



# DENMARK ORGANIC LESSONS FOR U.S. FUTURE

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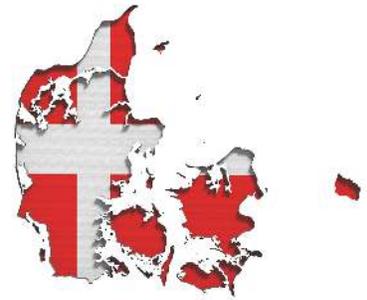
While the growth of organic in the U.S. is mostly market-driven, other governments around the world have chosen to use their policies and tax dollars to aggressively grow organic agriculture and food purchases. Denmark has led the way in organic planning with astounding success. Many European countries have seen the benefits of the Danish model and have integrated similar activities. We in the U.S. can learn much from these policies and the positive results.

Organic food purchases in Denmark have the highest market share of any country in the world, at 12.8 percent in 2020 (U.S. organic food sales were just under 6 percent in 2020). Ninety percent of the citizenry can specifically name organic practices and why they are beneficial. Eighty percent of the people buy organic food, with fifty percent buying organic on a weekly basis.

Denmark's numerous organic products are exported to nearby countries where eager consumers trust the Danish organic label. Almost ten percent of the agricultural land is certified organic. This organic success was achieved through a concerted effort by the Danish government with many non-governmental partners playing pivotal roles in building the capacity and demand to make this happen. This country of 5.8 million people implemented an Organic Action Plan in 1995 and has consistently met its targets for growth as Denmark continues to set new goals for the future. One Danish organic promoter stated that over a five-year period, the Danish government has invested an equivalent of \$10 per person in organic agriculture.

## **PESTICIDE CONTAMINATION MOTIVATED CHANGE**

Denmark is a small country, about twice the size of Massachusetts. It is composed of a long peninsula surrounded on three sides by the North Sea as well as a series of islands. All drinking water is sourced from wells tapping into the groundwater under the landmass. In the early 1990s, wells were becoming contaminated with pesticides and the Danes became alarmed. Instead of digging deeper wells, or trying to desalinate the ocean, they decided to stop the source of the contamination and encourage the transition to organic production. They spent five years developing their first plan and relied on many non-governmental agencies to partner with them to encourage farmers and consumers to welcome organic, as well as build appropriate marketing strategies and infrastructure that aid organic agricultural growth.



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## **SUCCESSFUL SOLUTIONS WERE HOLISTIC**

The Danes approached the issue holistically. They felt it was important to have a stable market and that everyone should have access to organic food regardless of income. When they started to implement their Organic Action Plan, they knew farmers would need both financial and technical help during the transition to organic. Cooking, processing, packaging, storage, and distribution of organic foods would need to be modified to maintain the freshness and integrity of the organic foods. Consumers would need to be educated about how organic food is produced and its numerous benefits as well as help in purchasing higher-priced products.

Twenty-five years ago, my husband and I spent 10 days in Denmark visiting organic farmers, educators, processors, and policymakers. One of the first dairy farmers we visited had newly transitioned to organic and I asked him why he made that choice. He answered that he could not lose the farm on his watch. I asked what he meant by that and he explained his family had lived on that farm since the mid-1600s. He saw himself in a long line of family members, both past and future, and he needed to do his best for all of them. **To help him succeed in his organic transition, the government provided him an organic transition subsidy, funded by the government by taxing pesticide sales and giving that specific tax to transitioning farmers.**

## EDUCATION & TRAINING BEYOND FARMS WAS NECESSARY

During our visit, we visited numerous educational institutions. In the late 1990s, organic processed foods were much less common and organic foods tended to be fresh--not frozen or highly processed. To preserve the nutrition and flavor for this fresh product, a new set of skills needed to be taught. One institution focused instruction on fresh food handling for food service workers in institutional kitchens (hospitals, schools, daycare centers, retirement homes) and restaurants. They were taught how to purchase, cook, store and present organic foods.

The Danish government supported the purchase and use of organic foods in institutional kitchens called “public kitchens,” which provided a quick and stable market for the growing number of organic farms.

## CHANGING CONSUMER PURCHASING

In order to encourage Danish consumers to also adopt an affection for organic foods, the government incentivized a change of purchasing by sending most Danish citizens coupons in the mail that could only be used to lessen the cost of organic foods they purchased in their local stores.

This government subsidy was very popular and many organic foods sold out quickly in the early part of the month when everyone had their coupons. This effort helped to equalize access to organic food while at the same time providing a strong market, which encouraged more farmers to transition.

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## FREE ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

From the beginning, Danish government officials reached out to farmers to identify barriers to organic transition, and farmers stated they wanted the cost of organic certification to be free.

To this day, the Danish government manages organic certification free to all producers. Organic certification in Denmark is free because the value of the ecological services of organic production far outweighs the certification costs. The government also continues to encourage the transition to organic by providing a day-long consultation with an organic expert to help them understand the changes and opportunities resulting from organic production on their individual farm.

Research and innovation are deeply embedded in the Danish organic plan. From agricultural production to developing new food products and processing techniques suited to organic, Denmark has become an important global leader in visioning and building the infrastructure, policy examples, and public support that can be replicated to create an organic world. 🌱

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