



ORGANIC FARMERS  
ASSOCIATION

# How Farmers Get Involved in Shaping Ag Policy

*By Harriet Behar*





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

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

But what can farmer advocacy really accomplish?

## A VERY PRODUCTIVE BUNCH

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

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

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



## KEVIN FULTON

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



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

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

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

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



## **MIKE APPEL & EMILY OAKLEY**

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

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

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

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

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

## LINLEY DIXON

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



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

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

## ADVOCACY IN ACTION

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

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

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

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



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