



ORGANIC FARMERS
ASSOCIATION

REVITALIZING THE MID-DELTA MISSISSIPPI RIVER WITH ORGANIC



Shawn Peebles

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

