



ORGANIC FARMERS
ASSOCIATION

Organic Farmers Unite: A Powerful Lobby Day in Washington D.C.

By Amanda Jones



ORGANIC FARMERS UNITE

In the heart of our nation's capital, a determined group of organic farmers and advocates recently converged for the annual Organic Farmers Association's Farmer Fly-In. This event, held on March 5, was not just a gathering; it was a powerful demonstration of grassroots advocacy in action.

Gathering under the banner of the Organic Farmers Association, 36 passionate individuals, including farmer members of OFA's Policy Committee and Governing Committee, embarked on a journey to Washington D.C. The goal was to make our voices heard by advocating the key marker bills to be considered in the upcoming Farm Bill that hold the promise of transforming the landscape for organic agriculture.

Before their day on Capitol Hill, participants spent time preparing for the pivotal moments ahead. Policy proposals were voted on, advocacy strategies were outlined, and our farmer members who typically gather virtually made new connections and solidified old friendships as they geared up to make their voices heard.

The preparation was not just about the future discussions with legislators and policymakers, it was also about the invaluable experiences shared by the farmers themselves. Pryor Garnett from Garnetts Red Prairie Farm in Oregon, a seasoned advocate, shared his insights on reviewing policy proposals with the group. "Reviewing the year's policy proposals is an invigorating, whirlwind of an experience," Pryor remarked. "The discussions are uniformly thorough, and I learn a lot every time we do this."

GROUP MEETING AT USDA

To start off a day of advocacy, a crucial meeting was held at the USDA building, where Jenny Lester Moffit, Under Secretary for the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), and Dr. Jenny Tucker, Director of the National Organic Program (NOP), engaged with our delegation. During this meeting our farmers gathered to share feedback about the Transitioning Organic Producers Program (TOPP). This program is aimed at assisting conventional farmers in transitioning to organic agriculture by providing technical support.

Farmers gave feedback on the recent implementation of the new Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE). This initiative focuses on enhancing enforcement mechanisms within the organic industry to ensure compliance with organic standards to prevent fraud. With some farmers' experiencing price increases and overwhelming paperwork, and others experiencing positive system reform, this was a productive meeting to give feedback and would lay the groundwork for the meetings to come on Capitol Hill.

ADVOCACY DAY ON CAPITOL HILL

After meeting with USDA officials, our advocates split off to meet with their respective legislators. Throughout the day, discussions revolved around the challenges faced by organic farmers and the policy solutions necessary to support the needs of organic farmers across the country.

Several marker bills poised to shape the future of organic agriculture were discussed. The O DAIRY Act (S.3097) emerged as a key policy position for organic dairy farmers like Zach Cahill from Cahill Dairy Farm in California.

 Sara Tashker, Green Gulch Farm

After the rush of Lobby Day, OFA members gather and rest before leaving the Hill.





OFA California members gathered in Washington, D.C. for the 2024 Lobby Day.

ADVOCACY CONT.

This comprehensive act encompasses crucial provisions aimed at enhancing the organic dairy sector. It promises improved data collection, the establishment of a functional safety-net program specifically tailored for organic dairy farmers, investments in regional organic dairy infrastructure, and immediate support to address rising input costs. Meanwhile, member Ed Maltby representing the Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (NODPA) was a staunch advocate for the Organic Dairy Data Collection Act (H.R. 6937), which aims to provide better insights into the challenges facing organic dairy operations, ensuring that policymakers have the necessary information to enact meaningful change.

Seth Kroeck from Crystal Spring Farm in Maine, attending his second fly-in, reflected on his meetings on the Hill. "My last meeting was with Molly Ryan, agriculture staffer to Senator Collins," Seth recounted. Ryan shared that Senator Collins is "approached by every organic organization because [she is] the only Republican senator who will vote organic" and that she "like[s] OFA because it is just organic farmers." Reflecting on his experience, Seth added, "This year I was solo and felt comfortable to go through my talking points and have a back and forth looking for points to connect on."

OFA farmer-member Scott Myers from Woodlyn Acres Farm in Ohio has sustained efforts to build a relationship with Rep. Max Miller's office. Miller's agriculture staffer had a background in specialty crops and was eager to discuss crop insurance reforms proposed in the Crop Insurance for Future Farmers Act (H.R. 3904). This act which seeks to extend critical crop insurance protections to beginning farmers was a hot topic for discussion. Scott and OFA team member, Julia Barton presented key points to promote a fair and functional crop insurance system. They also focused on the Whole Farm Revenue Protection Program Improvement Act of 2023 (S. 2593). If included, it will authorize research and reduce paperwork burdens to improve participation rates, ensuring that small, mid-size, and diversified farms can access crop insurance.

To conclude the meeting, Scott and Julia finalized plans for an in-district farm visit with Miller's office at Woodlyn Acres Farm which was held on April 22 in partnership with the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA).

Rep. Miller's visit served to deepen the dialogue on crop insurance policies and important conservation programs, and fostered collaborative efforts with the office and staff.



OFA Illinois members at the Capitol during Lobby Day.

ADVOCACY CONT.

As of this publication, Miller has cosponsored the Crop Insurance for Future Farmers Act, (HR 3904) and Continuous Improvement and Accountability in Organic Standards (CIAO) Act, (HR 5973) based on the conversations he had with farmers that day. Additionally, Scott Myers and Milo Petruziello (OEFFA Policy Director) now sit on Max Miller's Agricultural Advisory Committee.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Amidst these discussions, positive interactions played a pivotal role while advocating for the Strengthening Organic Agriculture Research (SOAR) Act (S.2720). The staffer for Rep. Marie Gluesenkamp Perez displayed knowledge and enthusiasm regarding the SOAR Act, and the Representative has since signed on as a cosponsor of the legislation. This act aims to enhance organic farming practices and research by providing funding for research initiatives, education programs, and extension services within the USDA. This bill seeks to address the unique challenges faced by organic farmers and promote sustainable agriculture practices.

Conversations with Rep. Jared Huffman indicated his willingness to support the Organic Agriculture Research Act (H.R. 3650) as a co-sponsor. This legislation resonates with Huffman's commitment to advocating for organic producers and seeks to bolster research and innovation within the organic farming sector. Huffman expressed his determination to support organic producers fully and stated that he would regard the materials provided during the office visit as his "marching orders" moving forward.

CONNECTIONS MADE

As the day drew to a close, our group reconvened for the House Agriculture Committee meeting and the Senate Agriculture Committee meetings, reflecting on the progress made and the challenges ahead. Pryor Garnett summed up the essence of our collective effort, stating, "The biggest benefit from advocating on Capitol Hill in person is the personal relationships I develop with representatives, senators and their staff. Becoming a trusted source for information about organic farming allows me to bring forward issues and gain the staffs' insights into how best to proceed and advance proposals that will improve the livelihoods and lives of organic farmers."

Amidst the discussions and deliberations, his words resonated deeply, underscoring the importance of personal connections and informed advocacy in driving meaningful change. There was an undeniable sense of optimism among us—a belief that through collective action and unwavering commitment, real change is not just possible, but inevitable.

As we look towards the future, let this lobby day serve as a beacon of inspiration for all organic farmers. Together, we have the power to shape policy, champion our values, and build a brighter, more sustainable future for organic agriculture. Will you join us next year, as we continue our journey toward a better tomorrow?

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Amanda Jones is a passionate advocate for sustainable food systems and a recent policy advocacy intern for OFA.