

# The Organic Voice

Organic Farmers Association – No 12 • March 2024

## How Farmers Get Involved in Shaping Ag Policy

*What can farmer advocacy really accomplish?*

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## The Making of a Marker Bill

*Why and how OFA led the way to create a marker bill to support organic dairy.*

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## NRCS Offering New Practice for Transitioning Land to Organic

*How to apply, when, and resources to help with the process.*

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**For ORGANIC FARMERS. By ORGANIC FARMERS.**

*Providing a strong and unified national voice for domestic certified organic producers.*



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## **OFA MEMBER PRIORITIES**

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- Organic Integrity & NOP Enforcement
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# From Our President

**Happy spring everyone,** although it doesn't look or feel much like spring outside my office window here in coastal Maine. The sun is out but there's snow on the ground and with the wind chill it feels like 22 degrees. We have a few things overwintering in our plastic greenhouse and now that we're past February things will start growing again. There's nothing like winter-grown spinach for its sweet flavor and crispy taste!

While it's nice to have some fresh greens in the winter months and stored meat and veggies in the freezer, we do purchase much of what we eat at various stores. I say "we purchase" but I should probably say my wife purchases since she's the major organizer of our cooking and food purchasing, which isn't always her favorite activity because she has many other things she'd rather do.

One other thing my wife has to put up with is listening to me complain about various rules, regulations, and laws that govern our food system, particularly in regard to organic regulations that I disagree with or would like to see changed. Things like the deceptive practice of labeling hydroponic vegetables as organic, or allowing large animal confinement operations to call their meat, milk, or eggs to be labeled as organic, just to name a few obvious ones.

The other day while my wife and I were conversing after another great meal, she brought up her observation that the food bloggers and YouTubers that she follows all recommend purchasing organic as much as possible. Now these aren't farming advocates necessarily, they're cooks, bakers, yogurt makers, or juice makers who use a variety of ingredients and methods to make some pretty amazing foods to share with their families and others who are interested in home preparation.

These folks know good food, they know the importance of the best ingredients and they're concerned about providing healthy foods to their families. And it isn't just the folks on social media, the majority of our friends will choose the organic option when it's available.

Most of these folks know that words like natural or regenerative have no official meaning, nor do they have a certification process to affirm that the products are what they claim to be, unlike organic. Not everyone has the ability to go to a farm stand or a farmers market and look the farmer in the eye and ask how the food they're presenting was grown.

Those of us in the organic food system may know the "inside story" of the challenges with the organic label and may be frustrated by the lack of response from the USDA and National Organic Program regarding those challenges. But as my wife points out to me, the demand is there, the interest is growing and that it's incumbent upon all of us fighting for an honest and healthy food system to continue to fight for the organic label. Without it, where will people turn for foods they can trust?

As I write today, I'm finishing up my final term as OFA President and a member of the OFA Governing Council. It's been a very rewarding six years and I've met some very inspiring people at OFA, I'm going to miss it. Thank you to everyone who has supported OFA, either with a financial contribution or by offering time to engage with our work in the fight for organic.

We're only just getting started!



Sincerely,  
David Colson, Outgoing President

*David Colson*

New Leaf Farm  
Durham, Maine



GROWING THE ORGANIC  
MOVEMENT THROUGH  
RIGOROUS RESEARCH,  
FARMER TRAINING, AND  
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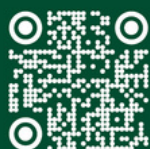
# WE SUPPORT ORGANIC FARMERS

*(and aspiring organic farmers!)*

AS WE WORK TOGETHER TO  
HEAL PEOPLE AND THE PLANET.

## RESOURCES FOR FARMERS

- Consulting for farmers available nationwide  
(free in some states!)  
[RodaleInstitute.org/Consulting](https://RodaleInstitute.org/Consulting)
- Digital webinars, online courses, and other  
educational resources  
[RodaleInstitute.org/Education](https://RodaleInstitute.org/Education)
- Scientific research on organic agriculture  
[RodaleInstitute.org/Science](https://RodaleInstitute.org/Science)



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is organic.*

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**TOGETHER, WE MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE**



Let's stay connected



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# Appropriations Delays Continue Plus Other Organic Policy News & Updates

*By Lily Hawkins*

## APPROPRIATIONS DELAYS

Last fall, Congress passed a resolution to extend a short-term government funding patch through the new year, and to extend the Farm Bill until September of 2024. The Farm Bill extension includes funding for all programs, including organic certification cost-share and other programs that were at risk due to a lack of baseline funding. So your 2024 certification cost-share should continue seamlessly this fall!

Lawmakers are still working to pass 2024 funding bills (the federal fiscal year 2024 started October 1, 2023). After first giving themselves an extension until January 18 to pass the bill that contains funding for USDA programs, they have continued to push the deadline through early March. OFA is monitoring the process and watching for any unfriendly riders or amendments.

Meanwhile, Congress is beginning work on funding bills for fiscal year 2025 (starts October 1, 2024), and members of the House and Senate are looking for feedback on which programs they should prioritize for funding. Organic Farmers Association is working with allies to advocate for funding for the National Organic Program and other programs of importance to the organic sector.

## FARM BILL TIMELINE UNCERTAIN

Congress's extension of the 2018 Farm Bill until September of 2024 still stands. House Agriculture Chair G.T. Thompson has indicated that he aims to pass a Farm Bill in the springtime, citing March as the first window when this could be possible, but with the delays in the appropriations process that will be more challenging than ever.



OFA's Annual Farmer Fly-In is happening right now (March 4-7) in Washington D.C.!

## NEW MARKER BILLS ENDORSED BY OFA

The delay in writing a new Farm Bill means that marker bills are still being introduced and there is still opportunity for farmers to advocate for their needs.

**Bookmark our Farm Bill Marker Bill Tracker to stay up to date.**

OFA is proud to endorse two new marker bills that were recently introduced.

## WEATHER Act

The Withstanding Extreme Agricultural Threats by Harvesting Economic Resilience (WEATHER) Act, legislation that calls for the development of an index-based insurance policy that is more responsive to crop and income losses faced by farmers as a result of extreme weather. The bill was introduced by Senators Peter Welch (D-VT) Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Ed Markey (D-MA), and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA)

The legislation would direct the USDA to research the possibility of developing an index-based insurance program that:

Creates a multi-peril index insurance product for farmers based on weather indices correlated to agricultural income losses using data from NOAA, satellites, climate models, and other data sources. Pays out within 30 days in the event of indices exceeding any of the pre-determined county-level thresholds for the following events: High winds, excessive moisture and flooding, extreme heat, abnormal freeze conditions, hail, wildfires, drought, and other perils the Secretary determines appropriate.

**Read more about the WEATHER Act and the full text of the bill here.**

## ORGANIC DAIRY DATA COLLECTION ACT

Congresswoman Chellie Pingree (D-ME) and Congressman Marc Molinaro (R-NY) have introduced bipartisan legislation to support organic dairy farmers across the country. The Organic Dairy Data Collection Act would enhance data collection at the USDA to better understand the costs associated with producing organic milk. Specifically, the bill: Directs USDA to collect and publish cost-of-production data for organic milk, including the costs of major organic feedstuffs, domestically produced or imported.

Directs USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) to gather and report monthly data about the amounts that organic dairy farmers are being paid for organic milk.

Directs USDA NASS, the Economic Research Service (ERS) or Agricultural Research Service (ARS) to publish reports on the cost of production data by state, regional data on the quantity of organic milk production and prices.

**Read more about the Organic Dairy Data Collection Act and read the full text of the bill here.**



# Farm Bill Marker Bill Tracker

Watch OFA's Farm Bill Marker Bill Tracker to keep track of marker bills that may impact organic farming in the next Farm Bill. Check the OFA website regularly for updates as Farm Bill conversations continue in D.C.

**Get the Tracker >**

## ORGANIC MARKET DEVELOPMENT GRANTS AWARDED

The Organic Market Development Grant (OMDG) program supports the development of new and expanded organic markets to help increase the consumption of domestic organic agricultural commodities. The program focuses on building and expanding capacity for certified organic production, aggregation, processing, manufacturing, storing, transporting, wholesaling, distribution, and development of consumer markets.

The OMDG Program offers a 24-month Simplified Equipment-Only Grant with funding up to \$100,000, which is a great option for farmers, and a 3-year Market Development and Processing Capacity Expansion Grant with funding up to \$3 million, targeted to organizations and farmer cooperatives.

The first round of Market Development and Processing Capacity Expansion Grants was recently announced. There are many good projects in this first round and you can [read the full list of grantees online](#).

Applications have closed for 2023, but [Senator Tammy Baldwin \(D-WI\)](#) and [Congresswoman Ann Kuster \(D-NH\)](#) are working to codify this program through the Organic Market Development Act (S. 2936, H.R. 5763).

## ORGANIC FARMERS VISIT WASHINGTON D.C.

From March 5-7, members of OFA's Policy Committee and Governance Committee will travel to Washington D.C. to advocate for our Farm Bill priorities and the marker bills that will help achieve them.


On March 5, 36 organic farmers and representatives of organic farm organizations will visit Capitol Hill to educate members of Congress about the challenges organic farmers face and the policy solutions that will strengthen the National Organic Program and support organic farmers.

These policy solutions were identified and prioritized by farmers and include:

- Organic Integrity
- Assistance for Organic Dairy Farmers
- Organic Research
- Making USDA Programs work for Organic Farmers
- Climate & Conservation
- Increasing Organic Infrastructure
- Working with Allies to Build a Better Food System

## MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

This is a great time of year to reach out to your U.S. Senators and Representative and introduce yourself, especially if they are a member of the House Agriculture Committee or Senate Agriculture Committee. You can call the Capitol Switchboard (202-224-3121) to be directed to the correct office. Ask to speak to the Agricultural Legislative Aid and tell them about yourself and your farm.

Ask your elected official to support organic agriculture in the upcoming Farm Bill by mentioning OFA's Farm Bill priorities or mentioning any of the marker bills that matter most to you and your farm. 

**You can also take action by taking part in our online Farm Bill Action Alert and sharing it with your circle of family and friends.**

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



# Introducing OFA Farmer Workgroups

OFA's Farmer Workgroups are open for registration. Workgroups are a way for us to work together to identify problems, brainstorm solutions, and amplify the voices of OFA farmer members.

Our workgroups are farmer-directed and discuss challenges farmers face and identify farmer-led solutions, and together we will take solutions directly to our changemakers.

Learn more about these upcoming workgroups:

## Crop Insurance Workgroup

Make crop insurance work better for organic and transitioning farmers! This workgroup typically meets for one-hour, monthly.

## NOSB Workgroup

The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) meets spring and fall each year to discuss topics and materials of importance to the organic community.

Do you have ideas you want to share? Join our Workgroup and sign up to share a public comment at the next NOSB meeting! We would be happy to help you prepare.

OFA's NOSB Workgroup is a short-term, targeted work group that will meet ahead of the NOSB meeting to form comments for the board and prepare to share comments.

## Workgroup Recommendation

Is there an issue we need to be working on? [Please contact Farmer Services Director, Julia Barton](#) with your thoughts and ideas—we may be able to get a group going!

[Register for a Workgroup](#)

## Spring NOSB Meeting in Milwaukee

The spring NOSB meeting will be held in Milwaukee Wisconsin, with limited in-person public comment and prioritizing local farmers. The meeting will also include public comment via two webinars the week prior. Farmers who are interested in attending can apply for travel scholarship funds from the National Organic Coalition.

### NOSB Spring 2024 Meeting dates:

#### Public Comment Webinars

**Day 1:** Tue., April 23, 11am-5pm ET

**Day 2:** Thurs., April 25, 11am-5pm ET

#### Public Meeting

**Day 1:** Mon., April 29, 9am-6pm CT (limited in-person testimony)

**Day 2:** Tue., April 30, 9am-6pm CT

**Day 3:** Wed., May 1, 9am-6pm CT

The full meeting materials and the link to register to provide oral comment should be posted in early March.

Be sure to sign up promptly as the number of speakers is limited. If you are interested in participating you can reach out to OFA Policy Director Lily Hawkins at [lily@organicfarmersassociation.org](mailto:lily@organicfarmersassociation.org) or OFA Farmer Services Director Julia Barton at [julia@organicfarmersassociation.org](mailto:julia@organicfarmersassociation.org).

If you have ideas you want to share with the NOSB this spring, **join OFA's NOSB Workgroup**. We can help you prepare your remarks and sign up to share a public comment. (See left column for more info)



# HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

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Tracey Mann (KS-01), R

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Michigan  
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Brad Finstad (MC-01), R

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New Mexico  
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New York  
Nick Langworthy (NY-23), R  
Marc Molinaro (NY-19), R

North Carolina  
Alma Adams (NC-12), D  
Don Davis (NC-01), D  
David Rouzer (NC-07), R

Ohio  
Shontel Brown (OH-11), D  
Max Miller (OH-07), R

Oklahoma  
Frank Lucas (OK-03), R

Oregon  
Lori Chavez-Deremer (OR-05), R  
Andrea Salinas (OR-06), D

South Dakota  
Dusty Johnson (SD-At Large), R

Tennessee  
Scott Desjarlais (TN-04), R  
John Rose (TN-06), R

Texas  
Greg Casar (TX-35), D  
Jasmine Crockett (TX-30), D  
Monica De La Cruz (TX-15), R  
Ronny Jackson (TX-13), R

Virginia  
Abigail Spanberger (VA-07), D

Wisconsin  
Derrick Van Orden (WI-03), R

Washington  
Marie Gluesenkamp Perez (WA-03), D



UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON  
**AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION,  
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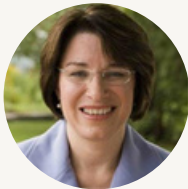
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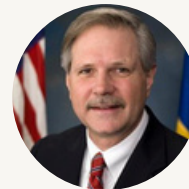
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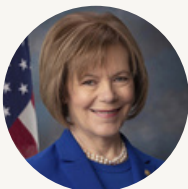
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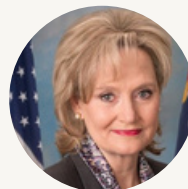
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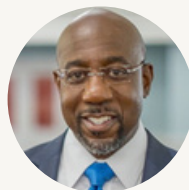
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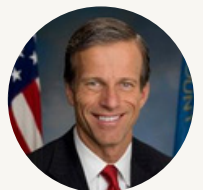
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**John Fetterman**  
Pennsylvania




**Deb Fischer**  
Nebraska

FEATURED STORY

# How Farmers Get Involved in Shaping Ag Policy

*By Harriet Behar*





As citizens of a democracy, those who run our government seek to be responsive to their constituents that vote them into office. These elected government officials write the laws and appropriate funds, which steer the direction of all policies, at the federal, state and local levels.

The effect these policies have on how a farmer runs their operation, as well as whether or not it is economically viable, encourages farmers to get involved to advocate for change and improvement.

But what can farmer advocacy really accomplish?

## A VERY PRODUCTIVE BUNCH

In the Great Plains, organic agriculture has not taken as deep a hold as it has in other areas of the country. Organic producers do not find knowledgeable or helpful personnel in many of their USDA offices, from the Risk Management Agency for crop insurance, the Farm Service Agency for loans and Organic Certification Cost Share, or the Natural Resources Conservation Service for funding the implementation of conservation practices on their organic lands.

In addition, there are state legislatures and county boards who have tried, and sometimes succeeded, to put laws or regulations in place that confuse consumers on how their food is produced, and make it difficult for family scale farmers to have fair access to the marketplace.

Farmers are a small portion of the population, but we are a very productive bunch. Taking the time away from running the farm to make your voice heard, may seem like a waste of time. Why would any politician want to hear from a single farmer? But experience tells us, this attitude is far from the truth. Since so few people are actively paying attention to their legislators' activities, a phone call, email, handwritten letter or speaking at an in-district meeting with your elected official has a significant impact. Joining an agricultural organization, like the Organic Farmers Association, and helping to identify issues and develop solutions is an achievable and impactful effort!



## KEVIN FULTON

Kevin Fulton of Nebraska ran a successful grass-fed beef operation on his 2,000+ acres in the early 2000s. The Country of Origin Labeling law, requiring consumers to know what country their meat was raised and processed, helped his operation grow and thrive. In 2016, under pressure from the World Trade Organization, Congress withdrew the COOL law as it applied to beef and pork products. This loss of transparency resulted in cheaper beef from other countries, being labeled as USDA, with unclear requirements for the “grass-fed” label, taking away Kevin’s premium market in a very short time. Kevin then moved to growing organic crops on much of his former pasture land.



Kevin gave public testimony to his state legislature against a proposed “right to farm” law that promoted industrial animal agriculture and trampled on the rights of all rural residents. He also fought a proposed “gag law” that would have made it impossible to whistle blow on animal abuse, especially on the large industrial farms. There was a lot of emotion around this issue, with many farmers joining together to speak against it. Other activists taught him it is important to speak out, be fearless and stand up for what you know is right. By making alliances with humane organizations as well as consumer groups, everyone’s understanding of humane treatment of animals was enhanced and many more folks joined the cause.

***When the opposition stated that gestation crates are beneficial because they keep the sows from crushing the piglets, he calmly pointed out that there are no piglets present when the sow is gestating. This simple truth helped to defeat that gag rule.***

Kevin is an active member of the Organic Farmers Association, and has found that a deeper understanding of government programs has helped him navigate government bureaucracy to have it work better for his operation. He enjoys working with other farmers, consumers and businesses to improve the climate for organic agriculture, as well as improve opportunities for others in his greater community.

Kevin is a Transition to Organic Partnership Program organic mentor, helping a young farmer transition and become the second organic farmer in his county. He recommends you “bring your farm” to those in power, with photos and personal stories. These types of discussions stick with them rather than just short talking points and build relationships by sharing who you are and why you care.



## MIKE APPEL & EMILY OAKLEY

Mike Appel and Emily Oakley of Oklahoma, have worked within their local community, helping to expand access to fresh vegetables through their farmers market and the SNAP program. Their house representative was the chair of the agriculture committee during the last farm bill, and they were able to join with others and expand this food access program nationwide through their relationship with this powerful legislator.

Their interactions with the National Young Farmers Coalition showed them they were not alone, even though their fresh organic vegetable operation is very different from other farms in their region. By working with their local NRCS office, the scoring of applications was modified to be more friendly to organic practices.

Emily spent five years on the National Organic Standards Board, championing the voice of family-scale farmers. Sharing her own experiences, as well as others', she impacted numerous decisions on the NOSB. Emily and Mike are now working to address a proliferation of CAFO poultry houses in their area and the negative impacts on ground and surface waters.

***“Don’t try to save the world, or change the USDA wholesale, instead focus on making sure the small-scale farmer voice is heard,” Mike shared.***

Making noise through meetings with state and local officials, phone calls and letters, they feel their voice is greatly amplified rather than just voting periodically. Local newspapers and television stations are always looking for stories. Are you growing a unique crop or managing livestock in a unique way? This positive publicity for your farm will be noticed by your legislators, and is another way to amplify your voice. Bring in consumers too, and educate them so they can also advocate when needed. Organic consumers feel deeply about organic integrity. Mike noted, **“Not enough genuine farmers attend policy meetings, and when they do, they can sway the conversation.”**

## LINLEY DIXON

Linley Dixon of Colorado also got involved with policy work after feeling isolated as the only organic farmer in her area. By talking with others, she gained a much better understanding of organic production methods and how at times, agricultural policy can either make it easier on the farm and marketplace, or cause problems. "You don't farm in a vacuum; policies affect the long-term economics [of farming]."



Linley has worked with the Real Organic Project for years and has seen how important bringing specific concrete examples of the problems is to bring change to how the organic regulations are interpreted. She is working now to build community, as a way to build positive change.


Bringing a louder voice, with more focus on defining the solution, makes it harder to be ignored. Keep your discussion to things you really know. Building relationships with individuals and organizations who share your values is an added benefit when advocating for policy change. "It is important to educate legislators, their staff and USDA agency people," Linley shared, "you never know when it will pay off."

## ADVOCACY IN ACTION

This month, OFA members from across the nation are visiting their representatives in Washington, D.C. to lift the voices of organic farmers. **There are many ways to get involved: Farmer Circles, Farmer Workgroups, leadership committees, and more.**

Take the first steps today and join as an OFA Member.

Please get in touch if you'd like to connect on the issues that matter to you! The organic community and market is one built from the grassroots up, and your voice is important to keep it evolving with farmers' interests and needs at its core.

Call us at 833-724-3834, or email us at [helpline@organicfarmersassociation.org](mailto:helpline@organicfarmersassociation.org) and we'll get you connected. 



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

# CALL OFA'S FARMER HELPLINE

Call the OFA Farmer HelpLine to speak with our Farmer Services Team for support on organic practices, organic transition, and overcoming barriers to organic certification.

**HELPLINE:  
(833) 724-3834**



# Help OFA Grow

## OFA MEMBERSHIP



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FEATURED STORY

# The Making of a Marker Bill

*By Lily Hawkins*

## ORGANIC DAIRY FARMERS ARE STRUGGLING

Organic dairy farms anchor rural communities, and transitioning to organic has been a way for family dairy farms to earn more for their product while protecting the health of their land and communities. As you might expect, organic dairy farmers are held to ecological management standards and these can increase the cost of production.

For example, organic management requires that organic dairy cows spend a minimum number of days grazing on pasture (and must exceed the minimum in many states), they must consume at least 30% of their dry matter intake from pasture, organic feed is required and is much more expensive, and organic dairy management typically requires more labor to move cows through rotational grazing systems. Conventional farmers are not held to these same regulations and it is common for conventional dairies to give cows growth hormones to enhance milk production.

*The two systems are quite different, are held to different standards, and create different costs of production.*

Over the past 15 years, large facilities have taken advantage of loopholes in the national organic standards' origin of livestock and pasture rule regulations. This lack of clarity in the rule and a lack of regulatory enforcement allowed cows to be kept in factory farm conditions. Many of these large "organic" factory farms fed organic inputs but failed to transition animals properly to the herd and failed to provide them adequate access to pasture and dry-matter intake. These facilities use economies of scale to outcompete smaller organic dairy producers who are scrupulous in their adherence to compliance of the organic standards.

Increasing market consolidation has also created a burden for family-scale organic dairy farmers, reducing the number of buyers and processing facilities. In many regions of the country organic dairy producers may only have one buyer to choose from, and they usually have to transport their milk farther than conventional dairy producers to reach a processing facility. The cost of transportation is expensive and is commonly passed to the farmer.

In recent years, weather disruptions and unstable international trade have created spikes in organic input costs, further eroding profits for organic dairy farmers. Because of these difficult circumstances and related fluctuations in organic feed prices over the past many years, the cost of producing organic milk has consistently exceeded the organic pay price farmers receive for their product.

## SUPPORT IS NEEDED TO KEEP FAMILY FARMS IN BUSINESS

The dairy market is complex; partly due to the fact that cows must be milked everyday and milk is highly perishable. This leaves farmers unable to easily adjust their production or to store their product until they can get a better price. As a result, dairy is subject to some of the most complicated federal price regulations of any commodity. However, nearly all of the price guarantee regulations and safety net programs designed to stabilize the U.S. dairy market are designed for the conventional dairy industry and rely on data from conventional dairy farms, feed, and processors to determine the design of programs and the amount of financial payouts through relief programs.

Organic dairy farmers sometimes benefit from these programs designed for conventional dairy. At other times, they are left without the support provided to conventional dairy. And sometimes, the data used to activate conventional dairy support programs is directly opposed to the data organic dairy farmers are experiencing because they operate in different industry markets.

Even when programs are designed to provide assistance to organic producers, such as the 2023 Organic Dairy Marketing Assistance Program (ODMAP), the USDA has been forced to rely on conventional dairy data when designing the program. This caused the program design to be based on estimated marketing costs that are far lower than what organic producers are actually spending and, as a result, the relief package failed to meet the needs of organic dairy farmers. More had to be done, and organic farmers had to lead the way.



## FARMERS WORK TO CHANGE POLICY

Starting in 2022, Organic Farmers Association convened a working group of organic dairy producers to identify what policy changes could help organic dairy farmers stay in business. Because organic dairy farming looks different in different regions of the country, we were intentional in building a group with producers and producer-groups from all major organic dairy producing regions of the country. From the Northeast, where farms and herd sizes tend to be smaller and where many farmers recently lost contracts with Horizon, to the Midwest, where farmers rely more on domestically produced feed and are more likely to produce milk that will be processed into products like cheese and sour cream, to the West Coast, where farm and herd sizes can be much larger but have less access to organic feed and hay and have suffered from years of drought which minimized the pasture production.

Through weekly meetings, the farmer group identified four major needs for the industry:

- Immediate relief
- A functioning safety net
- Better organic data collection
- Improved infrastructure for organic dairy

The group then worked on a policy proposal that suggested solutions to each of the identified problems.

Organic dairy working group members then took their ideas to members of congress during OFA's annual farmer fly-in in March of 2023 and through virtual meetings with their legislators.

In spring of 2023, Senator Welch of Vermont agreed to work with the OFA organic dairy farmer working group on a marker bill encompassing their proposal. Welch's office respected the expertise provided by the dairy producers, taking time to listen to feedback and incorporate it into their legislative language.

After extensive work crafting and editing the proposed legislative language, the bill was shared with major stakeholders in organic dairy from outside the working group. Some changes were made to ensure that they were comfortable with the contents of the bill, while still keeping the language as close as possible to farmers' original proposals. In September of 2023, the Organic Dairy Investment Reporting and Yields Act (ODAIRY Act, S. 3097) was introduced in the U.S. Senate. The ODAIRY Act will improve data collection for organic dairy, require USDA to conduct a study on what a functional safety-net program for organic dairy farmers would look like, and provide investments in regional organic dairy infrastructure.

In the House, bipartisan support for marker bills is especially important due to the slim majority currently held by Republicans. Representatives Pingree (D-ME) and Molinaro (R-NY) have cosponsored the Organic Dairy Data Collection Act (H.R. 6937), which will provide improved data collection to better understand and address the challenges organic dairies face by requiring the USDA to collect and publish cost-of-production data for organic milk, including the costs of major organic feedstuffs (both domestic and imported), to gather and report monthly data on the organic dairy farmer pay price, and to publish reports on the cost of production and data on the quantity of organic milk production and prices.

Now farmers, OFA staff, and groups that support organic dairy producers are working to gain support for these two crucial marker bills, to ensure their inclusion in the final version of the farm bill. The working group members have been hard at work scheduling meetings online with members of congress, writing emails, and making phone calls to representatives. OFA will also prioritize these bills during the farmer visits to Capitol Hill in March. 🌱

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



## TAKE ACTION

If you would like to get involved, call your Senators and Representative and ask them to support these bills. You can **call the Capitol Switchboard at (202-224-3121)** to be directed to the correct office. Ask to speak to the Agricultural Legislative Aid.

### Suggested Script for Senate:

*Organic dairy producers are in crisis, and support is urgently needed to help farmers stay in business. Will you please support the Organic Dairy Investment Reporting and Yields Act (ODAIRY Act, S. 3097) to improve data collection for organic dairy, require USDA to conduct a study on what a functional safety-net program for organic dairy farmers would look like, and provide investments in regional organic dairy infrastructure?*

### Suggested Script for House:

*Organic dairy producers are in crisis, and support is urgently needed to help farmers stay in business. Will you please support the Organic Dairy Data Collection Act (H.R. 6937), which will provide improved data collection to better understand and address the challenges organic dairies face by requiring the USDA to collect and publish better data for organic milk?*

*Feel free to add details about why support for organic dairy farms matters to you!*

**Find contact info for your legislators here.**

If you would like to share who you contacted and the response you received, please email [Lily@OrganicFarmersAssociation.org](mailto:Lily@OrganicFarmersAssociation.org).

**Learn more about the ODAIRY Act by downloading OFA's issue factsheet.**



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# WELCOME NEW OFA LEADERSHIP!

We are pleased to announce the newly elected members of OFA's Policy Committee and Governing Council! The Governing Council serves as the governing body of OFA, and the Policy Committee directs the policy process. Each region is represented by two certified organic farmers and one regional organic farm organization. Members are elected by OFA farm-members and serve 2-year terms, with the newest cohort serving March 2024-March 2026.

## Governing Council

**California Farmer Seat: Sara Tashker**  
Green Gulch Farm, Muir Beach, CA

**California Organization Seat: Rebekah Weber**  
Policy Director, California Certified Organic Farmers,  
Santa Cruz, CA

**Midwest Farmer Seat: Dave Campbell**  
Lily Lake Organic Farm, Maple Park, IL

**Midwest Organization Seat: Jacquelyn Evers**  
The Land Connection, Champaign, IL

**North Central Farmer Seat: Bob Keatley**  
Arrow Dale Farm, River Falls, WI

**West Farmer Seat: Pryor Garnett**  
Garnetts Red Prairie Farm, Sheridan, OR

**South Farmer Seat: Jesse Buie**  
Ole Brook Organics, Inc, Brookhaven, MS

**South Organization Seat: Brooke Gentile**  
Organic Association of Kentucky,  
Executive Director, KY

**Northeast Farmer Seat: Doug Murphy**  
Murphy's Grass Farm, Sherman, NY

## Policy Committee

**California Farmer Seat: Zach Cahill**  
Cahill Organic Dairy, Ferndale, CA

**California Organization Seat: Grace Perry,**  
Community Alliance with Family Farmers,  
Program Manager, Sonoma, CA

**Midwest Farmer Seat: Harold Wilken**  
Janie's Farm, Danforth, IL

**North Central Farmer Seat: Andrew Olson**  
Prime Pastures Organic Dairy, Lewiston, MN

**North Central Organization Seat: Roz Lehman**  
Iowa Organic Association, Executive Director,  
Des Moines, IA

**West Farmer Seat: Linley Dixon**  
Adobe House Farm, Durango, CO  
American Samoa U.S. Virgin Islands

**South Farmer Seat: Michael Appel**  
Three Springs Farm, Oaks, OK

**Northeast Farmer Seat: Doug Murphy**  
Murphy's Grass Farm, Sherman, NY

**Northeast Organization Seat: Maddie Kempner**  
NOFA-VT, Membership & Advocacy Coordinator,  
Richmond, VT

# INTRODUCING OFA FARMER CIRCLES

## WHAT'S A FARMER CIRCLE?

Organic Farmers Association believes that community is at the heart of any movement. Farmer Circles are intentional, intimate spaces of collective care where farmers come together to find connection, support, and inspiration. These meetings will not be recorded in recognition of the need for protected space.

In many regions of the country, organic farmers can be quite isolated. Without a local community of organic farmers, farmers may feel very alone in their agricultural experience and faced with added pressures of pesticide drift, lack of organic processors, changing markets, pest and disease pressures, discrimination, etc., the Farmer Circles offer a place to build a supportive community for what farmers need on a regular basis.

We call these convenings Circles as symbolic representation of the relationships we aim to establish and maintain. Circles provide a non-hierarchical format, allowing participants to share equally in the conversation.

Farmer Circles meet via Zoom on a monthly basis and are facilitated by farmers who identify with that Circle. Participation is open to all farmers who are organic curious, in transition, and already certified. OFA membership is not required to participate.

Currently, there are 6 Farmer Circles:

- ① The Collective Circle
- ② The Black Farmer Circle
- ③ The Latino/Hispanic Farmer Circle
- ④ The Queer Farmer Circle
- ⑤ The Asian Farmer Circle
- ⑥ The Indigenous Farmer Circle



If a Farmer Circle is not currently offered that interests you, please email Racial Equity Project Manager Ryann Monteiro at [ryann@organicfarmersassociation.org](mailto:ryann@organicfarmersassociation.org).

[Learn more about Farmer Circles here.](#)



# Bringing Life to the Fairness Principle in Organic Agriculture

## An Introduction to the Agricultural Justice Project

*By Elizabeth Henderson*

Providing farmers with the tools they need to bring IFOAM's Organic Principle of Fairness to life on their farms is a central focus of the Agricultural Justice Project (AJP). This principle states:

***"Organic Agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.***

***Fairness is characterized by equity, respect, justice and stewardship of the shared world, both among people and in their relations to other living beings."***

AJP has spent years collecting good examples from farmers who have paid close attention to relationships with their workers, and assembled them in a toolkit for easy access. (See the end of the article for toolkit and more resources.)

While the toolkit began as a set of resources to help farms and ranches meet the AJP's Food Justice Certification standards, AJP has been expanding these resources to better help farmworkers, food chain workers, food business employers, nonprofit employers, and all buyers of farm products, regardless of whether they choose to pursue Food Justice Certification (FJC).

The toolkit includes a model employee handbook, with a guide to using it, that a farm can download and quickly adapt for use. The farmers at Foxtail Farm, in Osceola, WI, had glowing reviews for AJP's resources and reported having a much better season "with a lot more understanding and joy between everybody."

Mud Creek Farm in Victor, NY, and Little Seeds Gardens in Chatham, NY, have adapted the AJP handbook conflict resolution process for use on their own farms and train all employees in how to use it as an essential part of their worker orientation.

The toolkit also helps farmers to understand "at-will" employment so that they can commit to terminating employees only for just cause.

Farmer-educator Nancy Vail of California-based Pie Ranch (Food Justice Certified since 2013) reflects, "AJP is doing what everybody should be doing in agriculture, what organic certification should be doing...FJC helps us figure out how we set up systems so that we have fairness, transparency, and accountability at the center of our businesses. AJP works closely with farmers to get [them] up to speed."

With a lot of support from Pie Ranch and Roxbury Farm in Kinderhook, NY, AJP has created an easily adaptable guide to making a comprehensive health and safety plan and training employees in its use.

Since paying living wages is essential to being a fair employer, the toolkit includes resources to help farmers calculate the prices and revenues needed and a guide to calculating living wages for your area. To generate revenues for living wages, New York-based Roxbury Farm created a highly participatory and efficiently-run CSA with over 900 shares, delivering to 17 member-run sites in Westchester County, the capital district and NYC.

They also offer meat from Roxbury and another farm that members can order online for delivery with their share. In their words, "We have a guaranteed market for our products and we receive a fair price. This allows us to pay better wages to people working on the farm, use regenerative farming practices, raise our livestock humanely, and to share our farming knowledge with other farmers."

In 2023, Roxbury Farm achieved Food Justice Certification. In a recent CSA member newsletter, farmer Jody Bolluyt shared that, "Of all the certifications we apply for, [Food Justice Certification] is the most important. We can't grow your food without all the skilled and talented people who work on the farm."

Since farmers learn best from the success of other farmers, AJP has been collecting and analyzing farmer strategies for increasing revenues to improve the quality of the jobs on their farms. We highlight effective strategies and will be creating a series of profiles of farms with exemplary business practices, from open books management to collective bargaining to implementations of "sliding scale" pricing that push the envelope for customer relationships.

Our community relationships are fundamental for many of these strategies to succeed. Some farmers have benefited from close relationships with customers who can share access to resources, such as land or infrastructure, that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive.

Another strategy is to create options for higher income customers to pay more for farm produce. Pie Ranch invites farmstand customers to pay a voluntary "food justice tax," that helps the farm cover the additional costs of being a fair employer. Roxbury Farm invites members to contribute to a Financial Aid Fund to subsidize lower-income members. Other CSAs implement a sliding scale for share prices, allowing higher income members to subsidize others while making sure the farm earns enough to be sustainable.

Few organic farmers have experience with unions and there is a lot of apprehension among farmers that any commitment to freedom of association will "wreck" their farms. The toolkit includes some guidance to help understand the value to workers and to the farm when farmers recognize their freedom of association.

**Photo Credit: Walter Hergt, Roxbury Farm**




Jim Cochran of Swanton Berry Farm, Pescadero, CA, one of the first farms to certify with AJP, discovered that encouraging his workers to unionize had direct benefits for his farm business, "...It's really pretty amazing how detailed [the contract] is. It really is almost like having an HR department. I don't know how to explain it exactly, other than to say that it systematizes things...in a very positive way, I believe, so that the owner can't be capricious about things. And then of course the employees, by participating in the process, really feel some ownership in the process themselves...it's an important part of what we offer as a company...the culture of inclusion and decision-making, and furthermore the sense that the employees have that, that if they have issues that they will get dealt with in some formal way."

Recognizing the challenge of implementing new practices when farmers are busy with the daily demands of production, AJP offers technical assistance to farms of all sizes with free consultations for small to mid-size farms and for BIPOC-owned farms. AJP can help farms improve labor and trading practices even if they don't pursue Food Justice Certification. For farms that qualify, the AJP Social Justice Fund also covers certification expenses if they choose to seek certification.

Leah Penniman of Soul Fire Farm in Petersburg, NY (FJC since 2017) says her farm participates in FJC because they "believe that protecting the rights of workers is paramount along with protecting the earth. What I appreciate about the program is that there is an opportunity for the workers on our farm to be educated about their rights...AJP sends in an auditor to make sure we're not just paying lip service to those values but that they are actively being enacted...The cost-sharing and support for lower income and BIPOC farmers is really essential. FJC makes sure there's validity, and financial support makes it accessible."



**Photo Credit: Swanton Berry Farm**

The fair practices and policies of the FJC standards promote collaboration between employers and employees, who work together to build successful, safe, and fair workplaces and provide a fair trade framework for farmers and buyers to negotiate fair pricing and build truly sustainable farm and food businesses. Implementing policies and practices on your farm that center on fairness can happen step by step. The toolkit allows you to evaluate your existing policies, or start with a recommended policy that embodies fairness. If you would like help getting started, contact Jon Magee, APJ's Technical Assistance Coordinator, [jon@agriculturaljusticeproject.org](mailto:jon@agriculturaljusticeproject.org). 



Elizabeth Henderson farmed using organic practices at Peacework CSA, one of the first CSAs in the country and represents the NOFA Interstate Council on the Board of the Agricultural Justice Project. She often contributes to *The Natural Farmer* and is lead author of *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture* (Chelsea Green, 2007).



Find more resources below from APJ's Toolkit made for farmers, farmworkers, food chain workers, food business employers, nonprofit employers, and all buyers of farm products.

-  **Standards of Fairness**
-  **Farm Employee Handbook**
-  **At-Will vs Just Cause**
-  **Negotiation & Freedom of Association**
-  **Health & Safety Plan**
-  **Living Wages**
-  **Calculating a Living Wage**
-  **Profitability & Buyer-Seller Relationships**

## AJP Partner Resources

FJC farms qualify for **preferential vendor status for institutional food procurement** through the Good Food Purchasing Program and other values-based procurement standards. AJP partners with the national Good Food Communities campaign to shift local government procurement to support fairly-produced food and especially BIPOC producers and workers. AJP encourages farmers to connect with the GFC campaign in their region.

AJP also facilitates a **Fair Farming group** on the nonprofit social media platform Ag Solidarity Network, a project of Marbleseed, the Wisconsin-based organic farming organization. AJP encourages interested farmers and farm employees to join the ongoing conversation there by joining the platform and opting into the fair farming group.



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NOVEMBER 2023

# **From Resource to Action:** Building a Diverse Equitable, and Inclusive Community of Organic Professionals

**Project Report & Lessons Learned**



# Show OFA Your Farm Photos!

OFA is looking for photos of real farmer members and farms and supporters to feature in our 2024 Organic Voice Magazine, e-news, and membership and event materials. We know there's no better way to tell the story of organic than from the perspective of the hands, soil, and souls who do the work.

We're looking for a variety of perspectives of farms, farmers, farm families, products/crops, and supporter work—anything you think captures what it's like to be a part of or an organic farmer in the U.S. in 2024.

## How to Enter

Please upload photos to this form with a few details including the name and location of the farm. Each entry can include up to 5 photos.

**Why:** Real photos tell real stories. OFA wants to showcase our members' journey to and through organic—for better or worse. Growing this movement requires us to share our experiences and engage with one another. This is one small way to do that.

**Upload Your Photos**

*\*By submitting your photos, you agree to allow Organic Farmers Association to use your photos on our website, on social media, in print, and for any other future OFA promotion or marketing. Photo credit will be given to the photographer, farm, city, and state.*



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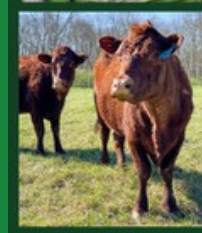
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FEATURED STORY

# NRCS Offering New Practice for Transitioning Land to Organic

*By Harriet Behar*

## NEW NRCS OFFERINGS

Cover cropping, crop rotations structured for building soil organic matter and carbon sequestration, as well as encouraging biodiversity with wildlife habitats or native prairies are all NRCS practices originally written to serve conventional systems of farming. In fact, many foundational organic activities are found within the practices cost-shared by NRCS.

While they are organic practices, the terms set forth practices designed for conventional farmers and made it difficult for organic farmers to access these government funds. Some of the terms required the use of herbicide or conventional fertilizer, others focused mostly on using less pesticides with improved spray nozzles, without any funding for ecosystem services provided by beneficials. The good news is that for over a decade, the NRCS has been making progress in their understanding of organic systems as well as improving their NRCS practices and conservation planning tools to more specifically address the needs of organic farmers, ranchers and agroforestry producers.

Current NRCS programs include cost share through the Organic Initiative under EQIP, which recognizes the higher costs of organic inputs and can provide higher payments for organic farmers. However, there is a limitation of \$140,000 for each single or multi-year Organic Initiative contract, where nonorganic farmers using the same practices have a limitation of \$450,000. Converting land to rotational grazing, which could need moveable fencing, watering systems, and non-erodible walkways can easily go over \$140,000, especially if the contract also includes stream crossings or other engineered activities. The Organic Farmers Association is working to remove the lower Organic Initiative limitation in the upcoming farm bill.

## NEW ORGANIC TRANSITION INITIATIVE

Late in 2023, the NRCS launched a new Organic Transition Initiative under EQIP, dedicating \$70 million dollars nationwide to practices (Transition to Organic Practice # 823) and planning (Conservation Planning Activity and Design #138 and #140) to aid new-to-organic farmers in the transition to organic on nonorganic land. Existing organic producers transitioning new land to organic are also eligible to apply. This initiative provides both technical assistance as well as significant financial incentives.

The conservation professionals at the NRCS are gaining knowledge of organic systems, and their help in addressing specific concerns on each farm is another bonus of this initiative. Some standard NRCS practices have a higher payment to an organic or in-transition to organic producer, recognizing the loss of income from lowered yields when the farmer and the land are adjusting to a new system. All activities performed, and inputs used, during the transition must meet all National Organic Program regulations, with the goal of achieving organic certification. The payment contract can be 1-3 years, with the yearly payments on a per acre basis. The payment cap for a multi-year contract is the same as regular EQIP, \$450,000.

This interim 823 Conservation Practice Standard (CPS) recognizes the holistic approach of organic management systems. CPS 823 provides funding for an overall plan including numerous practices that work together to promote ecosystem health. Over the next few years, the NRCS will be reviewing the implementation of CPS 823 and will be modifying it periodically so it can help many types and sizes of organic farms with their successful transition to certified organic production.



## NEW TRANSITION TO ORGANIC MANAGEMENT PRACTICE 823

The new CPS 823 includes a suite of practices, such as Conservation Cover, Conservation Crop Rotation, Cover Crops, Field Borders and Nutrient Management. Windbreaks, native prairie plantings or wildlife habitats on field edges, filter strips through fields, and strip cropping are also encouraged. High tunnels, low tunnels, silvopasture systems and forest stand improvements, irrigation, raised beds, and mulching systems help specialty crop growers improve their production quality and yields while at the same time providing conservation benefits.

For livestock producers, access areas to pastures, forage management, heavy use area protection installations (roadways, barnyards), diversions to prevent erosion and more are also encouraged to be included with this CPS 823, when needed on the farm to meet specific conservation objectives.

### HOW TO APPLY

When applying to the NRCS for any of their cost share programs under EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) or CSP (Conservation Stewardship Program), your application needs to address one or more natural resource concerns, such as soil erosion, protection of water quality of ground and surface waters through nutrient management, improvement of forages and more.

You can apply for both CPS 823 and a conservation plan activity (CPA) for the transition to organic CPA 138 under EQIP, which entails hiring an organic Technical Service Provider (TSP) with organic knowledge paid by the NRCS, or you can apply only for the CPS 823 and your county NRCS person will help you. Either way, those helping you will walk your farm and help you identify the various resource concerns. Applications are done through your county's NRCS office.

If your NRCS District Conservationist doesn't offer or understand Practice 823, have them contact their state office or Lindsay Haines ([lindsay.haines@usda.gov](mailto:lindsay.haines@usda.gov)) at the D.C. NRCS Office.

## TERMS TO KNOW: EQIP PROGRAMS FOR ORGANIC PRODUCTION & TRANSITION

**CSP 823:** For Transition to Organic Management Practice with Cost Share Payments

**CPA 138:** Funding to hire a TSP to write a transition plan

**DIA 140:** Transition to Organic Design, written by TSP

**TSP:** Technical Service Provider, hired to write Transition to Organic Conservation Plan and Design CPA #138 and DIA #140

## WHEN TO APPLY

The NRCS will take applications for any of their programs, any time of year, but there are deadline dates for “ranking” the applications. All applications are then ranked in that pool, and any applications received after that date, need to wait for the next “ranking” date. Sometimes there is only one application ranking date, and other times there are numerous per year. Each program may have its own ranking date, or all NRCS programs may all be the same day. In addition, each state determines their own ranking dates throughout the year.

### **Here is a resource to all of the application ranking dates for the various NRCS programs, state by state.**


Many states have a fall (at the beginning of the Federal Fiscal Year) and spring ranking date for these EQIP programs, but please confirm your specific program dates.

## PAYMENT SCENARIOS

CPS 823 is a comprehensive, multi-practice standard, and with that comes some complexity when determining the farmer cost share payments. There are about 20 different scenarios when working through the eligibility. If you are an “underserved producer” which includes beginning farmers (farming less than 10 years), a veteran (served in the armed forces or reserves), socially disadvantaged (American Indian, African American, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian or Hispanic), or a limited resource farmer (income level below the national poverty level for a family of four for the two previous years, or less than 50 percent of your county’s median income household income for the two previous years), your payment will be 90% of the cost determined to do the practice by the NRCS. If you do not fit into these categories, your cost-shared payment will be 75% of the cost of the practice implementation.

## PAYMENTS ADDRESSING INCOME FOREGONE AND FARM TYPES

In addition, the NRCS increases payment for crops being grown, when the Risk Management Agency has documented a drop in yield in that county for that crop. If you are growing something unusual, you may not be able to obtain that “income foregone” extra payment since the RMA has not researched that crop. Lastly, they have a variety of scenarios for small scale farms, simple crops with or without livestock, and complex crops with or without livestock. Small scale farms under five acres in size growing specialty crops have the higher payments per acre, especially when addressing multiple resource concerns and the RMA has statistics that during transition, there is a loss of income. If you have a simple crop rotation with no livestock, then your payments would be less than the small-scale specialty crop grower. The payments range between \$2,100 to \$500, \$350, or \$250 per acre. Remember when you sign up for many activities, you are contractually required to do them all, so don’t overcommit just to get a higher payment.

The current federal investment in transitioning to organic is unprecedented. For anyone who is transitioning land to organic, the CPS 823 offers a wide variety of technical assistance and funds to help lessen the financial burden to implement organic practices on the land. If you, or any of your neighbors are considering beginning or expanding organic production, now is the time to apply! We would be happy to talk through your ideas with you before you call or contact your NRCS office. In addition to the NRCS offerings, there is also targeted transition support available through the Risk Management Agency and agricultural groups across the nation. If you are considering transition and need help getting connected with these groups, please call OFA’s Farmer Helpline at 833-724-3834. 



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

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

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**OFA's Policy Committee meets in D.C. for the Farmer Fly-In prior to the 2024 Lobby Day where OFA members meet with legislators to advocate for organic agriculture policies in the next Farm Bill.**



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