) 637-4652

Nathan Metzger
Eltopia, WA
nathan@victoryagllc.com
+1 (509) 727-5073

Jon Findlay
Caro, MI
jonfindlay1979@hotmail.com
+1 (989) 551-8393

Derek Schrok
Tampico IL
dereks@fairfieldam.org
+1 (309) 314-5582

Peter Seely
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**Strengthening
Organic Enforcement
Rule has been
Released**



Did you know, the USDA NOP is strengthening enforcement of the organic supply chain? Some operations that buy and sell organic products have not been required to be certified organic.

The Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) regulations will soon change this for some brokers, traders, distributors, and importers.

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WRITTEN BY

Judith Redmond & Dave Runsten

"It is highly unlikely in the near future that we will see immigration reform," said Kevin Johnson, Dean of the School of Law at the University of California, Davis on March 17 at a conference on Immigration and Farm Labor. This deadlock in Washington only adds to the frustration felt by many U.S. farmers. A survey of farmer and rancher students enrolled in [California FarmLink's](#) business education class in 2022 revealed that 100% of farms that had employees often or sometimes did not have enough to get all of their work done.

Many U.S. growers of labor-intensive

crops have long relied on immigrant workers from Mexico, including at least 50% of whom are not legally authorized to work here. But the number of Mexican immigrants has declined significantly in the last 15 years, as increasing export fruit and vegetable production and industrial growth in Mexico offers alternative employment to potential immigrants.

One option that many farmers are turning to is the H-2A temporary agricultural program which allows farmers to fill their seasonal jobs if they certify that locals are not available. But a novice, searching for information about the program could easily be deterred by

"It is highly unlikely in the near future that we will see immigration reform."

Kevin Johnson, UC Davis

complicated regulations and expensive requirements. The farmer must pay for transportation to and from the home country, provide housing, and pay a wage that is often higher than prevailing local rates.

The number of workers coming to the U.S. through the H-2A program has quadrupled over the past decade to almost 400,000, but what may come as a surprise is that over 65% of H-2A employers are farms with only one to nine employees. However, the majority of actual visas certified are for workers destined to labor on farms with 250 or more employees. In other words, while most of the employers are smaller scale, most of the workers go to large farms.

So how are busy farmers making sense of this program that requires them to deal with multiple federal and state agencies, complicated timelines, and costly requirements? The answer lies with farm labor contractors (FLCs), which are supporting businesses that now provide the majority of H-2A certifications. FLCs offer differing levels of support, but in addition to handling the paperwork, many of them recruit, transport, and house guest workers. In many cases, the workers recruited through FLCs are transferred from one farm to another, as different needs arise, which is an interesting development because the way the program was originally conceived was that the H-2A workers would be tied by contract to one farm where they would work for a specified period and then return home.



PROBLEMS WITH H2A

While farm groups criticize the bureaucratic headaches and high costs of the program, farm labor advocates argue that the guest workers on the temporary H-2A visas cannot change employers and thus may have to endure abusive circumstances and may be isolated in housing that is tightly controlled employer. They say that the growth of the H-2A program has exacerbated the existing rural housing crisis for rural workers and in fact, is displacing the current domestic labor force of settled Mexican immigrants. The program “creates second-class citizens and is so bad that it cannot be reformed,” said Cynthia Rice of California Rural Legal Assistance at the U.C. Davis conference. Then she asked, “Why can’t we think of North America as a unit in which labor can move freely back and forth, just like traded goods?”

FARMWORKER MODERNIZATION ACT

The Farm Workforce Modernization Act that Congress has been debating for a number of years would incorporate Dianne Feinstein’s Blue Card program, whereby existing undocumented farm workers are given work visas that allow them to work, travel, and eventually

“Why can’t we think of North America as a unit in which labor can move freely back and forth, just like traded goods?”

Cynthia Rice, California Rural Legal Assistance

become legal permanent residents. Why this isn't an option for new immigrants is always explained as "politically infeasible," meaning the majority of Republicans in Congress won't allow it. This anti-immigrant stance has become so extreme that it has caused the dairy industry—which employs many undocumented immigrants and needs year-round workers—to petition for year-round H-2A workers, i.e. permanent workers through a seasonal temporary worker program.

WITHOUT OTHER OPTIONS, FARMERS TURN TO H2A

In a class taught by [FairShare CSA Coalition](#), called "How to Become an Ethical H-2A Employer," farmers shared that they appreciate the H-2A program because employees with legal visas are an improvement over those without, and allowing the guest workers to return home to spend time with family is much more humane than the reality for undocumented immigrants who find traveling back and forth across the southern U.S. border difficult and dangerous. The trainers underscored the point that if a farmer is using a FLC they need to make sure that the FLC is ethical. In fact, while most FLCs are above board, many of the worst abuses recorded by U.S. Department of Labor inspectors are in situations where FLCs are involved.

One farmer using the H-2A program is Eve Kaplan-Walbrecht of [Garden of Eve](#) organic farm in Riverhead New York (and also on the [OFA Governing Council](#)). This is Eve's third year employing H-2A guest workers to fill her entire production crew of six. Her goal is to have staff who will stay for the whole season, and also have people who will come back year after year. She uses an agency to help with the paperwork, but recruits the workers herself, pays for their transport, and houses them on the farm.

When discussing the criticisms of the program she pointed out, "The thing is, you can poke holes in H-2A,



but if there is no program, there is basically no way to get workers. Labor security is the number one concern and stress — so what is the alternative that people are proposing? Look at what's happening in the supermarket! More and more produce is being grown outside of the U.S. People don't patronize American growers who are being fair and paying their workers more. I want to know how many of these fair labor organizations [that are criticizing H-2A] are buying their produce at Target and Costco — because that makes me upset, and I don't think those people own that. The workers in Mexico don't have protections and are getting paid so much less, but we farmers, supposedly are the ones abusing people?"

Although she wasn't at the UC Davis labor conference, Eve echoed Dean Johnson saying, "This country has decided that it is not going to do anything about immigration policy as far as I can see, and that leaves the farmers without a lot of other options." 🌱

Judith Redmond is co-founder of Full Belly Farm in Guinda, CA and is currently developing a curriculum for farmers, ranchers and fishers who have employees and wish to offer high quality employment and work environments.



Dave Runsten is the Water Policy Director for Community Alliance of Family Farmers (CAFF) in Sacramento, CA.






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A photograph of two men standing in a cornfield. The man on the left is wearing a red and white plaid shirt and dark pants, holding a clipboard. The man on the right is wearing a red and white plaid shirt, a black hat, and dark pants, pointing towards the corn plants. The corn plants are young and green, growing in rows in a field with dark soil.

TRANSITIONAL ORGANIC TRENDS ACROSS THE U.S.

RODALE INSTITUTE ORGANIC CONSULTING TEAM

Rodale Institute's [Organic Consulting Team](#) provides nationwide support to farmers and supply chain actors as they transition to certified organic systems. Launched in 2019 with the support of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, the team of 13 consultants and support staff are located across the country. The consultants support the growth of organic agriculture by providing regionally-relevant technical assistance, translating research results into practical information, developing educational resources, and connecting communities.

WRITTEN BY

*Rodale Institute Organic Consulting
Team; introduction by Samantha
Hilborn-Nalwai and Nicholas Podoll*

The consultants are working with all types of producers from large row crop farmers to small-scale vegetable operations; livestock producers to fruit and nut orchards and everyone in between. The Consulting Program is actively supporting more than 280 farmers and farmland owners to transition their systems to organic. Combined, they represent roughly 100,000 acres in production, with approximately 18,000 acres in active transition. To date, the Consulting Program has supported 40 farmers to complete their certification.

FARMERS' NEEDS AND CHALLENGES BY REGION

Each consultant has shared their view of the needs and challenges for transitioning farmers in their region (Mountain West and Appalachia Regions are omitted due to not having enough correspondence to make a reasonable assessment).

PACIFIC REGION

The Western coastline from California to Washington has well-developed farmers' markets and CSAs that support small family farms and organic production. The most common limiting factors in this sector's growth are land access and farmer availability. Additionally, high land prices and development pressures preclude the widespread production of staples like grains and beans. High-value specialty crops are often the only option to make ends meet, even with optimal premiums for certification.

Looking inland, organic farming is more often practiced by large corporate entities. This is also common in traditional vegetable-producing valleys along the Coast, like Salinas and Ventura, California. In the case of industrial-scale organic agriculture, the motivations are often market-driven and crops from those farms may not even be available locally. Global market volatility dictates not only crop selection but also certification choices.



Figure1. Rodale Institute's Consulting Program is divided into nine regions.

SOUTHWEST REGION

Most of the work in the Southwest region has been focused on New Mexico. Most central and northern NM farms are vegetable and orchard systems under 50 acres. These farms practice organic production methods but their current markets do not demand certification. Technical assistance in this sub-region includes incorporating drought-resistant crops, season extension, and diversifying market opportunities. Southern NM farms are hundreds of acres with more overhead and include crops like pecans and chiles. These transitioning farms' main need is market assistance in achieving a steady organic premium. Lastly, cattle ranching is a large part of the Southwest culture, but lack of marketing and education surrounding organic beef certification and lack of organic processing facilities inhibit growth.

MIDWEST/NORTHERN PLAINS/CENTRAL PLAINS REGIONS

Minnesota holds most of the current transitioning farms' activity in the North Central region. Wisconsin and Iowa continue to lead the way in the Midwest, while Nebraska is the hotspot in the Central Plains. There are several long-time certified organic operations in Montana and the Dakotas mainly producing small

grains and pulses like lentils, beans and peas. There seems to be less interest in transitioning to organic in those states despite once being a stronghold of organic small grain production. Across these regions, corn and soybeans dominate the landscape as spring small grains have become less profitable. Fertility for corn and weed control in soybeans continues to be major issues in these systems, which can be answered with a combination of a more diverse rotation of small grains, cover crops, and integration of livestock. However, we need better markets for small grains and more breeding work in organic systems.

SOUTHEAST REGION

The current work in the Southeast region has a strong focus on Georgia. Many farmers are turning to organic farming as the local consumer demand for organic food increases. Georgia has an ideal climate for organic vegetables; it has a long growing season allowing for multiple harvests throughout the year. Many small-scale farmers have a long history of using traditional farming methods that are consistent with organic practices. The biggest challenges for these transitioning farmers are access to financial resources to offset the organic certification cost and marketing opportunities for their products. Technical assistance is focused on providing training and resources for these exact issues.

NORTHEAST REGION

Most of our consultants in Pennsylvania have focused on the traditional row crop rotation of corn, soy, and wheat. In addition, perennial hay and pasture systems provide a foundation for the state's dairy industry. For transitioning row crop farmers, most technical assistance work is focused on helping them to diversify their rotations with cover crops and small grains which together help suppress weeds. Rye and barley are grown to meet an increasing demand for local organic grains. Developing crop adaptability and markets (with organic premiums) for value-added small grains would strengthen our recommendations for interested organic growers.



Midwest Consultant Nicholas Podoll talks with a farmer considering organic transition.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Most of our consultants in Pennsylvania have focused on the traditional row crop rotation of corn, soy, and wheat. In addition, perennial hay and pasture systems provide a foundation for the state's dairy industry. For transitioning row crop farmers, most technical assistance work is focused on helping them to diversify their rotations with cover crops and small grains which together help suppress weeds. Rye and barley are grown to meet an increasing demand for local organic grains. Developing crop adaptability and markets (with organic premiums) for value-added small grains would strengthen our recommendations for interested organic growers. 🌱

Rodale Institute Consultancy Team. Photo Credit: Jack Dempsey.





NORTHEAST ORGANIC DAIRY PRODUCERS ALLIANCE

NODPA:
The Independent Producer Voice
for Organic Dairy Family Farms

NODPA provides education, resources, advocacy and discussion for organic dairy family farmers throughout the Northeast.

For more information about NODPA, NODPA Field Days, Odairy discussions, what's happening in Washington, and other resources available for organic dairy family farmers, visit www.NODPA.com

The Integrity of the USDA Organic Program Is in a Precarious Position

The futures of organic family farms across the country are at stake, but so is consumer trust and the integrity of the organic seal. No matter the miles between our dairies, the challenges are the same. NODPA will ensure there is consistent implementation of organic regulations to ensure a fair and level playing field for all dairies.



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NATIONAL ORGANIC STANDARDS BOARD



**SPRING
MEETING
APRIL 2023**

NOSB Spring Meeting Highlights for Organic Farmers

Written By, Harriet Behar

The National Organic Standards Board held its spring 2023 meeting both virtually and in person between April 18-27 in Atlanta, GA. As is typical for the spring meetings, there was mostly discussion on a variety of proposals and the many materials that are going through their sunset review which happens every five years for every material on the National List. There was no in-person public comment; this was taken only during the two webinars which occurred the week before the in-person meeting. Numerous farmers continued to state that the spring and fall dates of the two yearly NOSB meetings make it very difficult for them to participate, and the NOSB responded that these are the best dates for the meetings, even though it is not perfect. One farmer suggested the NOSB have two virtual “listening sessions” that would occur in between the usual fall and spring meeting times to allow for more farmer participation, and that is being considered by the National Organic Program and the NOSB. The NOSB also discussed but did not vote on bringing back in-person public comments, in addition to the virtual ones, with no consensus reached on that topic.



ORGANIC IS CLIMATE-SMART

A proposal that organic agriculture is climate-smart and should be approved for all USDA funding that might be focused on that issue, passed the NOSB. Many public commenters expressed their opinion that hydroponic production was not climate-smart and that allowing hydroponic under the organic rules damaged the organic climate-smart claim. Some NOSB members pushed back on this idea arguing that the hydroponic issue is settled and that perhaps the main reason producers did not like hydroponic was it was negatively affecting their markets. Most of the producers who expressed their concern with organic labeling of hydroponic operations were grain producers, who stated their opinions were

based on the rules requiring soil building and other aspects that are not part of hydroponic. The board discussed [KM1] [HB2] bringing back NOSB and public discussion on the various production methods used for producing perennials and annuals in field containers and greenhouses, but no decision was made to add the topic to future NOSB agendas.

CROP INSURANCE, GPS FIELD LOCATIONS, ION-EXCHANGE RESINS

There was good public input and Board discussion on aiding organic producers in obtaining appropriate crop insurance, as well as how to best use various GPS or other technologies to determine exact field locations taking into account both religious objections from the Plain Community as well as lack of satellite or cell access both domestically and internationally. In handling, the NOSB voted to allow ion exchange resins to be used in organic, without being placed on the National List.

NATIONAL LIST

CROP SUNSET: Board members discussed negative environmental issues from both newspaper and plastic mulches and covers, but it did not seem that they would be voted off in the fall. Sulfur and lime also had their own possible negative effects, but the benefits that these materials provided were seen to outweigh these problems. Liquid fish products were also discussed, especially in relation to the amount of phosphoric acid used to bring down the pH to 3.5, and in relation to using by-product only in liquid fish crop inputs to preserve native fish populations, but there was still mostly positive support to relist at the vote this fall.

LIVESTOCK SUNSET: Alcohols, aspirin, electrolytes, glycerin, lime, and mineral oil were all supported for relisting. For vaccines, the board discussed a previous NOSB recommendation to only allow GMO vaccines if

WHAT IS THE NATIONAL ORGANIC STANDARDS BOARD?

The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) is a Federal Advisory Board to the USDA National Organic Program (NOP). The NOSB was established by the 1990 law, Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA), to represent the organic community in the public-private partnership between the USDA NOP and organic community. The NOSB consists of 15 public volunteers with designated seats representing the diversity of the organic community. Four seats are reserved for organic farmers.

The NOSB has been meeting since 1992 and helped develop the framework for the National Organic Standards and National Organic Program at USDA. The NOSB considers and makes recommendations on a wide range of issues involving the production, handling, and processing of organic products. The NOSB has statutory powers over the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances.

Each NOSB member is appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture for a term of one to five years. USDA publishes a call for nominations each Spring, and newly appointed members begin service in January of the next year.

The NOSB meets twice a year at a public meeting, typically in April and October, to discuss the items on its work agenda, vote on proposals, and make recommendations to the Secretary. These meetings invite public input via submitted written and virtual oral comments. All meetings are free and open to the public, and the meetings are livestreamed on zoom.

If an NOSB proposal receives a decisive vote (2/3 majority) by Board members in favor of the proposed motion, it becomes a recommendation to the USDA Secretary and the NOP.

non-GMO vaccines were not commercially available. The NOP has this recommendation on hold, so the board only discussed whether this was feasible or not. As it stands now, all vaccines (GMO or not) are being allowed by some certifiers, and some certifiers are not allowing GMO vaccines, since the rule requires them to be on the National List, which they are not. It appears this inconsistency will continue until there is clearer guidance from the NOP.

NOSB 2023 FALL MTG: PROVIDENCE, RI

Public Comment Webinars

Tuesday, October 17 @ 12-5 pm Eastern
Thursday, October 19 @ 12-5 pm Eastern

NOSB Public Meeting in Providence, RI
October 24 - 26 from 9 am - 6 pm Eastern

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RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The long list of research priorities, given to the agricultural research community and USDA granting agencies, was improved. There was also agreement within the NOSB to continue working on the "To Be Determined" list of excluded methods, which has been on the work agenda of the NOSB for many years. The fall NOSB in-person meeting will be held in Rhode Island from Tuesday, October 24-Thursday October 26, with two virtual public comment sessions on Tuesday, October 17 and Thursday, October 19. Typically, signups for public comment fill up fast and the announcement for the signup is about 7-8 weeks before the virtual comment dates. You can testify from the field using your smart phone! 📱

Harriet Behar runs organic Sweet Springs Farm in Gays Mills, Wisconsin. She serves on the OFA Governing Council and Policy Committee and has served as the Chair of the NOSB.



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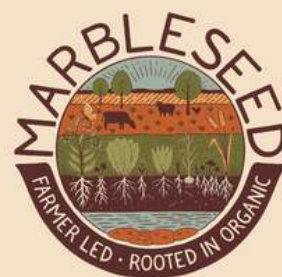
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OFA 2023 Policy Positions



Each year, Organic Farmers Association solicits input on policy priorities and policy positions from all U.S. certified organic farmers and organic farm organizations.

The OFA Policy Committee reviews the results and OFA members make comments on the drafted policies. OFA farm members vote on these policy positions.

For a position to become adopted, it must have 60% of the popular national vote and 60% popular support in at least two-thirds of the six regions. Each year, newly adopted policies become part of the Organic Farmers Association Policy Platform.

All 2023 proposed policies achieved necessary votes for adoption into our policy platform.

OFA Policy Process

How OFA annual policies are made.



**ORGANIC FARMERS
ASSOCIATION**



**19,500+ ORGANIC
FARMERS INVITED
TO PARTICIPATE**

U.S. organic farmers & organic farm organizations submit policy priorities & proposals



Policy Committee reviews & refines policy position proposals



All OFA Members edit & comment on proposed policies



Policies are added to OFA Policy Platform

60% National vote & 2/3 of regional votes at 60% is needed to pass



OFA Organic Farmer Members vote on policies



Policy Committee finalizes edits

Governing Council approves

2023 New Policies

The 2023 New OFA Policies were passed in late May after a 30-day ballot period open to OFA certified organic farm members. These policies were passed by at least 60% of the popular national vote AND 60% popular support from at least two-thirds of the six regions. These policies will become part of the Organic Farmers Association Policy Platform available [here](#).

ANIMAL WELFARE

OFA SUPPORTS animal welfare requirements as proposed in the Organic Livestock and Poultry Standards Rule (2022) with 0-3 year implementation and clarity around enforcement and continuous improvement. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)

BEGINNING FARMER & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

OFA SUPPORTS raising the FSA Microloan program limits to at least \$100,000 each for the operator and ownership categories of microloans. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)

OFA SUPPORTS programs and outreach that improve access to capital for small farmers pursuing or maintaining organic certification by creating and maintaining targeted, accessible federal and state grants and loans for farmers to enter long-term leases, to purchase agricultural land, to cover farm operating expenses, and to obtain operating capital for equipment, facilities, etc. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)

CORPORATE CONTROL/CONSOLIDATION

OFA SUPPORTS competitive markets and supply chains for agriculture and food products through active enforcement of antitrust laws and foreign ownership limits and policies that reduce current and future consolidation, limit mergers, redirect food and farmer subsidies toward local producers, and encourage local economic resilience through building regional food systems that support local producers, processors, and distributors and communities. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)

CROP INSURANCE

OFA SUPPORTS USDA-RMA allowing crops to be enterprised by organic, transitional or conventional practice type in a single policy. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)

ECONOMIC VIABILITY

OFA SUPPORTS the development and swift implementation of a National Organic Action Plan to build diverse and local markets, improve production techniques, increase access and availability to underserved communities, and provide financial and technical support to increase domestic production of all organic agricultural products. A National Organic Action Plan will facilitate production growth in conjunction with increased market opportunities emphasizing the holistic benefits of organic agriculture. We support states developing and implementing the same process. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)



NATURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS) PROGRAMS

OFA SUPPORTS updating organic practices included in the NRCS EQIP Organic Initiative and Urban Agriculture Program to provide for the unique activities and diversity typically found in organic production. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)

ORGANIC CERTIFICATION COST SHARE

OFA SUPPORTS expansion of the Organic Certification Cost Share program to cover certification fees for small farms as certification fees have proven to be a barrier to program entry and have caused small farms to leave organic certification. The program should expand to a minimum of \$1500 per scope with 100% reimbursement. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)

ORGANIC INTEGRITY

OFA SUPPORTS increased NOP funding to strengthen enforcement activities through a consumer and producer complaint hotline, and market surveillance to verify correct use of the organic label at physical and internet retail locations. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)

OFA SUPPORTS USDA NOP guidance and training to certifiers to implement new organic rules, as well as a granting program to fund certifier implementation costs. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)

OFA SUPPORTS requiring USDA's National Organic Program (NOP) to periodically review and update organic practice standards (beyond the National List of allowed and prohibited materials) to ensure continuous improvement in organic standards. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)

OFA SUPPORTS consistent enforcement of a minimum standard for diversity in annual crop systems. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)

ORGANIC RESEARCH

OFA SUPPORTS increased USDA research on how organic systems provide long-term mitigation and adaptation to climate change. (Adopted by the farmer membership 2023.)





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\$15

☐

\$20

☐

\$25

☐

\$30

☐

Other\$

click to
JOIN
ONLINE

PAYMENT

MEMBERSHIP

DONATION

TOTAL

MAIL TO: Organic Farmers Association
PO BOX 709
Spirit Lake, IA 51360

☐

CREDIT CARD

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CHECK ENCLOSED (Payable to: Organic Farmers Association)

CC#:

Exp:

/

CVV#:

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