

The Organic Voice

Organic Farmers Association – No. 16 • March 2025



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How organic food and farming may hold the answers to our health

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From Our President

As I write this in mid-February, it is the fifth day in office of our Secretary of Agriculture, Brooke Rollins, and the 30th day of the current U.S. presidential administration. An enormous number of changes have been made or initiated in the federal government in that short time, and many more are promised.

Long-established programs that farmers and ranchers depend on, like the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Services Administration (FSA), have seen their staffs deeply cut and entire programs ended. Tariffs have been imposed or threatened by the White House on imports, and affected countries have imposed or threatened retaliatory tariffs on U.S. exports. I can't predict what further developments will have come by the time you read these words, but am sure there will be more and of equal or greater consequence. We're living in a time of great uncertainty and momentous change – neither of which are comfortable or desirable to most people, with farmers being no exception. What's a person to do? What's a farmer to do?

Persevere. Remember that everyone—human or animal—needs to eat, and farming is essential to eating. Farming means planting and tending and harvesting as the seasons demand, without regard to the tides of politics and the fortunes of the powerful. Spring is nearly here, and we farmers know what we need to do to feed folks. Go do it, because people will always be hungry.

Have faith. Remember that organic agriculture is how humanity farmed for over 12,000 years except for only the recent few decades, and that organic practices produce nutrient rich foods that are essential for the health of humans and the health of the soil. As tariffs and federal program changes disrupt food supply chains again (remember the empty shelves during the pandemic?), focus on the importance of producing healthy, local food for the communities near you.

Have courage. Remember that change, while stressful, can be for the good, too, although it may take a while to see the good that comes from it. Until you can see that good coming toward you, be courageous and strong through the difficult times.

Act. We farmers enjoy the certainty that the actions we take to produce food are doing good for others. But now more than ever, we farmers also need to look beyond our own fields and ranges and production. Farmers need to act beyond their farms and communities at the state and national level to advocate for changes that will strengthen farms and enhance food security. Organic farmers in the United States are extremely fortunate to have their needs and interests represented by the Organic Farmers Association (OFA), which publishes this magazine you're reading. OFA—especially its incredibly capable and dedicated staff—works tirelessly to help Congress and the USDA understand the changes that organic farmers need. Your membership in OFA enables us to work for you, and if you aren't already a member I earnestly ask you to join at whatever level you can afford. If ever there was a time when organic farmers needed a national voice and advocate, that time is now.

Join.

Sincerely,



Pryor Garnett
OFA Governing Council President
Garnetts Red Prairie Farm
Sheridan, Oregon





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Spring Policy Update

Each March OFA and leadership members travel to Washington, D.C. for a Farmer Fly-In. This event is a time for OFA to take the policy priorities of all our members to decision makers and to advocate for programs that organic farmers need to succeed.

As you read this, over 30 OFA farmer and organization members from 16 states will be attending meetings with their senators, representatives, House and Senate Ag Committee staff, and USDA staff to discuss organic farm policies. As the news cycle changes (rapidly!), these meetings are even more critical so we can educate congress on why organic is important.

USDA FUNDING FREEZES AND WORKFORCE REDUCTIONS

In January, the USDA froze many critical funding streams for farmers and organic and sustainable organizations, key programs that support local, and regional food systems, as well as direct farmer services.

Since then, there has been a lot of back-and-forth with executive orders, memos, and court decisions, but the impact of the USDA grant freezes will have lasting affects. By the time you read this, it is possible things have changed, however, **we are still collecting farmer stories on how the USDA disruptions are impacting your farm business.**

OFA'S LETTER TO SECRETARY ROLLINS

On Thursday, February 20, OFA sent a letter to newly confirmed Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins welcoming her to the agency, urging her to restart paused payments to farmers and the organizations that support them, and providing a briefing on issues of top-line importance to organic farmers.

OFA asked that Rollins:

- Provide Strong Organic Integrity Enforcement to Ensure Stable Markets for U.S. Farmers:
- Provide Thorough Oversight and Accreditation of certifying agencies to ensure consistent interpretation of the organic regulations.
- Ensure existing USDA programs are functional for organic farmers

Read the full letter on OFA's website and find out how you can contact Secretary Rollins to express your concern and share your story if you have been impacted by funding disruptions.

COMING SOON

In order to better share with all our members what progress was made during the Farmer Fly-In, **we're launching a special edition of *The Organic Voice*.**

The Fly-In edition will be published in April and will share key takeaways from members' meetings, next steps and action alerts you can support, and stories from organic farmers' time on Capitol Hill. The Fly-In is only one day, but the real advocacy work and relationship building happens after they return home. Please watch your inbox in April!

TAKE ACTION!

We need your help to restore funding for the Organic Certification Cost Share Program.

The 2018 Farm Bill has been extended again until September 30, 2025. While major agricultural programs continue their operations, smaller critical initiatives like cost share were not extended.

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Members of
Congress**



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A photograph of a wooden sign for 'Ethos Farm' hanging from a rustic wooden structure. The sign is dark brown with white text and a small bird icon. Below the sign, a wooden table is filled with various fresh fruits, including blueberries, strawberries, and apples. The background shows a gravel path leading through a lush green field with trees in the distance.

Ethos Farm

Healing People and the Planet



FEATURED STORY

Food is Medicine: How Organic Farming and Healthcare Can Work Together

By Madison Letizia

Dr. Ron Weiss, MD was a newly minted doctor when he received devastating news from home. His father was diagnosed with end-stage metastatic pancreatic cancer, and had a short prognosis. Desperate to find a way to help his father, Weiss read about people who overcame their cancers by adopting a macrobiotic diet of primarily grains, vegetables, fish, seeds, and nuts. After more research, Dr. Weiss and his father tried a version of this diet where food would be the medicine—what did they have to lose?

Amazing things started to happen. Mr. Weiss felt better, went back to work, and returned to the gym. Three months later his tumor had reduced by one-third, and six months later it had shrunk by 50%. One year later, the Weisses returned to see the doctor who had diagnosed Mr. Weiss and he wanted to know, frankly, why Mr. Weiss was still alive. Even after hearing the details of the macrobiotic diet, the doctor was not convinced that diet was responsible and switched the topic back to chemo treatments. That was a defining moment for Dr. Weiss.

He had seen firsthand that food had the power to heal, and knew there was more to explore around the connection of food and medicine. So, in his own medical practice, he set out to help others discover how fresh, whole, pesticide-free foods—and how the idea of food as medicine—could help improve or reverse patients' medical ailments.

FOOD IS MEDICINE?

The concept of food as medicine is not new; Hippocrates is said to have declared, “Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food.” This was an early influence for Dr. Weiss, who became the Founder and President of [Ethos Farm to Health](#), a farm-based healthcare system in Long Valley, New Jersey. While definitions and even the names of the food as medicine concept vary, it is the idea that access to nutritious food is essential for health and well-being. The food is medicine movement on a larger scale integrates programs like produce prescriptions, whole-food diets, and medically tailored meals into the healthcare system as a way to help prevent, manage, and treat human health.

FOOD IS MEDICINE CONT.

This concept is a growing method to combat the ever-increasing healthcare crisis around the world, including the staggering number of chronic illnesses here in the U.S. According to the CDC:

- Annually, 1-in-3 deaths (944,800 Americans) are a result of heart disease or stroke
- Over 38 million Americans have diabetes and 98 million adults have prediabetes
- Obesity affects 20% of children and 42% of adults, increasing risk of chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers
- In the U.S. 1.7 million people are diagnosed with cancer, and more than 600,000 die from cancer each year
- The American Cancer Society estimates 9,620 children in the U.S. under the age of 15 to be diagnosed with cancer in 2024

However, the argument can be made that if food is truly going to be medicine, then that food has to be free of toxic inputs and grown in healthy, nutrient-rich soils in order for it to have its full nutritive and medicinal effect on human health.

IT STARTS WITH SOIL

The healing properties of food begin with nutrients in the soil. Organic agriculture is based on the principle that healthy soil leads to healthy plants, healthy animals, and healthy humans. Maybe you've heard that on average our food now has fewer nutrients overall than the fresh foods our grandparents ate. This has been attributed to how we've changed the way our food is grown and our soil managed, especially since the agricultural revolution of the 1940's where chemicals gained an outsized role in farming. These chemicals (pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, etc.) are known to reduce soil health and the soil microbiome and deplete nutrients in the soils that grow our food, which results in foods void of vitamins and minerals needed by humans to fight illness and disease.

Markers of healthy soil are the level of organic matter and the diversity of its microbial community that carries out important system tasks—many of which scientists are still trying to fully understand. If the soil ecosystem is disrupted from performing its best and supporting the growth of nutrient-dense food when subjected to agrichemicals and excessive tillage.



Alternatively, organic practices like fertilizing with compost and animal or green manures increase the diversity of soil microorganisms, which fosters a healthier and more resilient soil microbiome.

There are approximately 29 elements considered essential for human life, 18 are also essential and/or beneficial to plants. Scientists have demonstrated that soils that provide a healthy, nutrient-rich environment produce plant tissues that contain most of the elements required for human life when eaten. It's no surprise that soils managed with regenerative and organic practices would have not produced healthier plants but also higher nutritional value.

One study measured the influence of soil health on the nutrient density of food from eight pairs of conventional and regenerative/organic farms across the country and found that, “ “ regenerative farms that combined no-till, cover crops, and diverse rotations...produced crops with higher soil organic matter levels, soil health scores, and levels of certain vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals.”

A longtime guide for getting enough vitamins and minerals is “eating the rainbow;” however, it's not just the variety of food we're eating, but the way that food is grown and the quality of the soil that will deliver the most significant impact to our health.

WHY ORGANIC FOOD IS MEDICINE

Dr. Stephen Rivard, MD is a retired emergency medicine physician and co-founder of Iroquois Valley Farmland REIT, a grassroots regenerative organic farm finance company. He has been investigating the connection between our health, food, and the way our food is grown for several decades.

Over a career of caring for patients, he observed healthcare costs and cases of chronic disease skyrocket. U.S. annual healthcare costs reached \$4.5 trillion in 2024, and it's not by accident that chronic illness rose alongside it with roughly 129 million people being diagnosed with at least one chronic disease (42% of those have more than one). As Dr. Rivard saw more and more patients diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, autism, obesity, and even food allergies, he started to think he missed something in medical school. In exploring the cause of this trend, he landed on the connection between the U.S. health crisis and our food. "It never occurred to me before then that food was the source of poor health in America," he shared.

Dr. Rivard's belief that we are poisoning ourselves with our food began in 2006 when seeking treatment for his young granddaughter. When all of the typical pharmaceutical methods failed, he sought advice from a Functional Medical doctor who explained his understanding of why our highly processed, chemically treated foods cause us to be sick. It was an "Aha!" moment and started Dr. Rivard's exploration of how GMOs and the chemical inputs (especially glyphosate) used in conventional agriculture lead to our health care crisis. Monsanto, now Bayer and the producer of this herbicide, sold the idea that glyphosate was safe because it affected only the shikimate cycle in plants and is an antibiotic to bacteria. They ignored the fact that our gut microbiome and its cell lining is made up of roughly half human and half bacterial cells.

These bacteria are involved in a variety of critical roles in human health, one of which is regulating up to 85% of our immune and inflammatory response. The destruction of these bacteria leads to a chronic hyperinflammatory state and seems to be the source of the epidemic of chronic diseases in this country.

WHICH COUNTRIES USE THE MOST PESTICIDES AND HERBICIDES?

1 **Brazil: 800.65** thousand metric tons

2 **US: 467.68** thousand metric tons

3 **Indonesia: 294.67** thousand metric tons

2022: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1263069/global-pesticide-use-by-country/>

Newer research is giving evidence that these chemicals in our food and water may be far more insidiously destructive than we first imagined. Since conventional farming provides 98% of the food that we eat in the U.S., we are all exposed to these chemicals on a daily basis in our food and water. For example, the CDC tested more than 1,600 urine samples of adults in 2013/14 and found 80% had detectable levels of glyphosate.

More research is needed on the impact of agrichemicals, like glyphosate, and the impact of organic food on human health. One long-term study published in 2018 demonstrates the power of clean, nutritionally dense food on human health. The French 2018 study followed 68,946 adults for seven years and found that higher organic food consumption was associated with a 75% reduction in cancer risk. The study identified more research needed in environmental exposure and more testing of the general public. Without more scientific research on these connections, it is an uphill battle for the medical community to adopt the idea of food as medicine. Dr. Rivard agreed this "...would change the entire paradigm of the healthcare industry. And we need it. We're running out of time."

Connecting the Dots

Dr. Doug Murphy, MD began Murphy's Grass Farm in 1977 in Sherman, New York, and still operates the 450 acre, 100 cow organic grass-based dairy. He also treats patients at VA Erie Healthcare in nearby Erie, Pennsylvania. Dr. Murphy is often asked why he practices both farming and medicine. "They're almost the same thing," he replies. "Farming is the art of applying science to animals and crops, and medicine is the art of applying science to people."

Dr. Murphy knew long before he started farming that he wanted to start a grass farm with pastured cows. Learning from his grandfather's organic garden, he recognized an important cycle—if you build the soil's biodiversity, everything is healthier. So when he had the chance to start a farm he knew there would be cows eating grass and grass-building soil health so his dairy and beef products would contain the nutrients Mother Nature intended. Fostering this natural cycle on his farm, influenced how he advised patients, encouraging that their health was highly dependent on what they ate. "There are two things to consider when thinking about your food choices; find food that is free from contamination and that has high nutritional density."

"Take care of people and take care of the land. When you take care of the land, it becomes the food that takes care of the people."

For years, Dr. Murphy has stressed the connection between good farming practices, good food, and good health. While Dr. Murphy didn't have much research at the time to back up his instincts on how the quality of food affects the body, his experience as a farmer showed him how the natural nutrition cycle works and benefits all the life it supports. He believes there are two things people should do, "Take care of people and take care of the land. When you take care of the land, it becomes the food that takes care of the people."

CAN AG AND HEALTHCARE WORK TOGETHER?

Jesse Buie, MPH is both the President/Farmer of Ole Brook Organics, Inc. and Co-Owner and Clinic Administrator of Capital City Children and Adolescent Clinic in Jackson, Mississippi. He explained that in the U.S., "We don't have a health system, we have a sick system," and if we can focus more on wellness, like nutrition and lifestyle prevention efforts, we might be able to make an impact. However, the barriers to the food as medicine method of healthcare comes from two enormous industries—food and healthcare—and all the solutions seem to be a chicken-or-the-egg type conundrum of where to start first. Increase organic production? Improve consumer education? Incorporate food and nutrition into more medical community training? Focus on food as medicine policy changes?

Like most movements, the answer will need to come from grassroots efforts. Buie shared, "Young people are more health aware. I'm pleased to see young people thinking about their health and willing to spend the extra money and effort." But moving toward a healthier society cannot rest just on the shoulders of younger generations.

Nadine Clopton, Regenerative Education Program Manager at [Rodale Institute](#), is working on another avenue—to make the connection between healthy soil, healthy food, and healthy people more explicit to the medical community, where she believes the impact on patient outcomes can occur in the short term. The Rodale Institute launched the Regenerative Healthcare Conference in 2022 to fill gaps in nutrition education for medical professionals. Clopton explained that medical professionals typically receive an average of 19.6 hours of nutrition education during medical school, but many conference attendees reported only receiving 4 hours. While modern medicine is remarkable, Clopton noted that "the Western medical paradigm is largely missing out on the opportunity to look to food as medicine as a means to both prevent and manage chronic health conditions. By taking it one step further and looking at how that food is produced, there is immense possibility to address the environmental health exposures that have contributed both to the soil health crisis and chronic disease epidemic."

WORK TOGETHER CONT.

The 2024 conference focused on myriad topics—including how medical professionals can source organic food for farm-to-healthcare models. Educating doctors about the soil/nutrition connection and its impact on human health is helpful, but they also need to be able to help their patients find local organic foods for them to make the prescribed dietary changes. Linking healthcare institutions with organic produce prescription programs, on-site farms, or sponsored CSAs working directly with regenerative organic farmers are strategies for providing access to clean foods and beginning to reverse the trends of chronic disease. Some institutions have successfully adopted these strategies, but it needs to become the norm, rather than the exception.

Moving major medical institutions to these models is challenging and will require directives from institutional leadership. Rodale Institute is consulting with institutions across the country on how to establish, implement, scale, and manage farm-to-institution programs. In 2014, Rodale Institute created an organic farm on the Anderson Campus of the St. Luke's University Health Network to provide organic produce to patients and staff.

The model has been a success and has positioned St. Luke's Anderson Hospital Campus as a community leader championing the connection between organic food and health. Other examples of farm-to-institution programs include the Farm at Trinity Health in Michigan.

This regional program annually connects thousands, regardless of socioeconomic status, to the healing power of nutritious, local food through its produce prescription program and in-hospital farm stands. In 2005, FairShare CSA Coalition in Madison, Wisconsin launched CSA Health Insurance Partnerships, which partners with local health insurance providers to offer rebates for signing up for organic CSA membership. Since then HMOs have added other CSA incentives to promote healthy lifestyles in their community.

A fascinating case study led by Dr. Steven Chen, MD of Recipe4Health in Alameda County, California, uses the Medicaid 1115 waiver to provide regenerative and organic food as medicine sourced from local, BIPOC-owned farms through medically tailored meals and produce prescriptions as a covered service free of charge to patients.

Clopton believes that with education (for consumers and medical professionals) and cross-sectoral collaboration between healthcare and agriculture, we could make a significant impact on human and environmental health. “The national healthcare budget is a lot bigger than the agriculture budget. Let's bridge those together and have healthcare woven into food and ag,” she suggests.

Furthermore, Clopton speculated that if we were able to reduce national healthcare spending for people with chronic diseases, which accounts for 90% of the \$4.5 trillion in annual expenditures, through food-as-medicine models, what else could we use those funds for? Enhancing conservation programs? Transitioning more farmers to organic? Making organic food more accessible for all people? Making sure every patient had a medically tailored whole-food diet? Expanding markets for organic farmers and access for those seeking nutritious, healthy foods?



Ramon Madrid, Rodale Institute

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

We're back to the chicken and the egg conundrum. The connection between soil, food, and health is strong and rooted deep in human history and our biology. But aversion to change is also well rooted. At the core, we need to change our national worldview, the way we think, feel, and act, towards food and health.

- › Progress towards achieving a shared worldview of food as medicine will require: More substantive research on the impacts of pesticides and organic food on human health
- › Increased consumer and medical nutrition education which focuses on the source of nutrition (soil health), the soil/gut microbiome connection, and the impact of whole, fresh, organic foods to prevent and reverse disease
- › Support for programs like the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) to assist farmers interested in transitioning to organic farming to meet the growing demand of food as medicine programs
- › Policies and programs that incentivize the integration of medical care with patients' access to organic food as a way to improve human and environmental health and grow new markets for organic farmers

Dr. Weiss, from the beginning of this article, warns, "These changes won't occur rapidly," but with grassroots work we can start to change minds, take action, and explore opportunities to return to balance.

POLICIES TO WATCH

S.5084 - Safe School Meals Act of 2024

In fall 2024, Senator Booker introduced the Safe School Meals Act (SSMA), legislation to protect children from harmful toxins in school meals.

The bill would place limits on heavy metals, ban certain pesticide residues, trigger the safety reassessment of food additives including artificial food dyes that have been linked with health harms, and ban the use of PFAS, phthalates, and bisphenols in school meal food packaging.

The bill would also support organic and other regenerative farmers who have been growing safe, nutrient-dense food for decades by connecting them to the \$17 billion National School Lunch Program and provide grants to farmers to remediate their soil and water. The bill would also expand the Organic Certification Cost Share program to cover 100% of certification costs, up to \$3,000.

Along with OFA, the Safe School Meals Act is supported by the Environmental Working Group, the American Federation of Teachers, the Michael J. Fox Foundation, the Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments, the Center for Environmental Health, Healthy Schools Now, EAT Real, Unleaded Kids, and Food Fight.

H. R. 9631 - National Food as Medicine Program

This bill would allow states to apply for grants and technical assistance to "establish, implement, and expand Food as Medicine interventions to reduce nutrition-related chronic conditions, address food and nutrition insecurity, and improve health through providing locally-sourced (or regionally-sourced) agricultural products grown, or transitioning to, a covered method of production."

Covered methods of production would include certified organic, regeneratively produced, or Regenerative organic products. Food as medicine programs could provide individuals eligible for medical assistance with access to healthy food prescribed by a healthcare professional to treat or prevent certain health conditions. 🌱

Read more about the Safe School Meals Act on page 21



Madison is an impassioned supporter of real, healthy food who found her way from the farm, to the city, and back to the farm, so to speak, as the Communications Manager for OFA.

Stand with Organic

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OFA was built for organic farmers by organic farmers, and today, more than ever, your involvement is essential as we embark on new policy and advocacy work that will shape the future of organic farming.

With only a \$25 membership fee, you can help power our D.C. outreach to educate new members of Congress about why organic is important, how it's different from other farming methods, why consumer demand is growing, and why farmers need support.

Membership isn't just a donation. It's about farmers coming together to have their voices heard and put their own farming experiences in a national context to work for change for all farmers.

Will you join us?

Already a member? Share this magazine with a farmer and ask them to join.



FEATURED STORY

The Many Benefits of Grass-Fed Bison and Beef

By Harriet Behar

The Amazon makes an important contribution to the Earth's climate regulation, as one of the largest carbon sinks, storing approximately 123 billion tons of carbon above and below ground. We forget that before modern agriculture, about one-half of the landmass of North America (one billion U.S. acres) was dominated by a sea of grassland from the Rockies to the Appalachian Mountains and from the Yukon to the Mexican desert.

These perennial grasses and forbs stored vast amounts of carbon, as well as built deep topsoil full of diverse biological life. An integral part of this grassland ecosystem was the vast herds of American Bison, an estimated 30-50 million animals, and the native peoples who revered and depended upon these ruminant animals for food, clothing, and shelter. The healthy interaction of grass, bison, and people sustained all three for thousands of years.

With the coming of the plow, domesticated livestock, and European settlement, the North American landscape changed dramatically. Mass killings of bison in the mid-1800s brought the herd down to less than 1,000 animals. Both native and non-native peoples have taken significant steps to restore the grasslands and bison or beef that feed upon those grasses. Studies have shown us that grass-fed ruminants are healthier for humans to consume than ruminants fed a diet of grains.

PEOPLE: GRASS-FED LIVESTOCK PRODUCE HEALTHIER MEAT

When ruminants consume a grass-fed diet, they have a healthier fat quality. Unhealthy saturated fats found in grain-fed meats are replaced by polyunsaturated fats in grass-fed animals. These polyunsaturated fats have lower LDL cholesterol levels, a contributor to many human ailments. Pasture-raised and finished animals also demonstrate a higher ratio of omega-3 fats to omega-6 fats.

Eating a higher percentage of omega-3 has been shown to support eye, brain, and heart health, reduce inflammation, lessen rheumatoid disease, and lower blood pressure and triglyceride levels in the blood that lead to hardening of the arteries. Since these pastured animals consume large amounts of vegetative matter, and through the miracle of the fermentation action that occurs in their four-compartment stomachs, or rumen, they can turn grass into high-quality protein (both milk and meat). Only ruminant animals can do that.

By consuming high chlorophyll plants, they concentrate more antioxidants, niacin, and carotene in their bodies. Many of these differences are two to ten times higher in grass-fed animals, than grain-fed animals.

Ruminant animals evolved over the millennia to roam and consume grass. When they are raised in confinement on grain, we see an increase in health and welfare issues for the concentrated animals, less nutritious food for humans, and a damaged environment.

Even though the nutritive benefits of grass-fed beef outweigh that of grain-fed beef, modern agricultural strives for efficiency has encouraged the opposite. It takes less land and time to raise animals in confinement. Large conventional feedlots provide a feed ration for animals to rapidly put on pounds and reach slaughter weight as quickly as possible. Ruminant animals evolved over the millennia to roam and consume grass. When they are raised in confinement on grain, we see an increase in health and welfare issues for the concentrated animals, less nutritious food for humans, and a damaged environment.

Grain-fed meats have a different taste, color, and texture than grass-fed animals. Grain-fed is somewhat “sweeter”, more tender, and has more fat “marbling” throughout the meat. Our palate as a society has been trained to seek out this profile, and many unaccustomed to grass-fed meat complain that it tastes “gamey” due to the different fat acid composition and its leaner texture.

GRASS-FED AND GRASS-FINISHED

To meet consumer preference, some grass-fed operations choose to “grain-finish” their animals for the last 2-3 months before slaughter. Some may still have access to pasture, but grain (corn) is also provided to give this taste and texture profile to the meat. It is also possible to “grass-finish” animals and achieve an acceptable flavor profile. Those ranchers who achieve this, focus on providing high quality, high protein forages year-round to their animals. If looking for grass-fed meat, ask if it is also grass-finished, to purchase the highest concentrations of the beneficial constituents for you and your family.

GRASS FARMING TO HEAL THE EARTH

When talking to a farmer/rancher who raises their animals on pasture, they will usually say they are grass farmers. The foundation of their operations is the pasture land they steward for livestock food and range. Many follow the basic tenets of Holistic Management, popularized by Allan Savory in the 1970s and 1980s. He studied native herd animals and learned how their activities and movements maintained and improved grasslands (especially vulnerable semi-arid areas) as the animals moved over the landscape. Herding animals naturally move in tight clusters, to protect their members from predators. They tend to inhabit an area for 8-14 days, loosening up thatch and eating grass. The somewhat pointed hooves of bison, as well as the flatter hooves of other ruminant animals, leave small indentations in the soil, providing a place where the grass seeds can have contact with the soil. Rain, manure, and urine all accumulate in these small pockets, providing the perfect habitat for grass regeneration once the animals move on to the next area.

It has been shown that grassland can produce 40% more vegetation when grazed heavily for a short period of time and then allowed to regenerate. Rotational, prescribed, or management-intensive grazing, used by many good grazers, follow the basics of holistic management. Setting up permanent or temporary paddocks and moving animals on a schedule that responds to the needs of the land, provides optimum height and digestibility of the grass for the ruminants, while at the same time, improving the vegetative resource.

PLANET: LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY AND CARBON CAPTURE

Grass-fed animals consume foodstuffs that grow wild, protect the soil, and are often inedible to humans, which produces high-quality protein for humans to consume. Grassland and pasture sequester carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, helping to mitigate climate extremes. Peer-reviewed science states that pasture grass-finished beef could lower the carbon footprint compared to grain-finished beef by 42 percent. The land remains covered with thriving vegetation and the planet can produce food and fiber for a growing population without contributing to soil erosion or CO₂ release into the atmosphere. Producing ruminants on well-managed pastures clearly is beneficial for the humans, animals, and the planet.



Photo via USDA

THE FUTURE RELIES ON WISDOM FROM THE PAST

Bison have roamed our continent for thousands of years, and while beef animals are more domesticated and somewhat easier to manage than bison, there are numerous benefits to raising bison. Native peoples and non-native peoples are increasing the bison herds of North America while maintaining the animals on grasslands for the majority of their lives. At this time, there are approximately 400,000 bison in North America. Numerous research institutes, university extension initiatives, and native tribal councils are working with producers to bring back bison to U.S. grasslands and bison meat to the dinner table.

The InterTribal Buffalo Council is committed to reestablishing buffalo, their preferred term, on Tribal lands to promote cultural enhancement, spiritual revitalization, ecology restoration, and economic development. The Council includes 80 tribes in 20 states and facilitates management of over 20,000 buffalo returning them to 1 million of the 32 million acres of Tribal lands. While grass-fed beef has significant nutritive benefits compared to grain-fed beef, grass-fed bison beats out all beef with even higher omega-3 fatty acids and conjugated linoleic acid (CLA). Grass-fed meats embody the definition of medicine by promoting the prevention of disease, of our planet, our land, and ourselves. 🌱



Harriet Behar is OFA's Farmer Services Consultant, and was one of OFA's founding members. 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.

A big thank you to Dave Carter, a former NOSB member, a Colorado-based bison producer and a Technical Advisor to the Flower Hill Institute, a native-owned and community-directed nonprofit. His enthusiasm and knowledge of all things bison provided information for this article.

1 - Pelletier, N., R. Pirog, and R. Rasmussen. 2010. Comparative life cycle environmental impacts of three beef production strategies in the Upper Midwestern United States. *Agric. Sys.* 103:380-389.

Farmer Mental Health Resources

Farmers face unique challenges like unpredictable weather, market fluctuations, long working hours, difficult management decisions, and isolation that can affect their mental health. Addressing mental health is vital for sustaining farmer's well-being and the health of their communities. Farmers aren't an exception when it comes to mental health challenges. By utilizing these resources and staying connected, we can help ensure that farmers receive the care and support they need to maintain their mental well-being.

SIGNS OF MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES

- Persistent sadness or anxiety
- Loss of interest in activities
- Increased fatigue or sleep disturbances
- Difficulty making decisions
- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Thoughts of self-harm or suicide

If you or someone you know is experiencing any or all of these signs, consider reaching out to the resources listed below.

NATIONAL RESOURCES

- **Farm Aid Hotline**
 - 1-800-FARM-AID (1-800-327-6243)
 - Offers support specifically for farmers, including mental health services and financial counseling
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Hotline**
 - Call 1-800-950-6264
 - Text "HELPLINE" to 62640
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**
 - 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)
 - Provides 24/7, free, and confidential support for people in distress
- **Crisis Text Line**
 - Text "HOME" to 741741
 - Free, 24/7 text line for anyone in crisis
- **American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) Farm State of Mind**
 - Provides resources focused on farmer mental health, like counseling services & hotlines

REGIONAL RESOURCES

- **AgriSafe Network:** Provides health and safety programs for farmers, including mental health resources. Specific programs vary by state.

- **Cultivemos:** Provides resources to improve behavioral health awareness, literacy, access and outcomes for farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers
- **Rural Resilience Training:** Free online training provided by the Farm Credit Council to help individuals recognize signs of stress in themselves and others
- **State Extension Services:** Many states offer mental health resources, like workshops, support groups, and counseling referrals

ONLINE RESOURCES

- **Rural Health Information Hub:** Offers a guide to mental health resources available to rural residents, including farmers
- **National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Farmers' Mental Health:** Provides research and resources specific to mental health in agricultural communities
- **Farmer Toolkit:** State's Department of Agriculture offer mental health and financial counseling programs for people working in agriculture
- **Farm State of Mind Toolkit (AFBF):** A collection of tools to help farm communities navigate mental health challenges

HOW TO HELP A FARMER IN NEED

- **LISTEN** without judgment: Create a safe space
- **ENCOURAGE** Professional Help: Suggest they speak to a counselor or call a helpline
- **CONNECT** with regular check-ins: Provide support and reduce feelings of isolation
- **EDUCATE** Yourself: Learn about available resources



ORGANIC FARMERS
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FARMER CIRCLES

Collective Circles

Our Collective Farmer Circles are monthly virtual community spaces that meet to give farmers, farm workers, and land owners support on specific topics.

MONTHLY TOPICS INCLUDE:

- Soil Testing
- Organic System Plans
- Crop Insurance
- Working with NRCS
- Spring Tillage
- Livestock Genetics
- Organic Inspection Preparation

Join organic educator Harriet Behar



SOIL & SOUL

Join us for Soil & Soul, a virtual workshop series focused on farmer wellness and finding balance in farming.

MONTHLY TOPICS INCLUDE:

- Planning for Organic Certification
- Wellness and Mental Health
- Building Farmer Networks
- Advocacy for Farmer Rights
- Unlocking USDA Resources
- Indigenous Wisdom in Organic
- Selling Organic

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A person wearing a bright yellow raincoat is holding a large bundle of freshly harvested green onions. The onions have long, vibrant green stalks and white roots. The person is standing in a field of similar green onions. The background is a soft-focus field of green plants under a pale sky.

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FEATURED STORY

Organic Dairy in Schools: Nourishing the Next Generation

By Ella Lucabaugh

As schools nationwide increasingly seek to improve student nutrition and health, organic products in schools have emerged as a focal point in the movement towards healthier school meals. Carton milk is ubiquitous in any school lunch, and the switch to organic milk is a small but powerful step in improving options for students.

Switching to organic dairy creates cascading benefits: it supports local farmers, reduces environmental impact, and builds resilient food systems. Yet, this transition faces significant challenges, from policy barriers to distribution logistics. At the forefront of federal legislative efforts, Senator Cory Booker's [Safe School Meals Act \(SSMA\)](#), aims to address food quality in public schools and to protect children from harmful toxins in school meals.

Senator Booker's Agricultural Legislative Aide explained, "The idea behind the bill is limiting certain toxins that we know are pervasive in the food system, including certain pesticide residues that we know are harmful, PFAs, phthalates, packaging that leach into food, and heavy metals." Bills like the SSMA will not only protect students from harmful additives found in lunches but also create significant new market opportunities for local organic farmers. Investing in school food initiatives is the first step to support schools in their mission to provide healthier meals to students. Booker's Office currently is looking for a Republican sign-on, and plans to reintroduce it to Congress in the new administration.

CURRENT EFFORTS AND INNOVATION: CALIFORNIA

While federal legislation like the SSMA works to create systemic change, innovative organic dairy farmers are taking matters into their own hands, and are partnering with school food directors to overcome traditional barriers. In California, [Straus Family Creamery](#) has pioneered a model for integrating their organic milk, yogurt, and other dairy products into local school districts. Albert Straus, organic dairy farmer and CEO and Founder of Straus Family Creamery, explains the inspiration for the program and its founding more than a decade ago. "The USDA requires 8oz of milk to go to each student, and noticeably many of these cartons were going to waste, up to 18 gallons a day from one school," Straus explained.

Innovatively, Straus Creamery envisioned the idea to supply milk in bags instead of cartons, allowing students from the Novato Unified School District to use a milk dispenser and get the amount of milk they actually wanted. Although organics often come at a premium, Straus Creamery was able to offset costs by diverting milk waste and creating a direct producer-to-consumer program model. Today, Straus, in collaboration with [Conscious Kitchen](#) and other generous partners, has integrated their products across the Bay Area in California. In the long term, Straus hopes to have organic food in all California public schools.

CALIFORNIA CONT.

Thomas Stratton, a regenerative farmer in California who provides milk to [Rumiano Cheese](#), explained another facet of the organic movement in schools. Offered to the entire state of California, Rumiano focuses not only on supplying local organic cheese but also offers comprehensive education and training to students, workers, and food directors. Rumiano has organized summits and organic best practices workshops for food service staff and farm tours that show school directors and students where their food comes from.

Through classroom engagements and cafeteria demonstrations, they help students connect with their organic food sources while simultaneously training food directors on the importance and implementation of organic options in school meals. Through the [USDA Local Food Promotion Program](#) grant, they have established a program to supply organic dairy products to a targeted 50 school districts across the state. Their organic cheeses appear in students' favorites across K-12 public schools—including pizzas, lasagnas, cheeseburgers, and cheese crisps.

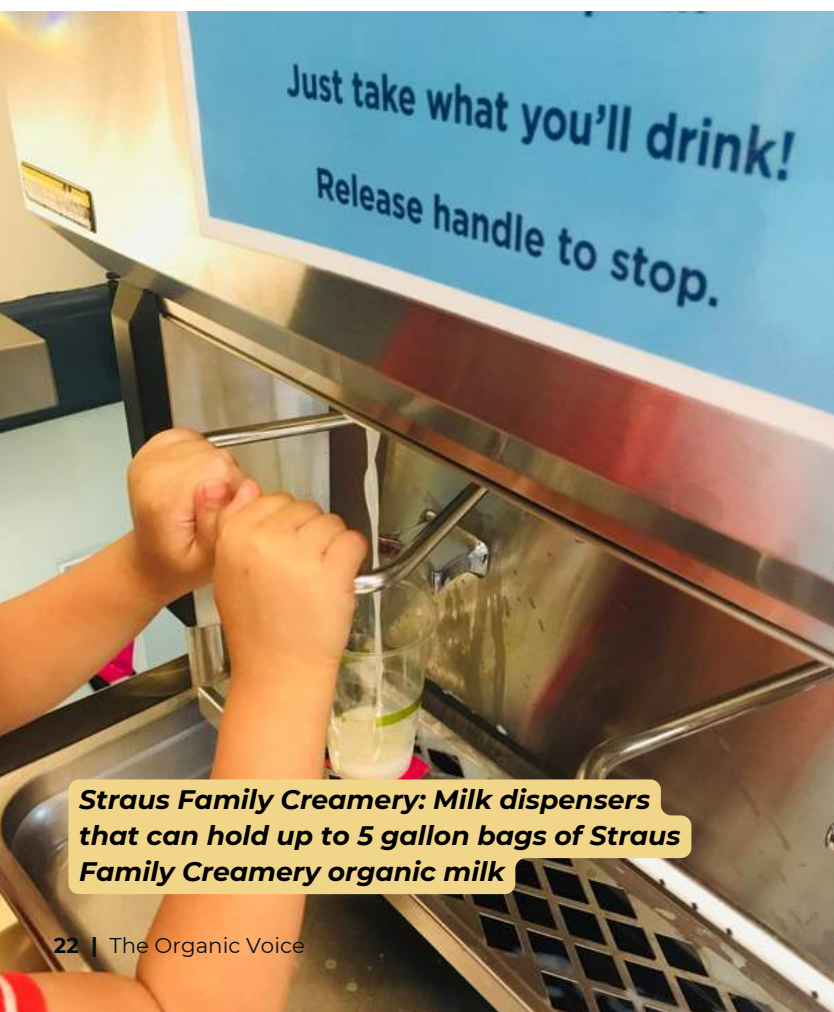
CURRENT EFFORTS AND INNOVATION: VERMONT

Vermont's landscape reflects the dairy industry's deep roots in the state's identity and its integral role in its economy. However, the past decade has brought significant challenges to Northeast organic dairy farmers, particularly due to global disruptions like the Russia-Ukraine war, which affected the supply of organic cow feed traditionally sourced from the region.

In response, organizations like the [Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont \(NOFA-VT\)](#) have stepped up their advocacy efforts, successfully securing approximately \$9 billion in organic dairy relief. This work has helped sustain local operations like [Miller Farm](#) in Vernon, Vermont, which has achieved a particularly meaningful success: providing organic milk for their local school districts.

Inspired by Straus Dairy, Miller Farm successfully expanded its current operations to include its own bulk milk bagging line, thanks to funding from the USDA Northeast Dairy Business Innovation Center. By focusing on bulk bagged milk instead of traditional milk cartons, Miller Farms and schools have been able to reduce their waste by 50%, similar to Straus, by utilizing bulk milk dispensers.

By transitioning milk cartons to bulk organic, both parties were able to create a cost-neutral process by offsetting the cost of organic with milk waste. Within the first week of the program running, there was interest in expansion.



Straus Family Creamery: Milk dispensers that can hold up to 5 gallon bags of Straus Family Creamery organic milk

Currently, Miller Farms supplies 13 schools, and they now work with a distributor. Lauren Griswold, Wholesale Market Foods Director of NOFA-VT, explained the program's roots and success. "The kids love it, it's delicious, the parents feel good!" This farm-to-school connection not only supports local agriculture but also provides students with access to high-quality, organic dairy products.

Last fall, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) launched the Organic Dairy Product Promotion (ODPP) program, allocating \$15 million to expand access to organic dairy products in educational institutions and youth programs. Fittingly, this program was launched in Vernon, Vermont, at Miller Farms.

This program will make organic dairy more accessible to institutional buyers, like school districts, by covering a portion or all of the purchase. "This program is truly groundbreaking because it expands access to organic dairy in public institutions, where household income typically dictates food access at home," explained Griswold. At schools students are offered the same meal options no matter their socio-economic background, which makes them a significant opportunity to expand universal food access and increase nutrition. In Vermont alone, where K-12 schools purchase 700,000 gallons of milk annually, the program's impact could be transformative for both students and the organic dairy sector.

Photo Credit NOFA-VT: WNESU Students posing with Farmer Peter Miller and Secretary of Agriculture, Food and Markets Anson Tebbetts during a field trip to Miller Farm to celebrate the school milk pilot project's success.



LOOKING AHEAD

The movement to integrate organic dairy into schools represents more than just a change in milk suppliers—it signals a fundamental shift in how schools approach nutrition, sustainability, and community support. The convergence of federal policy support through programs like the SSMA, innovative distribution models pioneered by farmers like Straus, Stratton, and Miller, and new funding through the ODPP program has created unprecedented momentum. As more schools across the country adopt these models, they demonstrate that the switch to organic dairy can achieve multiple goals simultaneously: improving student health, supporting local farmers, reducing environmental impact, and building more resilient food systems.

The success of these early programs suggests that organic dairy in schools could become not just an alternative, but the new standard for school nutrition programs nationwide. This transformation offers a blueprint for how thoughtful policy changes, innovative farming practices, and community partnerships can work together to create lasting change in America's school food system. 🌱

Ella Lucabaugh is a senior at American University in Washington, DC, and serves as the Organic Farmers Association spring Organic Agriculture Policy Intern. She is passionate about advancing healthy food systems and driven by the belief that organic agriculture not only promotes human health but also nurtures soil vitality and biodiversity.



SAFE SCHOOL MEALS ACT (SSMA)

In September 2024, Senator Cory Booker introduced the [Safe School Meals Act \(SSMA\)](#), legislation to protect children from harmful toxins in school meals.

The bill would place limits on heavy metals, ban certain pesticide residues, trigger the safety reassessment of food additives including artificial food dyes that have been linked with health harms, and ban the use of PFAS, phthalates, and bisphenols in school meal food packaging.

The bill would also support organic and other regenerative farmers who have been growing safe, nutrient-dense food for decades by connecting them to the \$17 billion National School Lunch Program.

This would also provide grants to manufacturers to switch to toxic-free packaging and grants to producers to remediate their soil and water. The bill would also expand National Organic Cost Share Certification to all eligible farms and lift the cap to cover 100% of certification costs, up to \$3,000.

Along with OFA, the Safe School Meals Act is supported by the Environmental Working Group, the American Federation of Teachers, the Michael J. Fox Foundation, the Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments, the Center for Environmental Health, Healthy Schools Now, EAT Real, Unleaded Kids, and Food Fight.

NRCS Organic Practice 823 Resources for Farmers

- ✓ 823 Farmer Factsheet
- ✓ 823 Producer Pre-Office Visit Checklist
- ✓ Watch a webinar led by farmers on 823
- ✓ NRCS New Practice for Transitioning Land (pg. 10)
- ✓ Unlocking Funding for Organic Practices (pg. 34)
- ✓ Do you have more to say on this topic? Join OFA's monthly Farmer Workgroup.

The National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has many programs to help farmers convert to organic farming operations, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) conservation program.

Under EQIP, Organic Transition Initiative 823 (OTI) is specifically meant to help those transitioning to organic operations through cost-sharing and providing technical support on such practices.

This program is relatively new and can be used by many farmers. Use OFA's resources to learn more, and reach out with your questions.

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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 >



Make Your Own Herbal Tinctures and Salves

By Harriet Behar

Herbal products are used both for human health and livestock management. Organic producers have had great success promoting animal health using herbal products including tinctures. These natural remedies originate from fresh or dried flowers, leaves, bulbs, roots, barks, and berries. For those already using these herbal products, this article will teach you how to make high-quality herbal tinctures and salves you may have already been purchasing, for your own use. There are many information sources on which items work well for various health challenges, but this article will not recommend any specific medicinal use. There is a list at the end of this article with books describing how to make herbal products and their use on humans and livestock.

It's fun and interesting to grow or wild harvest the common plants used in tinctures. The whole family can be involved in harvesting common plants or growing more exotic ones. For livestock producers, you may have noticed that your animals gravitate towards certain pasture plants at specific times of the year, and as you learn more about herbal medicine, you might observe that these plants are providing specific benefits to your animals.

Tinctures are a concentrated herbal extract, made by steeping ground up fresh or dried herbs in a liquid. Alcohol (usually 80-proof vodka), glycerin, apple cider vinegar, or olive oil can be used to pull the active ingredients out of the herbs during the steeping process. Since many of the plant constituents that provide health benefits are alkaloids, the use of alcohol is the most popular extractant to facilitate the movement of that constituent from the herb to the liquid tincture.

Research the types of tinctures you want to make, and see what type of extracting liquid is recommended, in order to decide what you might do on your own. Herbal tinctures are dispensed by the drop, so this amount of alcohol is not typically an issue for livestock. For those who do not want to use any alcohol, food-grade glycerin is the next best extractant.

INGREDIENTS AND TOOLS

Your organic herbs should be of high quality, with no dirt or mold. Fresh green leaves or flowers do not typically need washing, unless very dirty. Roots need to be fully washed. The alcohol base can be 80-proof vodka, 90-proof Everclear (with some distilled water to get it down to 80-proof), or some people use brandy. Glycerin, organic olive oil, or organic apple cider vinegar can be used if you are not using alcohol as your extractant. If you want to make a mixed tincture of a variety of herbs, make each herbal tincture separately, and mix them together after they have been pressed out of the herb/alcohol mixture. Alcohol-based tinctures have a several-year shelf life, other liquids are good for approximately one year.



CREATING A TINCTURES



Start with clear glass jars for mixing your fresh or dried herbs with your extraction liquid. Lids should be non-reactive (not metal) where they come into contact with the solution. Pint or half-pint jars are sufficient to make enough tincture for your personal use.



You will need a way to macerate, grind, or cut up your herbs. It is not recommended that you use a blender or food processor to completely blend the herbs with the liquid. But you could use this to coarsely chop dried root, which would be quite difficult to do with a knife. You want to cut up the plant matter so there is more surface area that the extraction liquid can interact with, but you want it to retain some of its physical integrity.



Make sure your cutting area, scissors, and knives are clean to prevent contamination. You then pour the liquid over the herbs once they are in the jar and cover tightly.



Plan for a cool dark place to store the jars for 4-6 weeks, but also where you could shake it periodically during that time. Store the finished tincture in amber glass jars, or clear glass jars in a dark place. Be prepared to write the type of herb and liquid that you mix together, and the date you started the tincture on the glass jar, and label the finished tincture too. Eventually, you will want to put them in amber ½ oz or 1 ounce glass bottles with eye droppers for dispensing.



BASIC RECIPE

Fresh leaves or flowers: Finely cut fresh leaves or flowers using a knife or scissors to start releasing some juices. Fill a jar as full as you can, but no less than ¾ full, with tightly packed plant matter leaving just enough space for the alcohol to move around the plant matter when you shake it. Fill the jar with alcohol so that it covers the herbs completely.

Dried leaves or flowers: Chop the dried leaves or flowers and fill the jar a little less than ¾ full. Adding liquid will cause the dried plant matter to expand. Cover packed plant material completely with the alcohol, at a volume of 1-2 parts herbs to 5 parts alcohol. The dried plant matter is much more concentrated than fresh, and this is why you can use less herbs in relation to the alcohol than when you use fresh plant matter. Make sure the mixture leaves some space to be shaken.

Dried roots, barks, bulbs, or berries: Finely chop and fill a jar about 2/3 full with the plant material before covering it completely with alcohol, at the same percentage as dried leaves or flowers (1-2:5). Finely chopped garlic is very strong and can be less than 50% in the jar with the alcohol.

If the tincture cannot be visibly shaken and mixed, move to a larger jar, and if the alcohol is consumed by the plant, add more alcohol to keep the plant matter completely covered during the 4–6-week steeping period. Many people prefer to start their tincture at the new moon and then press it at the following new moon.

Once the steeping period is done, prepare to remove the vegetative matter from the alcohol. You can use a small stainless-steel press, typically found in wine and beer shops (under \$75), but many layers of cheesecloth can also be used. The better you can press out the alcohol from the plant matter, the more constituents you will have in your final tincture.

Left: A small stainless-steel press, typically found in wine and beer shops (under \$75), helps separate the alcohol and medicinal properties from the plant material.

MAKING TINCTURE FOR INFUSING INTO AN OIL FOR SALVES

If you are making a tincture to then use in oil-based skin products, you can extract directly into the olive oil, but you may need to use more plant matter to get the same amount of constituent as you would have gotten from an alcohol-based tincture. To infuse the alcohol-based tincture into an oil, you can put the freshly made alcohol and herb tincture in a blender, 1 part pressed tincture to 5 parts organic olive oil, and blend until smooth.

Press this alcohol/oil through a cheesecloth to remove all vegetative matter. Put this mixture in a double boiler, slowly cooking off the alcohol. You will be able to see when the alcohol is no longer present in the double boiler since the alcohol and oil will separate and then vaporize. Typically for salves and balms, a mix of a variety of these herb-infused oils is then mixed with beeswax at about 7 parts oils to 1 part wax. You can work with finished alcohol tincture, after the vegetative matter has been removed, but you will get more constituent in the oil if you blend up the in-process alcohol tincture that still has the herbs in it.

Herbs used include burdock, goldenseal and dandelion root, echinacea flower and root, nettle and plantain leaves, calendula and yarrow flowers and leaves, and dried aronia berries.

Recommended Books to Learn More

The Herbal Medicine Makers Handbook, A Home Manual

By James Green

Published by The Crossing Press, Freedom CA

Making Plant Medicine

By Richo Cech

Published by Horizon Herbs, Williams OR

Alternative Treatments for Ruminant Animals

By Paul Detloff DVM

Published by Acres USA

Many of these are growing wild on your land or easy to grow and free for the picking. Tinctures provide one type of herbal preparation with teas, poultices, decoctions, vinegars, oils, and hydrosols all having their place in the herbal medicine cabinet. 🌿



Harriet Behar is OFA's Farmer Services Consultant, and was one of OFA's founding members. 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.

Photo via Harriet Behar, Calendula Field





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VABF

Virginia Association for Biological Farming

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Thank you, Organic Dairy Farmers

Our mission is to sustain family dairy farms in the North Bay region of California by producing high quality and minimally processed organic dairy products for consumers to enjoy. Amidst great challenges to the industry, our purpose is more important than ever. We are grateful for the tremendous partnership and personal relationships we have with our network of dairy farming families. Thank you to the Straus, Tresch, Hughes, Correia, Silacci, Mendoza, Nunes, Spaletta, Moretti, R. McClelland, and Noseschi family farms for your incredible organic land stewardship and positive contributions to our local community.

Learn more about our 2030 carbon neutral dairy goal and structured commitment to economic resilience for dairy farms at www.strausfamilycreamery.com

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 2025-March 2027.

Governing Council

California Farmer: Kenneth Kimes
Greensward/New Natives, LLC, Aptos, CA

Midwest Farmer: Jenn Halpin
Dickinson College Farm, Carlisle, PA

North Central Farmer: Matthew Fitzgerald
Fitzgerald Organics, Glencoe, MN

North Central Organization: Lori Stern
Marbleseed

Western Farmer: Steve Ela
Ela Family Farms, Hotchkiss, CO

Western Organization: Ben Howell
Oregon Tilth

Southern Farmer: Shawn Peebles
Shawn Peebles Organic Farm LLC, Augusta, AR

Northeast Farmer: Eve Kaplan-Walbrecht
Garden of Eve Organic Farm & Market, Riverhead, NY

Northeast Organization: Katie Baidon
Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York
(NOFA-NY)

Policy Committee

California Farmer: Mark Schlesinger
Little Paradise Farm, Sonoma, CA

Midwest Farmer: Scott Myers
Woodlyn Acres Farm, LLC, Dalton, OH

Midwest Organization: Milo Petruziello
Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA)

North Central Farmer: Russell Olson
River Valley Organics, Inc, Garner, IA

Western Farmer: Nathaniel Powell-Palm
Cold Springs Organics, Bozeman, MT

Western Organization: Melissa Spear
Tilth Alliance

Southern Farmer: Steven Beltram
TendWell Farm, Asheville, NC

Southern Organization: Roland McReynolds
Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA)

Northeast Farmer: Seth Kroeck
Crystal Spring Farm/Maquoit Wild Blueberries,
Brunswick, ME



New Organic Mushroom and Pet Food Regulations Finalized

By Harriet Behar

While organic mushrooms and organic pet food have been in grocery stores for many years, there were not clear, nor consistent, regulations for these products. Based upon National Organic Standards Board recommendations from 10 years ago, new regulations are now finalized and all producers selling organic mushrooms, organic mushroom spawn (used to inoculate a substrate that then produces mushrooms), and organic pet food will need to meet this rule no later than March 22, 2027.*

NO ADDITIONAL FUNGI “SCOPE”

Organic mushrooms and mushroom spawn will be certified under the crop scope, the USDA did not believe a specific scope for the overall fungi kingdom was necessary. Numerous organic crop regulations will not be mandated for organic mushroom and spawn production, since fungi are very different from plants. Wild mushrooms can be certified organic under the wild harvest standard. This rule only covers mushrooms, not other types of fungi.

COMPOSTED AND UNCOMPOSTED SUBSTRATES

The primary clarification for mushroom and spawn production covers the type of composted or uncomposted substrate ingredients that can be used. Plant and animal materials are used to make an uncomposted substrate with specific functional qualities depending on the types of fungi being produced. Mushrooms are different from plants since they directly absorb nutrients from their growing media. There is a recognition that organically produced feedstocks for the uncomposted media would be preferred, but this regulation was written to meet the concern that sufficient feedstock quantities with specific functional qualities would not be “commercially available.”

The specific functional qualities needed must be clearly outlined in an operation’s Organic System Plan, as well as the producer’s search for sufficient quantity. The rule makes it clear that more than one type of plant or animal material might provide the same functional quality, and the producer needs to search among all available organic feedstocks first that might provide what they need.


SUBSTRATES CONT.

Unfortunately, the commercial availability allowance may create more of a cost burden on smaller operations since they will likely be able to find certified organic feedstock in quantities needed for their smaller operations, while larger operations may not be able to find certified organic feedstock in large quantities and will thus be allowed to use nonorganic materials at a much lower price point.

Wood products, a common mushroom substrate material, do not need to meet the commercial availability clause, since wood products are not typically certified organic. No prohibited materials can be used on the wood after harvest, but tracking of prohibited material use when the tree was growing, is not required.

The definition of compost used in the production of mushrooms and spawn is different from the current regulation, only requiring it to reach a temperature of 131 degrees for three days. While biodegradable plastics were requested to be included in approved compost by some commenters, at this time (March 2025) they are not allowed. The National Organic Standards Board is in the midst of considering various changes to the compost standard for both plants and mushrooms.

PET FOOD

Taurine, a synthetic amino acid necessary for cats, was added to the allowed list for all pet food. The processing of organic pet food must meet all organic handling standards. Pets are defined as domestic animals not used for the production of food, fiber or other agricultural-based consumer products. 

Update*

On February 10, 2025, the USDA AMS delayed the effective date of the Market Development for Mushrooms and Pet Food Final Rule ([89 FR 104367](#)) until March 21, 2025, which will push back the compliance deadline for all organic mushroom and pet food operations to March 22, 2027. [Read more.](#)

Organic Farmer Education Resources

OFA offers a variety of education resources and opportunities for organic curious, transitioning and certified farmers, as well as organic supporters.

Browse OFA's

Organic Education Event Calendar

Farmer Circles & Workgroups

Organic Voice Magazine Archive

Webinars

Support Resources

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Explore the Resources

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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.



Marbleseed educates, inspires, and empowers farmers to thrive in a sustainable, organic system of agriculture. We are committed to maximizing an organic, regenerative farming ecosystem across the Midwest to provide livelihoods for human-scale farmers, food justice for eaters, and environmental protection.

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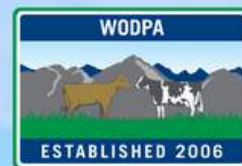


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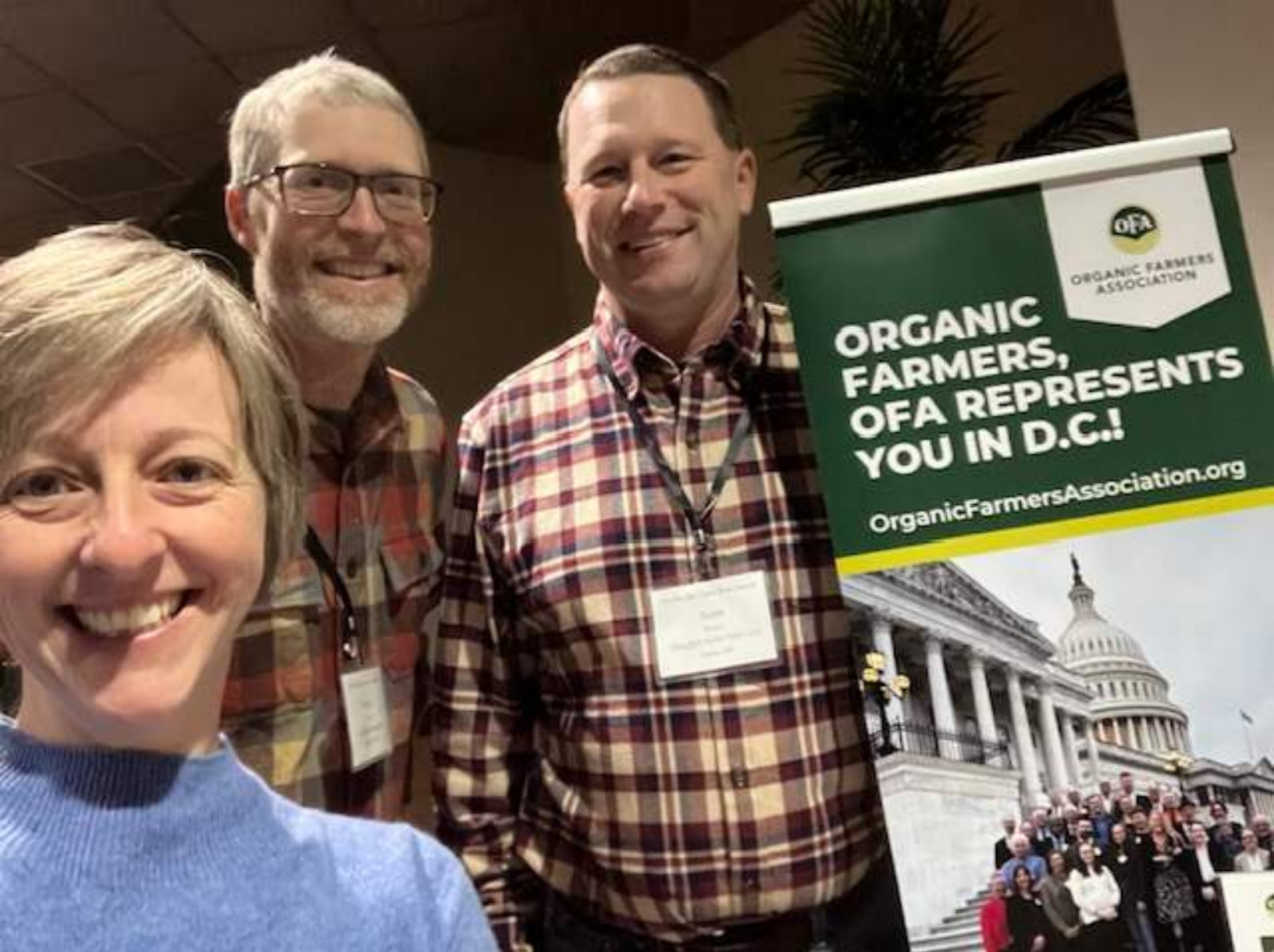
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Winter Conference Season

This winter the OFA team has been meeting members, organic and transitioning farmers, and partners at conferences and events all across the U.S. Our staff, leadership team, and members have been essential to making all our travel, presentations, and tabling events happen.

OSU Organic Grain Conference: (L to R)
Julia Barton - OFA Farmer Services Director, Patrick Turner - OFA Farmer Member (Octagon Acres Farm), and Scott Myers - OFA Policy Committee Chair & Organic Farmer (Woodlyn Acres Farm)

For ORGANIC FARMERS. By ORGANIC FARMERS.



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