

The Organic Voice

Organic Farmers Association – No. 19 • November 2025

Government Grants Improve Organic Infrastructure and Markets

To grow the organic supply chain we need to invest in our local food system infrastructure

Page 12

Consumer Education and Grain Processing Democratization

Keys to improving the environmental and social impacts of American grain production

Page 18

The History of National Organic Farmer Movements

Ahead of OFA's 10th Anniversary we review our founding and the recent history leading to where we are now

Page 37

For ORGANIC FARMERS. By ORGANIC FARMERS.

Providing a strong and unified national voice for domestic certified organic producers.



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- Improving USDA Programs for Organic Farmers
- Organic Integrity & NOP Enforcement
- Keeping Organic Rooted in Soil
- Dismantling Corporate Consolidation
- Organic as a Solution to Climate Change



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Staff

Executive Director, Kate Mendenhall
Policy Director, Lily Hawkins
Project Manager, Ryann Monteiro
Membership & Outreach Coord., Amber Lippon
Communications Manager, Madison Letizia
Farmer Services Director, Julia Barton
Farmer Services Consultant, Harriet Behar

Contributors

Nicole Tautges, Sam Oschwald Tilton, Katie Fettes, Jenna Spencer,
Harriet Behar, Lily Hawkins, & Aparna Nidamanuri

Editor: Madison Letizia

Editor-in-Chief: Kate Mendenhall

Cover Photo: Gianforte Family: Gianforte Farm, New York

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COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

Send comments & inquiries to:

Organic Farmers Association
PO BOX 709, Spirit Lake, IA 51360 USA
202-643-5363 | info@OrganicFarmersAssociation.org

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Contents

QUARTERLY UPDATES

- 1 President's Letter
- 4 Winter Policy Update

WINTER ISSUE FEATURES

- 12 Government Grants Improve Organic Infrastructure and Markets
- 18 Consumer Education and Grain Processing Democratization
- 37 The History of National Organic Farmer Movements, and the Founding of OFA

- 8 2026 Annual OFA Policy Survey

DON'T MISS THESE STORIES

- 10 Interrupted: The Article We Lost to the Shutdown
- 24 Cultivating the Organic Opportunity: Lessons from Canada's Organic Task Force
- 30 What's Really Moving the Organic Grain Market in 2025?

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From Our President

Every farmer needs a market of some kind. It can be as simple as providing for friends and neighbors, or as complex as an international supply chain, but a market of some kind is always needed to get products from the farm to their consumers. And the market has to get those products all the way there. If it doesn't, it's not a market that the farmer can depend on. And without a dependable market, the farmer won't be able to afford to grow their products, and pretty soon those products won't be available to consumers. This is just as true for organic products as for conventional and industrial ones, and it always has the same outcome. Without a fully functioning market for a product, a supply chain with every link strong, farmers won't grow the product and consumers won't get it.

We know that consumers want more organic options, because sales of organic food and fiber are growing much faster than sales of conventional ones. But if domestic U.S. farmers and ranchers can't produce the organic products that consumers want because they don't have a functioning market they can depend on, those consumers will either have no organic choice, or will be presented with imported products whose organic credentials are less strongly enforced.

Organic—especially food, but also fiber and other products—is uniquely dependent on, and vulnerable to, market gaps. That's because putting the organic seal on a product legally requires that every link in the production and processing chain be certified organic. And getting certified takes work, costs money, and isn't done lightly. It takes a nudge or two (financial; technical; collaborative) to build a new market for organic products.

Market development and stabilization for certified organic products is a collection of projects that will deliver more domestically-produced organic food and fiber products to consumers, simultaneously satisfying consumer demand for organic goods, and assuring organic farmers and ranchers that there will be dependable buyers for their products at prices they can thrive on. You can read in this issue of Organic Voice about several farmers who received USDA Organic Market Development Grants. The Organic Farmers Association advocated strongly for those USDA grants, as part of what OFA does in support of U.S. organic farmers and ranchers.

OFA exists to "provide a strong and unified national voice for domestic certified organic producers so that organic agriculture will become the basis of a viable United States food and agricultural policy and production system." We spoke in support of Organic Market Development Grants because we recognized the importance to farmers and ranchers of having good markets for their organic products. The successes in that program demonstrates the value of having OFA advocating on behalf of organic producers, and the importance of joining OFA as a farmer, supporter, or organization. If you're already an OFA member, I sincerely thank you. If you're not, please consider joining us!

Sincerely,



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



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challenging *and* critically important

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Year-End Organic Policy Update

By Lily Hawkins

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN

The main focus in D.C. right now is the ongoing government shutdown. Congress failed to pass legislation to fund the government past September 30, and though a short term funding patch known as a Continuing Resolution (CR) passed in the House, it did not make it through the Senate when Democrats declined to support a bill that did not include key healthcare provisions.

While some essential services are still taking place, many federal programs are paused, with federal workers furloughed or working without pay until the shutdown is resolved.

At this time there has been little movement toward resolution on a CR, with several possible inflection points having passed with no movement. Some speculation says the shutdown could drag on well into November.

There are concerns that President Trump may use the shutdown to further reduce the federal workforce as he has threatened to do. OFA will be tracking the situation.

Background

Once legislators pass a funding patch to reopen the government, they will need to turn back to passing actual funding legislation.

Both chambers have passed their version of the Agriculture Appropriations bill, but bills need to be passed for all funding areas and agreed upon by both chambers. Currently the ag appropriations bills are very different in the House and in the Senate. The House bill proposes deep cuts to several key agricultural programs, including:

- A 56% cut to the **Value-Added Producer Grant program**
- A 9% reduction in **Conservation Technical Assistance**
- A 16% cut to the **Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program**—the USDA's only farmer-driven research program

In contrast, the Senate bill largely maintains funding for the USDA and FDA, preserving some programs targeted for cuts in the House version.

FARM BILL PROSPECTS

With the inclusion of many agriculture provisions important to large scale commodity growers in the Big Beautiful Bill Act, and distraction from a government shutdown, momentum toward a new Farm Bill is slow.

Despite the uncertain timeline, OFA and allied organizations continue to advocate for the inclusion of key policies for organic in any future Farm Bill.

Farm Bill Marker Bill Tracker



Legislators of the 119th Congress are beginning work to introduce and reintroduce Farm Bill marker bills. (Bills that OFA supported last year need to be reintroduced in the new Congress.) These bills are not intended to pass on their own, but are a vehicle to introduce ideas and build support for policies in hopes that they'll be included in the next Farm Bill. Keep track of organic policies in our tracker!

[View the Tracker >](#)

ORGANIC IMPORT VERIFICATION ACT

OFA is spending extra time right now supporting the Organic Imports Verification Act. This would promote organic integrity and a level playing field for domestic organic producers by requiring the USDA to test high-risk bulk imports of organic feedstuffs for residues of substances that are prohibited in organic production. The bill is sponsored by Senator Ricketts (R-NE) and Senator Smith (D-MN). Specifically, the bill would do the following:

1. Establish Risk-Based Protocol: The USDA Secretary, in consultation with the Secretary of Homeland Security and the “organic agricultural product imports interagency working group,” shall develop and regularly update risk-based protocols for determining the high-risk status of organic feedstuffs.

2. Establish an Annual List of High-Risk Organic Feedstuffs: Each year, the USDA Secretary, using the established risk-based protocol, shall create a confidential list of high-risk imported organic feedstuffs that will require additional residue testing that year.

3. Establish Parameters for Residue Testing: The USDA Secretary will create residue testing parameters for the established list of high-risk imported organic feedstuffs. Parameters would outline necessary testing frequency, quantity to be tested, the type of testing, who is responsible for the testing, and other necessary parameters.

4. Require Annual Testing: Annually, the USDA Secretary will be required to conduct residue testing for each covered organic feedstuff.

5. Establish Corrective Action: If required residue testing indicates a prohibited substance over the permitted level for organic, the shipment of that organic feedstuff will be excluded from organic sale.

6. Require an Annual Report to Congress: The NOP would be required to present an annual report to Congress on the residue testing carried out during the year prior for each high-risk organic feedstuff and imported organic feedstuff shipped in bulk. The report would include information on the frequency of the applicable residue testing, residue testing methods used, testing results, standards used to analyze the test results, and any actions taken due to the residue testing.

While import fraud can appear across commodities in the organic sector, imported organic feedstuff commodities (like whole soybeans, soybean meal, corn, cracked corn, rape, rape meal, whole sunflowers, hulled sunflowers, sunflower oil, and sunflower meal) enter the U.S. market through high-risk (complex and opaque) supply chains. This bill would build off of the recently finalized Strengthening Organic Enforcement rule and provide the USDA with an additional tool to crack down on fraud.

Nearly 700 organic farmers, organizations, and consumers have signed a letter in support of the legislation. **Click here** to ask your Senator to co-sponsor the bill. If you would like to attend an advocacy meeting with your Senator about the bill, please contact OFA Policy Director Lily Hawkins at lily@organicfarmersassociation.org.

CONFIRMATION OF DUDLEY HOSKINS

On September 18, the Senate voted to confirm Dudley Hoskins as the new Undersecretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs. This is a key position for organic policy, since the NOP operates under USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. As chief of staff for AMS during President Trump's first term, he engaged with the organic program, including the Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) Rule. 🌱

Lillian Hawkins is the Policy Director of Organic Farmers Association. She ensures the policy priorities of certified organic farmers are represented in Washington, D.C.



OFA FARMER MEMEBERS

- ? Are you interested in hosting an in-district visit on your farm in 2026?
- ? Do you live in a district with a member of congress who could become an organic advocate?
- ? Is there an organic issue you're facing on your farm that you'd like to build support for?

We want to work with you to host an in-district visit next year!

Please email OFA Policy Director Lily Hawkins and let us know in you're interested!



**ORGANIC FARMERS
ASSOCIATION**

BE A PART OF FARMER-LED POLICY SOLUTIONS

JOIN A FARMER WORKGROUP

Farmer Workgroups are a space for farmers to work together to identify problems, brainstorm solutions, and amplify the voices of organic farmers in the policy space.

- **Crop Insurance Workgroup:** Make crop insurance work better for organic and transitioning farmers during this monthly one-hour session by working to ensure crop insurance is fair and functional.
- **Grain Grower Workgroup:** This workgroup meets monthly for one hour to address ongoing organic farmer concerns regarding issues of concern to grain farmers, such as fraudulent organic imports, and generate strategies and solutions.
- **Mixed Vegetable Grower Workgroup:** This workgroup meets monthly for one hour to address concerns raised by mixed veg farmers such as market consolidation to generate strategies and solutions.
- **Public Procurement Workgroup:** Join OFA Organization Members and farmers working together to get more organic food in institutions like schools and hospitals. This workgroup will meet monthly for one hour.
- **NOSB Workgroup:** A short-term, targeted workgroup that will meet ahead of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) meeting to form comments for the board and prepare members to also to share comments.

Complete a Workgroup Interest Form Now

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SEEDING A BETTER FUTURE WITH
ORGANIC**



**TOGETHER, WE MAKE A
DIFFERENCE**



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2026 ANNUAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT SURVEY

For Organic Farmers, By Organic Farmers

MAKE
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VOICE
COUNT!

This survey is available online, or you may print these two pages & mail to OFA by January 23, 2026.

PLEASE SELECT THE BEST OPTION:

- ☐ I am a certified organic farmer.
- ☐ I am an "exempt" organic farmer (less \$5K/yr)
- ☐ I work for an organic farm organization.
- ☐ Other (please specify)

ARE YOU AN OFA MEMBER? ☐ Yes ☐ No

PLEASE SELECT YOUR FARM'S/ORG'S REGION:

- ☐ **CALIFORNIA**
- ☐ **WEST** (AK, HI, WA, OR, NV, AZ, ID, UT, NM, MT, WY, CO, KS)
- ☐ **NORTH CENTRAL** (ND, SD, NE, MN, IA, WI)
- ☐ **MIDWEST** (MO, IL, IN, MI, OH, PA)
- ☐ **SOUTH** (TX, OK, AR, LA, MS, AL, GA, FL, SC, NC, TN, KY, VA, WV, MD, Territories)
- ☐ **NORTHEAST** (NY, VT, NH, ME, MA, RI, CT, NJ, DE)

CHANGES IN FEDERAL PROGRAMS: Over the last year, there have been significant changes at the Federal level—from reductions in staffing and major reorganization plans at USDA, to the expiration of the Farm Bill and a government shutdown in 2025. We want to know how you've been impacted, and what is most important for us to communicate about your experience in D.C. Please answer the following questions to provide us with more information as we work on this issue.

Have you been affected by recent events such as: (check all that apply)

- ☐ The government shutdown
- ☐ Tariff negotiations
- ☐ USDA staffing
- ☐ Possible Affordable Care Act subsidy reductions
- ☐ Farm labor or immigration changes
- ☐ None of the above
- ☐ Other, please describe:

click

FOR THE
ONLINE
SURVEY



The online survey is more comprehensive.

YOUR POLICY PRIORITIES

Please **SELECT THE TOP FIVE** policy issues you think should be the **HIGHEST PRIORITIES** for OFA:

- ☐ Animal Welfare
- ☐ Beginning Farmer Issues (Access to affordable land, credit, mentorship, etc.)
- ☐ Climate Change & Conservation
- ☐ Contamination (Pesticide, PFAS, GMO Drift)
- ☐ Corporate Control & Consolidation in the Organic Market
- ☐ Making USDA Programs work for Organic Farmers (Crop Insurance, Disaster Assistance, NRCS, FSA)
- ☐ Organic Market and Supply Chain Development
- ☐ Prohibiting Certified Organic Hydroponic & Container Growing
- ☐ Labor and Immigration
- ☐ National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) Issues and Agenda
- ☐ NOP Enforcement to Ensure Organic Integrity
- ☐ Organic Research
- ☐ Organic Certification that is Practical and Affordable
- ☐ Import Fraud
- ☐ Other (please specify):

What is the biggest challenge facing your farm business?

SUBMIT YOUR POLICY POSITIONS FOR POLICY COMMITTEE REVIEW

If you have identified a new needed policy position or a needed change to an existing OFA policy for the OFA Policy Committee to consider, please submit your policy concern(s) below. Please be specific.
You can review OFA current policies [here](#).

POLICY PROPOSAL #1

Recommended OFA Policy Position (Example: *OFA SUPPORTS strengthening USDA import inspection, review, and testing protocols to ensure organic label integrity.*):

This policy is important because:

I have more ideas about this. Please contact me so I can help!

☐ Yes

☐ No

POLICY PROPOSAL #2

Recommended OFA Policy Position

This policy is important because:

I have more ideas about this. Please contact me so I can help!

☐ Yes

☐ No

CONTACT INFORMATION

Your policy positions and priorities will be kept confidential and only shared as a group. If you have expert knowledge for a policy position, OFA may reach out to you for more info.

Name

Farm Name/Org

Address

City State Zip

Email

Phone

My preferred way to communicate is: phone ☐ email ☐

RETURN COMPLETED SURVEY TO:

Organic Farmers Assoc.
PO Box 709
Spirit Lake, IA 51360



ORGANIC FARMERS
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Interrupted: The Article We Lost to the Shutdown

By Furloughed Guest Writer

What's this, you ask?

Well, this was the space created for an article we had planned to publish from a USDA staff member about market gaps in organics.

We saw the draft just one day before our guest writer, a Senior Research Agricultural Economist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, was furloughed as a part of the wide-reaching federal government shutdown. The article was full of metrics, statistics, and charts expounding on the current state of the organic market as well as suggestions for the future growth of the sector. We thought our readers would like it.

But we're not getting to read that article.

This is just one example of the far reaching affects of the government shutdown. From local office closures during peak harvest season, grant payments not being processed, leases not being reviewed, and the lack of access to data and information from the USDA that farmers have the right to access, farmers are being affected.

This is just one example of the far reaching affects of the government shutdown...

While OFA's editorial calendar being interrupted is small potatoes compared to the much greater hurt others are experiencing, we've included this page in order to make a point: [we're all losing out during this government shutdown.](#)

If you're a farmer experiencing ripples, waves, or monsoon rains from the shutdown, **please call us at (833-724-3834) or email our Farmer HelpLine.** Our team is documenting the impacts and connecting farmers with members of the media who are sharing farmers' stories to create pressure in D.C.

We hope to run the completed article in the future for you all, but we know not everything lost in this shutdown may be recovered. Please reach out if we can help you in any way.



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FEATURED STORY

Government Grants Improve Organic Infrastructure and Markets

By Harriet Behar

Mel and Sue Brown: Amaltheia Dairy, Montana

“We were able to add another layer of value to what we were doing on our farm,”

said Luke Gianforte, a New York grain producer who received an Organic Market Development Grant (OMDG) last year, as part of the Organic Transition Initiative. A total of \$85 million was distributed nationwide to 107 farms, processors and market-focused businesses and organizations in 34 states in 2024. To grow the organic supply chain and support increased U.S. demand for organic food, we need to invest in our local food system infrastructure.

While the OMDG was short-lived, it proved to be a mechanism that supported this supply-chain growth. In September 2024, Senators introduced the Organic Market Development Act to permanently establish the Organic Market Development Grant (OMDG) Program; the bill was supported by Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Sen. Angus King (I-ME), Sen. Peter Welch (D-VT), and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), and supported in the House of Representatives by Rep. Anne Kuster (D-NH), Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-ME), and Rep. Andrea Salinas (D-CA).

That bill expired with the 118th Congress, but we anticipate that it will be reintroduced later this month under the name Domestic Organic Market Expansion (DOME) bill.

Check our [Take Action advocacy page](#) later this month for an action alert to Congress, urging them to support this bill and invest in building our local organic supply chains.

OVERVIEW OF THE 2024 ORGANIC MARKET DEVELOPMENT GRANT

One aspect of the OMDG program allowed farmers to expand value-added processing or diversify their cropping systems to strengthen their resiliency through expanded market access. The underlying goal of this program was to support the development of new and expanded organic markets to increase the consumption of domestic organic agricultural products. The grantees of this pilot grant program are reporting success in meeting this goal.

Grant Overview cont.

The DOME Act outlines a permanent program to continue OMD grants and framework. OMD grants ranged from \$15,000 to \$3,000,000, covering the purchase of equipment, expanding processing capacity, and market development. Farmers applying for grants under \$100,000 were able to access a simpler application process. While some farmers hired grant writers to help them through the process, many did not. Grants over \$100,000 required a monetary match and more extensive reporting and oversight. There were many different agencies that grantees were required to interact with, which proved challenging, but once they dedicated one family member to learn the requirements, things went smoothly.

The 2024 OMDG funds targeted five areas: organic grains and livestock feeds, organic legumes and other rotational crops, organic dairy, organic ingredients not currently available in commercial form, and organic fibers. While the OMD grants provided support for necessary supply chain investment, it left out other bottlenecks, such as local livestock and dairy processing and logistics solutions for moving farm products to urban markets. In addition to infrastructure, OMD grants also funded marketing strategies for specific organic products. These grants were a much-needed investment in building organic supply-chain infrastructure across the U.S.; yet, the one-year funding will not achieve the goal of developing new and expanding organic markets to increase organic consumption. DOME offers a multi-year investment to support the organic market by solidifying domestic supply-chain infrastructure, to fill domestic organic demand, and to continue to grow the organic market.

GRANT CASE STUDIES

Venture Milk

Venture Milk is a milk processor focused on niche marketed dairy products to bring organic milk to the southern U.S. Venture Milk's owners Brooke and Jonny work with the family farm Jonny grew up on, Working Cows Dairy in Slocumb Alabama. Working Cows Dairy, certified organic since 2009, milks 200 cows. This grant awarded to Venture Milk enabled them to hire more help, improve their processing efficiencies for cheese and bottled milk, as well as expand their product and packaging options for retail and food service. In their economically distressed area, providing more options for local, healthy dairy products and creating new local jobs were important goals.

This grant has enabled Venture Milk to purchase milk from other farms in the area, increasing opportunities for more organic dairy farmers. The closest non-store brand organic milk processor is in North Carolina, giving them an impetus to fill local market demand with fresh, local organic milk and cheeses. They have expanded their fluid milk processing and added cultured buttermilk and kefirs to their product line. The next phase will add cottage cheese, yogurt, and frozen dairy. Grants under \$100,000 did not require a monetary match, and this was a plus. They greatly "appreciated the opportunity to expand organic dairy in this region of the southeastern United States." The support and funding was excellent in helping them build upon their current activities and has expanded markets for other dairy farmers and co-processors as they increase the products Venture Milk provides to consumers.



*DeJong Family:
Working Cows Dairy,
Alabama*

Gianforte Farm

Luke Gianforte was attracted to the OMDG for support to build on-farm infrastructure to give him enhanced opportunities for selling cornmeal and roasted soybeans. His operation limited his ability to meet the market demand and he was seeking support to expand his processing facilities. His grant was less than \$100,000 and did not require any monetary matching funds, which was a significant incentive to apply.

For his grant, Gianforte paid upfront for the equipment purchased and submitted receipts for reimbursement. He had the option to receive some grant money upfront, but since they were purchasing everything from one supplier, it was easier not to split up the payments. While originally it was challenging to navigate the required paperwork, Luke and his wife quickly became proficient in the necessary requirements. Luckily, they submitted all of their receipts before government funding was frozen in January 2025, and received their payment in a timely manner.

Gianforte Family: Gianforte Farm, New York



Amaltheia Dairy

Amaltheia Dairy outside of Bozeman, Montana, is a 20-year-old organic goat milk dairy, making soft goat milk cheeses for local markets. The OMDG supported an expansion into fluid milk products. By offering a more diversified product line, they gain access to different markets and provide a local product that was not available in their region. Appropriately-scaled stainless steel dairy processing equipment is not cheap, and it takes many professionals with specific skills to install milk cooling, pasteurization, and bottling equipment.

Unfortunately, they were unable to complete purchasing and reimbursement requests before the funding freeze this winter, forcing them to put their project on hold while waiting for the review and release of their promised funds. This delayed the installation of their equipment. Once their project was cleared to continue this summer, they found it challenging to get the plumbers and electricians back to work on their project with competition from other area construction projects. They are planning to increase their goat herd over time, but want to remain “family scale.” They welcomed the resiliency that this product diversification provides to their farm enterprise. This grant was a “great thing for their farm,” and they were enthusiastic to learn that it could continue into the future for other family farmers.

Moon Valley Farm

For Emma Jagoz of Moon Valley Farm in Maryland, OMDG was not her first interaction with government grants, as she had received a Value-Added Producer Grant in 2021. The application process and reporting system were similar and, therefore, not a daunting process this time around. Moon Valley Farm is a four-season fresh vegetable operation.

The grant paid for a small-scale bean/grain thresher, a commercial-scale dehydrator, and a larger delivery vehicle. In addition to increasing their crop availability, the introduction of legumes and grains improved their crop rotation, which had been heavy on the cucurbits, nightshades, and brassicas. The fresh market vegetable equipment and experience growing diverse crops translated easily into growing dry beans and sunflowers; the only piece missing was the specialty harvesting equipment.

Moon Valley Farm cont.

There has been a learning curve in using the new equipment, but they learned to adjust the harvest settings and speed to improve the percentage of clean beans and sunflower kernels with minimal hand sorting before packaging. Emma is enthusiastic about the positive changes this brought to the farm, and she aims to be able to share this equipment with other vegetable growers in their network in the future.

Not all grant awards supported processing equipment, other farmer-focused grant awards funded vegetable growers who were upgrading their facilities to allow four season production along with value-added processing in Washington state, a vegetable grower freeze drying micro-greens in Pennsylvania, and an operation ramping up production of certified organic transplants in Georgia. Forty-one percent of the grants supported individual farmers with awards below \$100,000, while the majority of the funds supported larger projects. The larger OMD grants (over \$100,000) primarily went to companies that process or package significant volumes of local organic commodities in their region, or to organizations that used the grant money to develop marketing toolkits and worked to expand market access for smaller-scale organic farmers in their region.

Emma Jagoz: Moon Valley Farm, Maryland



Many OMD grants have demonstrated the value of this investment because they can be replicated in other regions of the country based upon the known success of the project. These grants exemplify that a small monetary investment can be multiplied many times over to build resilient local and regional farm economies. 🌱



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.

TAKE ACTION!

Organic Farmer voices matter in D.C.

Did you know you can download OFA's current advocacy factsheets to get the most relevant information on an organic farming policy. Plus, you can use these factsheets to communicate key points with your legislators when you advocate for organic farming!

**Download a
Factsheet**

Browse OFA's current Action Alerts to find where your voice is needed most to protect organic food and farms!

Send a letter to your legislators to:

- Urge Congress to Support Organic Farmers in the Farm Bill
- Protect Federal Funding for Farm and Food Programs
- Ask your Senators to Fight Fraudulent Organic Imports

Write a Letter



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(and aspiring organic farmers!)

AS WE WORK TOGETHER TO
HEAL PEOPLE AND THE PLANET.

RESOURCES FOR FARMERS

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- Digital webinars, online courses, and other
educational resources
RodaleInstitute.org/Education
- Scientific research on organic agriculture
RodaleInstitute.org/Science



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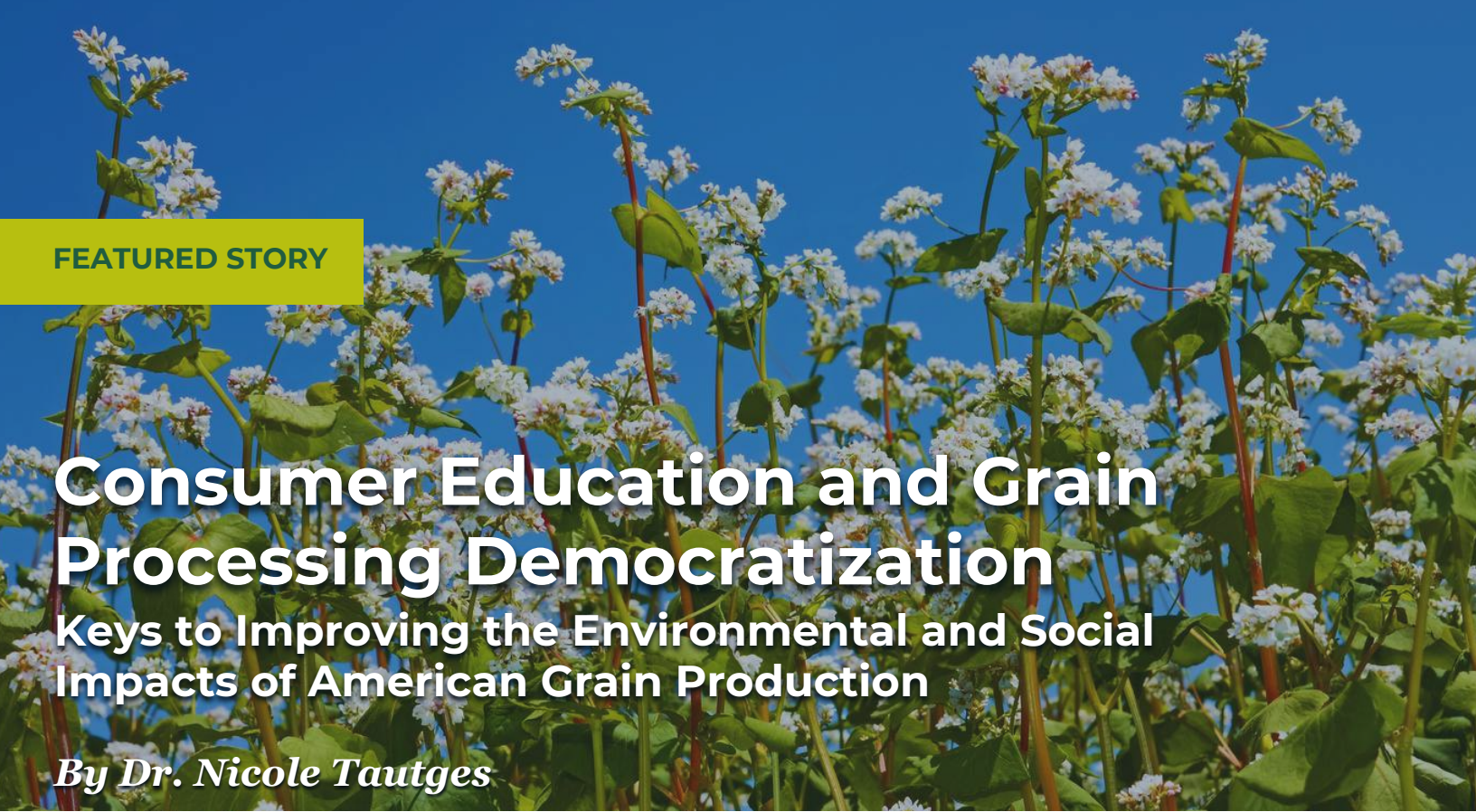
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FEATURED STORY

Consumer Education and Grain Processing Democratization

Keys to Improving the Environmental and Social Impacts of American Grain Production

By Dr. Nicole Tautges

American agrarian traditions rooted in small family farms and communitarian values are a powerful part of the American cultural ethos. While the on-the-ground experience was probably not as idyllic as nostalgic sensibilities provoke; nonetheless, the cooperation, community pride, and unique community identities that were formed during the height of family farming in the U.S. still form a distinct imprint on our cultural memory. In the Midwest, discussions about grain harvest, combining, and putting grain and hay up for the winter quickly give way to stories from old-timers about how it was done in their coming-of-age days.

Before the modern combine, grain was cut and bundled mostly by hand, and then fed into a community-shared threshing machine to get the grain off the stalk. The thresher and the farm crew traveled from farm to farm, and everyone helped with the grain harvest until everybody was done. As the old timers tell it, the field activities were mostly performed by the men while the women cooperated to cook and serve meals to keep the farm crew fed (I wonder what I would have thought back then, and whether I would have fought to be on the field crew side).

When telling this story (and I've heard it from many others too), my grandpa's eyes would close as he remembered the meal parts of the days—he seemed to go back in time to taste the dinner rolls and mashed potatoes, and gravy served up.

Maybe he can hear the voices of his neighbors—or perhaps he remembers just the sound of silent chewing that marks good food and rest. I can imagine the fun and relief from the heat and dust experienced in the camaraderie of everyone taking comfort in a big meal, together.

We all know what happened next. Advances in mechanization decreased the number of hands needed to grow and harvest food crops. The well-resourced farmers were able to adopt the technology more quickly, putting them further ahead, and productivity among family farms started to diverge. Foreign wars took sons off the farm, and when many returned, the family farm was changed or gone. Many grown farm children moved to cities, and farmland was consolidated into fewer hands. Advances in transportation enabled the nationalization, and then the globalization, of our food system. Food security improved. Food safety improved. Food quality decreased. Larger farms and larger technological capital investment became based on capturing economies of scale, and quality, nutritional content, and farm/community identities were all sacrificed on the pyre of efficiency. These techno-socioeconomic trends led to the centralization of food processing, which has driven monoculture agriculture, rural economic decline, and dilution of nutrition in the American food system. The community meals were gone, replaced by more lonely toils.

AMERICAN DIETS DON'T SUPPORT HEALTHY FARMS

Agroecologists—a fancy word for agriculturalists that seek to improve the environmental impact of agricultural systems—often focus on increasing the number of crops and the rotation cycle of cropping systems. In the Midwest, there is a big push to expand the acreage of crops other than corn and soybeans. In the West, monoculture wheat or wheat-fallow systems are the targets for improvement. Formal and informal cropping trials ensue, with calls for expanding acreage of wheat, rye, peas, alfalfa, pastureland, and other forages. I know this process very well because I have been a part of it. Farmers listen to our presentations politely and then ask where they can sell these other crops for a decent margin. They are often met with confusion or vague, repetitive references to the same oversaturated buyers. Little changes.

Rye is a great example. Use of rye as a winter cover crop has generated a lot of buzz and expanded acreage due to its well-documented benefits for nutrient capture, nitrate leaching mitigation, topsoil preservation, and even its ability to mitigate weed pressure. However, cover cropping has a cost, sometimes more than \$50-70/acre, not to mention the extra labor and mental costs for the farmer. Farmers are urged to use cover crops and are pointed to government cost share programs to offset the cost. The cost share programs require mental and social effort, more paperwork, more planting date and termination deadlines. More stress. What if farmers could take rye to seed and harvest the grain, and sell it at a profit? Then a “third crop” phase of the rotation would interrupt summer annual row crop phenological cycles, would mix up the opportunities to control weeds and pests, and lead to more varied organic matter inputs into the soil, likely enhancing soil health. Farmers could spread out the seasonal workload a little more, too.

But when was the last time you ate rye? If you have eaten it at all, how much have you eaten in the last year?

Farmers can't sell much rye at a profitable price, if at all. The food market for rye is minuscule. Most rye goes to feed markets, where it may be bought at a near break-even price, with net revenue near zero, or it may have slightly more value if sold as cover crop seed. The same is mostly true of peas, a legume crop that can benefit soil nitrogen, weed control, and soil health. A feed market exists for peas, but not much else. Input-heavy row crops like corn and soy dominate cropping systems because their processing industries (which historically attracted significant R&D investment) have developed revenue streams from a wide array of processed corn- and soy-based goods that span industrial applications, from feed to fuel to fiber to food additives and sweeteners. Value is captured from these crops during processing, while they are purchased from the farmer at low prices set by global market conditions. Often, processors' profit margins are also low, but as the industry consolidates, the remaining processors gain more power to set (or fix) prices. The high capital investment required to start processing plants precludes the abundant competition that keeps prices low.



Investment into rye marketing (one of the most discussed conservation crops) has not been done to the same extent as corn and soybeans.

American Diets cont.

Investment into rye marketing (one of the most discussed conservation crops) has not been done to the same extent as corn and soybeans. While traditionally a staple grain in northern and central Europe, rye has fallen out of American culinary traditions and off the typical palette. Old rye recipes and dishes are forgotten. Wonder Bread turned our expectations of bread from hearty, dense goodness to sponge eating. Go ask someone how often they buy rye bread. Tell them rye is so important for preserving water quality. I guarantee you, they won't purchase rye more often.

TOP-DOWN VS. BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES TO CHANGE

There are two common approaches to incentivizing more rotational crops. Top-down approaches are based on programs from governments or powerful market institutions.

One I already mentioned is government cost-share programs, which pay farmers a set amount per acre if they comply with the program rules, which often involve meeting specific planting and termination dates, paperwork, and on-farm inspections. Many farmers are farmers because they don't like paperwork and legalese. That's already a barrier to accessing cost share. However, these programs reveal a flaw right in their name—cost share. They don't usually cover 100% of the costs of a particular conservation practice, meaning the farmer still incurs additional input costs and competitiveness to implement it.

Moreover, contracts typically only last 3-5 years and then the farmer has to bear 100% of the cost. Also, these programs aren't always popular because they involve monetary redistribution to a few, which is not a popular practice in a capitalist system. Farmers repeatedly say they prefer to operate within a free-market system with expanding markets, suggesting that more free food markets would be a major boon to farm financial management and the use of more crops on-farm.

Another option would be for the government or other powerful, large-scale entities to buy enormous volumes of certain "conservation" crops, to create a venue for farmers to sell these crops and realize a profit.

So far, market initiatives for conservation crops have struggled to launch, perhaps because there is nowhere in the food system to sell large volumes of these crops that people aren't used to eating.

Conversely, the bottom-up, or grassroots, approach is to invest in food entrepreneurship, consumer education, and food innovation. Some approaches to this involve lobbying large consumer packaged goods companies (e.g., cereal makers) to replace a small amount of a commodity ingredient with a new, more sustainable ingredient—wheat flour, for example, with rye flour. (Two percent of 40 million pounds of a nationally distributed product can add up to a high volume of grain used in a novel way and can support more acreage.)

WHAT IF...

Before 2025, USAID's Food for Peace program annually purchased \$2 billion of U.S. agricultural commodities for international food aid, typically rice, wheat, lentils, and peas.

While foreign aid has significantly reduced and USAID no longer exists, the USDA announced in September that they plan to purchase \$480 million of U.S. commodities for international food assistance programs, primarily corn and soybean, meal, wheat, and soybeans, but also beans (black, pinto, and small red beans), green and yellow split peas, green peas and lentils, bulgur, rice, flour, and vegetable oil.

What if U.S. government purchasing prioritized conservation rotational crops that are nutritious and need market development support?

However, these large companies often make decisions based on low input costs and end up being inconsistent buyers. Also, with this approach, consumers aren't able to capture the health benefits associated with less commonly used grains, like rye, millet, or buckwheat, which all have environmental benefits when grown, and have higher levels of protein, antioxidants, and vitamins compared with wheat and corn, the most common building blocks of processed foods in the U.S. American eaters and families deserve to be offered more nutritious foods than the wheat- and corn-based processed products that dominate standard grocery store shelves.

Top-Down cont.

Entrepreneurship in the small and medium-sized food company space can be profitable and can offer more nutritious products. New food companies and food entrepreneurship have produced innovative, high-quality foods that deliciously highlight sustainable grains in new ways (some popular small- and medium-sized food companies make special pancake mixes, buckwheat bread, artisanal crackers, granola, etc.). There are not enough public or private investment supports for these types of food entrepreneurs to scale, or even to start new companies of this type.

Current food distribution systems and consolidation in the grocery industry can economically lock out these food companies from selling their products in the places most people shop for food, as most grocery stores charge large stocking fees and force most of the risk on the food companies—smaller start-ups don't have enough capital and freedom to take the risk. Our foods stay the same, and American farmers, eaters, and rural economies lose out.

We can change this. Public and private funders and investors can start programs that re-regionalize or re-localize food processing and distribution, putting these functions back into the hands of community members and neighbors, rather than corporations. Farmers and food makers can talk more directly to eaters about why they should try different grains like rye, buckwheat, and peas. Stories about old food traditions can be shared and remade anew. Consumers can visit the fields where the grains they eat were grown.

They can see the clean water and the soil preservation. More people can participate in farming and in food making.

It's going to take a lot of work and changes. Farmers will have to spend more time marketing. Consumers will have to spend more time experimenting with food and trying new things. Policymakers will have to explore alternatives to cost-share traditions. Food costs will need to be kept down to compete with commodity structures. The impact of local and state food regulations will need to be collaboratively assessed.

Most people say that this is an insurmountable problem that will take a lot of work. I think restoring American rural cultural traditions is worth it. Though nowadays, I hope I won't be stuck in the kitchen. I like shoveling grain. 🌾



Dr. Nicole Tautges is Research Director at the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute. Dr. Tautges completed her Bachelors degree in Agronomy at the University of Wisconsin Madison and earned her PhD at Washington State University, completing a project on soil fertility, weed, and soil microbial management in semiarid organic wheat production systems. She went on to work on Kernza research at the University of Minnesota, and worked at the University of California Davis on soil microbial ecology and soil health outreach in processing tomato systems. At Michael Fields, her research focuses on soil fertility and nutrient cycling in food grade grain systems, where she works mostly with rye, wheat, Kernza, oats, and buckwheat.



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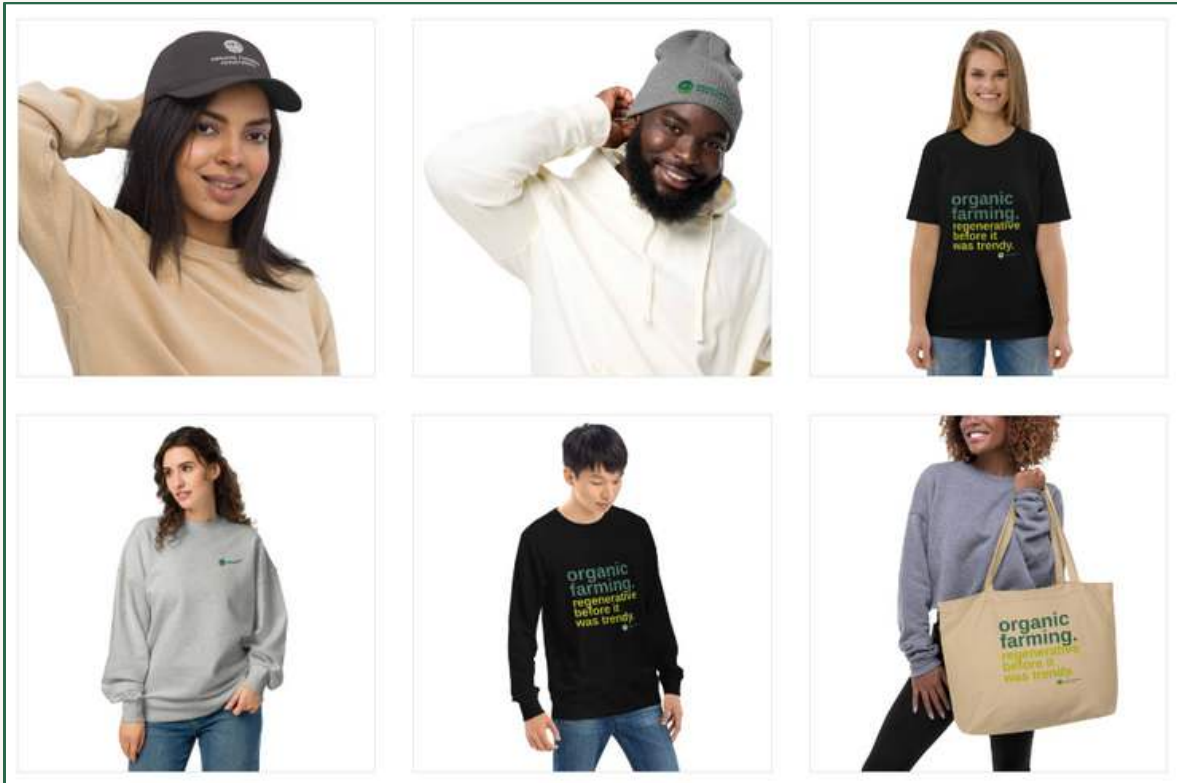
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Cultivating the Organic Opportunity: Lessons from Canada's Organic Task Force

By Canadian Organic Growers

The Canadian Organic Task Force, convened by Canadian Organic Growers (COG), brought together farmers, researchers, and policy experts to assess the economic and environmental impacts of expanding organic agriculture in Canada. The group's newly released report, [Cultivating the Organic Opportunity for Canadian Farmers and Consumers](#), offers compelling evidence that investing in organic is not only good for the environment but also a smart economic and market development strategy.

The findings point to a clear opportunity for Canada: organic agriculture boosts farm profitability, meets rising consumer demand, diversifies trade, and strengthens climate and biodiversity outcomes, yet public investment has lagged behind that of Canada's peers, including the United States and the European Union.

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

- Tripling organic acreage would add \$1.73 billion CAD to farm net returns over 10 years.
- The report calls for \$68.5 million CAD per year in public investment to triple and strengthen organic agriculture, generating an estimated \$8 in farm net returns for every \$1 invested in organic farm transition.
- Organic farming increases long-term profitability, delivering 117% higher net returns per acre, despite high short-term transition costs.
- Canada's organic market is now worth over \$9 billion CAD annually, but domestic production has plateaued. Imports are rising to meet consumer demand—a missed opportunity for Canadian farmers.

- Canada is underinvesting: the U.S. spends eight times more per acre per year on organic food and farming programs, while the EU spends roughly 200 times more.
- Environmental benefits include 35% lower greenhouse gas emissions per acre, up to 40% higher energy efficiency, and sustained soil health and improved biodiversity.
- Tripling organic cropping acreage would cut synthetic pesticide use by 1.8 million kg (1,984 tons) of active ingredient annually, and synthetic nitrogen fertilizer use by nearly 80 million kg (88,200 tons) annually, meeting 14% of Canada's national fertilizer emissions target.

"The report findings support what we've seen firsthand on our farm after five years of drought in the Peace Country," says Lisa Kitt, Organic Task Force co-chair and owner-operator of The Homestead Farm in northern Alberta. "Prioritizing on-farm biodiversity and soil health shows up in our bottom line and helps us stay productive and resilient through extreme weather conditions."

INVESTING IN ORGANIC MARKET DEVELOPMENT

One theme of the report—and a lesson that resonates beyond Canada—is the need to pair organic production support with market development investments. Experience from other jurisdictions demonstrates how dedicated funding for market access, processing, and promotion can sustain long-term sector growth.

Investing cont.

In this spirit, the Task Force recommends:

- Expanding processing, aggregation, and distribution infrastructure to ensure farmers of all scales, including small and regional producers, have a clear path to market.
- Creating an Organic Market Development and Promotion Fund to strengthen domestic markets, conduct consumer engagement, expand export capacity, and diversify trade.
- Launching an Organic Public Procurement Strategy, setting a goal for 10% organic food in public-sector kitchens.

These measures mirror successful U.S. models, such as the Organic Market Development Grant Program under the Organic Transition Initiative, but are not yet standard practice in Canada, where organic remains an underutilized tool in agricultural, trade, and climate policy.

BUILDING A NATIONAL STRATEGY

The report's recommendations feed directly into a broader Organic Action Plan (OAP) being developed by the Canadian Organic Alliance (COA)—a coalition of Canada's national organic associations, including COG, the Canada Organic Trade Association, and the Organic Federation of Canada.

The OAP, inspired by successful approaches in other jurisdictions, including across the EU, lays out a long-term roadmap for growing Canada's organic production, markets, and policy infrastructure around three pillars:

- **Strengthen Policy, Regulatory, and Data Infrastructure:** Establish a clear policy direction, strengthen regulatory oversight, and improve data collection to inform evidence-based market and policy decisions.
- **Accelerate Growth and Innovation in Production:** Enhance transition supports, risk management tools, research, and extension services to boost productivity, domestic supply, and sustainability.
- **Grow Organic Markets and Demand:** Build processing and distribution capacity, stimulate consumer demand through education and public procurement, and create stable, predictable market conditions.

The OAP was launched in October 2025 as a shared framework for federal, provincial and territorial governments, and as a tool for farmers and industry to coordinate action and advocacy. 

The full Task Force report and executive summary are available at:

cog.ca/policy/organic-task-force

The Organic Action Plan can be found at:

cog.ca/policy/organic-action-plan



Katie Fettes is the Director of Policy and Research at Canadian Organic Growers (COG), where she collaborates with partners to advance organic policy and sector development at the national level. **Jenna Spencer**, COG's Director of Marketing and Communications, leads the organization's communications strategy and outreach. Together, Katie and Jenna work with farmers and researchers on policy research and knowledge translation initiatives, including the Organic Task Force report, and collaborate with the Canadian Organic Alliance on the sector's Organic Action Plan.

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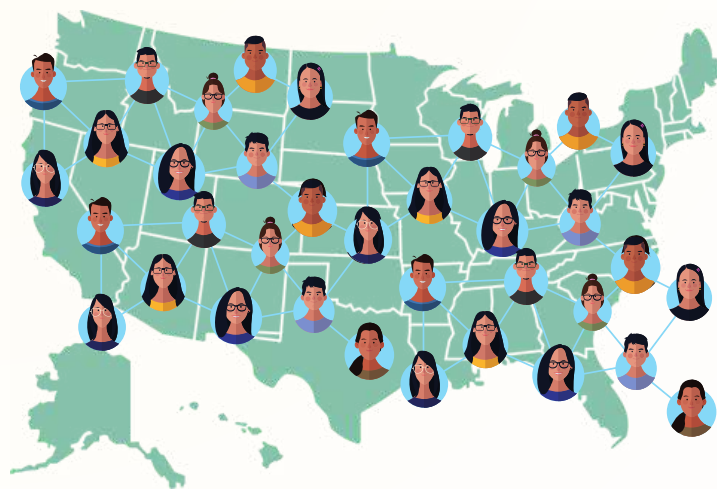
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GUEST STORY

What's Really Moving the Organic Grain Market in 2025?

By Sam Oschwald Tilton

OATS Training Specialist and an Organic Advisor at Glacial Drift Enterprises

As the training specialist for OATS and an independent ag advisor, I am always looking to learn more so that I can help organic advisors and farmers. Understanding the organic grain market and the economics, weather, and world events that drive it can be confusing. So, I was happy when ag economist Ryan Koory joined me for an episode of the Organic Advisor Call Series. Ryan is the VP of Economics at Argus Media, and specializes in the non-GMO and organic grain markets. To keep his finger on the pulse of the organic market, he is constantly speaking with farmers, certifiers, grain buyers, merchandisers, and end users. These details enable Ryan to see the bigger picture of where the market is and where it may be heading.

There are two different types of grain market data, and it's helpful to know what you're looking at. **The first are long-term market realities.** These are the hard numbers that direct long-term organic grain prices and can be quantified and tracked, things like the number of certified acres, the amount of on-farm storage, import trends, and consumer demand. These categories of market information are easier to measure and tend not to change on a dime.

The second type of data is short-term and more fickle. These short-term trends are influenced by human relationships and short-term data. Or, to put it in our contemporary vernacular, "vibes". How confident do people feel?

Are farmers feeling jittery and wanting to lock in current prices? Do buyers feel like prices will drop further, and want to take advantage of those on the spot market? While these vibes can create market rallies or price drops which can be a big deal in the short-term, they don't often change the long-term trends. As Ryan put it, "There are often times when short-term gossip changes prices for a few months but didn't change the long-term trends. There's too many examples of this for me to name and stay humble". Here's to humility!

So far in 2025, organic corn prices have stayed below the 5-year average, reflecting ample domestic supply and cautious forward contracting. Soybean prices remain slightly above average, supported by steady demand for imported meal, though well below the highs seen in 2023.

Want to hear the full conversation with Sam & Ryan?

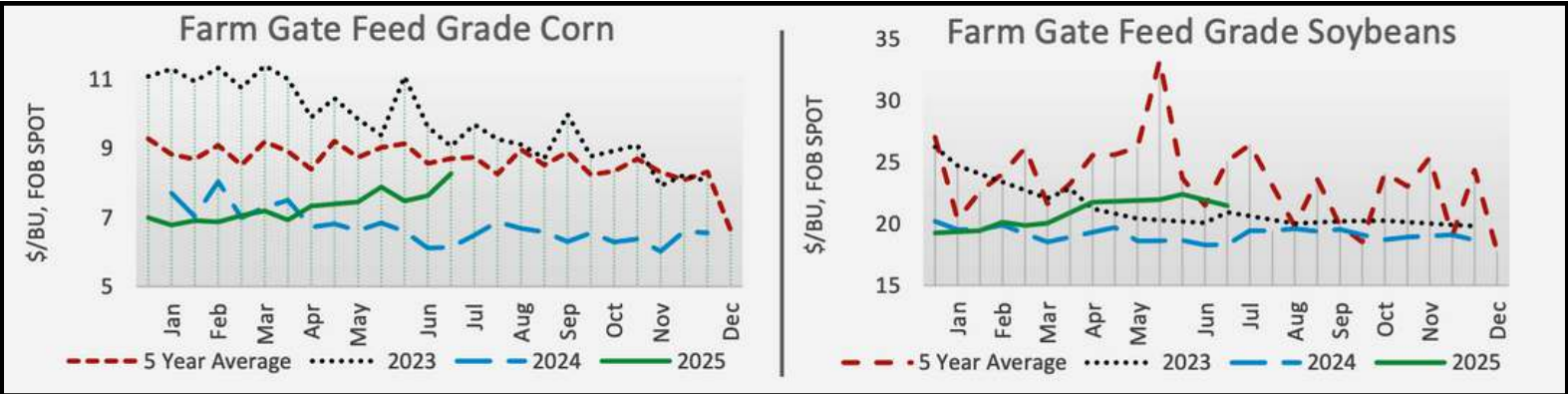


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Listen as a **podcast**, and dive deeper into market trends shaping 2025.

ORGANIC FEED GRADE CORN & SOYBEAN PRICES (JAN–JUN 2025)



Source: USDA AMS National Organic Grain and Feedstuffs Report, June 11, 2025

One long-term trend is that organic grain has shifted from being a specialty crop to more of a commoditized crop, significantly changing the organic market over the past 10 years. That has also changed how contracts are offered. Until around 2018, buyers wanted to lock in supply and would contract with organic farmers before they even planted. This helped producers lock in a price and supported higher returns. But ah, the free market! These higher prices, among other things, attracted more farmers to plant organic acres.

Now, with a higher supply of organic grain and a more volatile market, prices are lower. As a result, buyers lean toward the spot market to reduce their risk of being locked into long-term contracts that can't change quickly. This is where long-term market realities and short-term vibes come into play. The spot market and immediate prices are often driven by short-term realities and "market gossip" or "scuttlebutt," rather than purely by long-term fundamental data like acres planted. The spot market can benefit farmers who have invested in on-farm storage. Having the ability to store grain gives farmers the leverage to wait out low prices and take advantage of price rallies. Unlike their conventional brethren, organic farmers typically cannot bank grain at a local co-op, so on-farm storage for organic grain farmers is a lot more helpful in securing market leverage.

Currently, there are some clear long-term market trends shown in the numbers. Imports have fallen to under 10% of the organic corn supply, which is down sharply since 2017. As a result, domestic production and on-farm storage decisions are now the primary forces behind price moves.

Growers with storage and marketing flexibility are better positioned to shape their own outcomes. Unlike corn, organic soybean prices still rely heavily on imported meal, rather than whole beans or oil. Organic soy oil rarely fetches a premium, so imported meal, priced around \$800/ton in June 2025, is keeping soybean bids strong, often in the \$21–22/bu range through harvest.

Threats of tariffs and general market and policy uncertainty from the Trump administration are affecting organic grain buyers. In the past, buyers often preferred contracts to lock in prices from suppliers. But with the current uncertainty regarding tariffs, organic grain buyers are more hesitant to offer contracts to producers. Instead, they are looking to the spot market in order to take advantage of changing prices.

I appreciated learning from Ryan on our call series episode. He echoed the advice of many experienced organic farmers I work with, that diversity in income is stability, and it is easier to cut costs than raise your prices—the essence of farming in the black. Hopefully the current interest in Midwestern oats and more organic food-grade processors will drive a better market for small grains, allowing farmers to widen out their rotations in profitable ways. However organic grain is marketed, keep in mind the difference between those short-term vibes and long-term trends. 🌱

Even in uncertain times, several key principles remain helpful for organic grain farmers:

Market a full rotation

Rather than relying only on corn or beans for profit, include a wider variety of crops in your rotation to spread risk, and seek out quality buyers for each of those crops. Oats are becoming more popular, and new processing plants are opening in the Midwest.

Focus on fundamentals when marketing

The long-term market trends like meal imports and feed demand matter more than weekly planting updates or short-term weather swings.

Support demand growth

Blocking organic imports may deliver temporary price spikes, but the long-term health of the organic grain sector depends on building sustained domestic demand for organic feed and food.

Maintain the integrity of the USDA organic certification

US organics is an integrity-based program that requires consumers trusting the certification. If the USDA workforce reductions increase organic fraud and affect consumer confidence in the organic label, that will very much change the industry.

Farm in the black

Plan your profitability based on any stable long-term contracts you have or realistic spot market prices. Sure the spot market can be nice, but don't count on price rallies to lock in your profitability.



Sam Oschwald Tilton is the Training Specialist at OATS and an Organic Advisor at Glacial Drift Enterprises.



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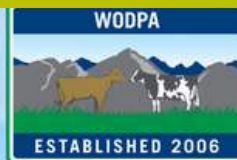
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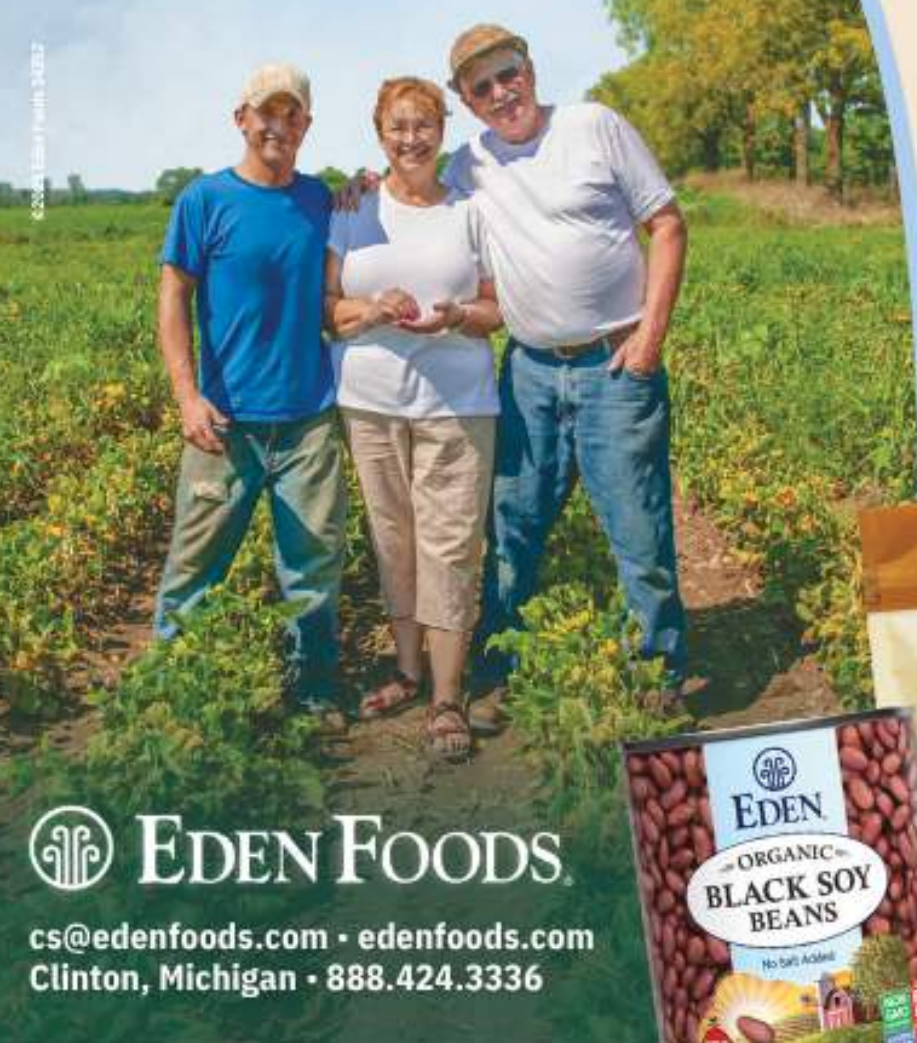
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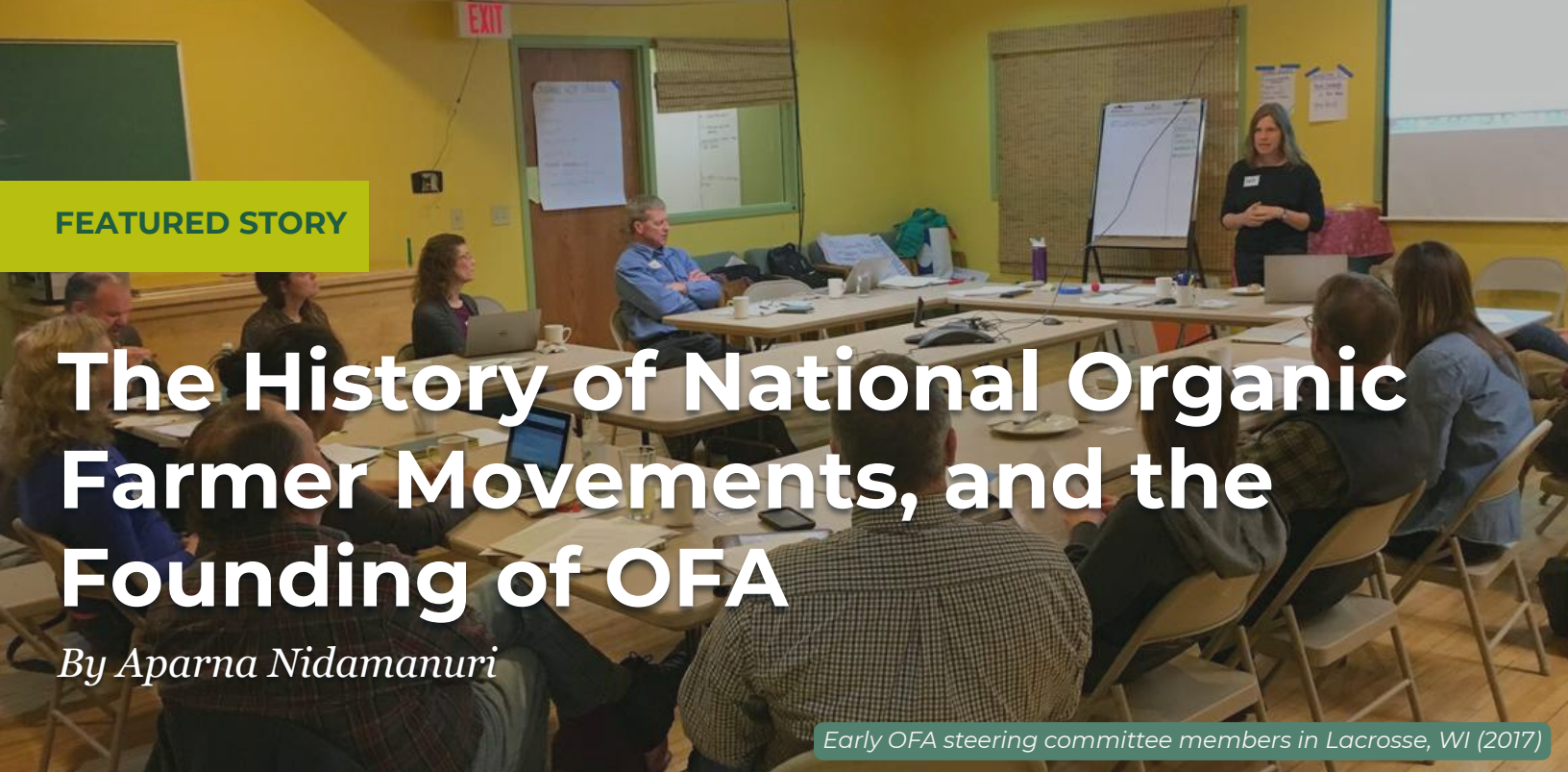


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FEATURED STORY

The History of National Organic Farmer Movements, and the Founding of OFA

By Aparna Nidamanuri

Early OFA steering committee members in Lacrosse, WI (2017)

In honor of the Organic Farmers Association's 10 year anniversary in 2026, we wanted to recount a small piece of America's organic history and recognize the groups, movements, and people that led to the creation of this organization. The entire history of organic agriculture is nearly as old as human civilization; recounting our current organic movement cannot overshadow centuries of agricultural innovation. In North America, Indigenous peoples managed regenerative organic agricultural systems for thousands of years before European settlers arrived. Following colonization enslaved people and migrants continued to influence organic practices and principles in the United States. Within this larger history, the current U.S. organic movement, which is in essence a modern adaptation of indigenous knowledge from around the world, has just been around for under a century.

EARLY U.S. ORGANIC HISTORY

In 1940, J.I. Rodale founded the Rodale Organic Gardening Experimental Farm in Pennsylvania,¹ educating readers across the country about organic principles and techniques through his magazine. In the 1950's the U.S organic movement saw a groundswell of momentum as public awareness about the health and environmental impacts of synthetic agricultural chemicals grew. The 1960s counterculture motivated back-to-the-landers to begin organic farms across the country, and by the 1970s, people were organizing around the concept of organic.

Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA)² and the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT)³ both formed in 1971. IFOAM-Organics International was formed in 1972,⁴ California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) was founded in 1973,⁵ followed by Oregon Tilth in 1974,⁶ and the Organic Growers and Buyers Association (MN) in 1976.⁷

Consumer interest continued to grow through the 1970s and 80s, leading to a growing number of organic farmers and processors to meet this demand, and more state organizations and organic certification bodies to support these growers. Though the federal government declined to regulate this growing industry, these organic farming organizations created early standards for organic certification. Some state legislatures also saw the need to establish standards for certified organic foods, and in 1973, Oregon became the first state to pass a law defining the term "organic." By 1997, 40 organic certification agencies—12 state and 28 private or nonprofit—conducted third-party organic certification.⁸

Despite having a shared goal, the process by which individual states and other certification agencies regulated organic agriculture differed. While general organic principles were similar, the rigor and enforcement of the regulations across states and certification agencies were inconsistent.⁹

While having a nonuniform standard state-by-state may have been confusing for consumers, it actually awarded farmers significant power when it came to setting certification standards. Founder of the International Organic Inspectors Association and former NOSB chair (certifier seat), Jim Riddle recounts that prior to the formation of OFA (and other current organic coalitions, boards, and associations), organic certification agencies provided a place for organic farmers to engage in determining what certification standards would look like. Additionally, some certification organizations were involved in research, education, and advocacy, and represented farmers in local and regional issues.

However, as the organic sector continued to grow in popularity and see commercial expansion, conflicting state and private organic labels became a greater issue, and by the late 80s, stakeholders of the organic sector recognized a need for a single standard.¹⁰

ENGAGING ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Concerned environmental and consumer groups demanding clear, uniform organic standards, and farmers and processors seeking solutions for interstate commerce, brought the issue of inconsistent organic standards to the national stage.

As a result, members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry (led at the time by Senator Patrick Leahy) started working on an act to be included in the 1990 Farm Bill¹¹ that would establish national organic food standards, which we now know as the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA).

Aware of the changes to come, in 1989, at an organizing meeting in Leavenworth, Kansas,¹² farmers and representatives from organic farmer organizations founded the Organic Farmers Association Council (OFAC) an "autonomous constituency group" within the Organic Trade Association (OTA), then called Organic Foods Production Association of North America (OFPANA).¹³

Members of OFAC ([see the list here](#)) primarily represented small certification and organic farmer organizations around the country, and is now widely recognized as the first organization that mobilized organic farmers nationally in order to amplify their collective voices.

According to Wisconsin organic farmer and early organic leader who helped form OFAC, Harriet Behar, between 1989 and 1990, OFAC members met 3-4 times to discuss concerns, ideas, and priorities for our national organic farmer movement. Many members testified before Congress, and the group advocated for stronger organic standards and the creation of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB).



OFAC leaders at a conference in 1990

While OFAC remained active into the 90s, the group lost momentum following the passage of the 1990 Farm Bill. Many members couldn't afford the frequent meetings or the time away from the field, and at a 1994 meeting, the group officially dissolved.

Though the OFPA had passed, there was still a decade-long public debate before national organic regulations were finalized and officially went into effect in 2002.

During this time of negotiation, the USDA published a highly contentious first draft of the organic program rule in 1997 that allowed what we now know as "the big three" (genetically modified crops, sewage sludge, and irradiation) in organic production.¹⁴ In response, hundreds of thousands of citizens made public comments criticizing the USDA's failure to uphold organic integrity in our national standards.

Fortunately, even with the absence of OFAC, organic farmers were still well represented in these discussions through farmer-led organic organizations across the country. The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture (now NSAC) was on the rise, and its Organic Committee stepped into the gap left by OFAC, bringing farmers to D.C. and training them to lobby for themselves and testify at hearings.

Additionally, four farmers were represented on the NOSB, and NOSB meetings around the country were well attended by organic organizations and organic farmers who provided testimony on behalf of farmer priorities.

Though the final National Organic Program (NOP) regulation was far from perfect, the voices of consumers and farmers helped to improve it significantly, setting more meaningful standards for organic certification that prevented the “big three” and other harmful additions from being included in the final rule.

FARMER ORGANIZATION AFTER OFPA

Following the long-anticipated 2002 implementation of organic regulations through the NOP, the industry saw several changes.

An unintended consequence of implementing the NOP was that it established stricter rules to prevent conflicts of interest within certifying organizations;¹⁵ thus limiting certifiers' ability to be involved in advocacy and education. As a result, many certifiers split into two joined entities so they could safely provide both the education and technical assistance farmers needed, as well as continue to provide local organic certification services. However, some agencies elected to either discontinue their certification services or their education and advocacy support for farmers. This change affected state and regional organic farmer movements and, in some cases, led farmers to reduce their engagement within these organizations, where previously their voices had a direct impact on organic standards at the local level. But organic farmer leadership remained strong in organizations focused on farmer-to-farmer information sharing, creating an organized organic extension network to support a growing organic market and advance farmer-led advocacy for organic integrity.

When OFAC dissolved, it left a gap in organic advocacy. The group formerly provided a collective organic farmer voice within OFPANA, now the Organic Trade Association (OTA), but following OFAC's dissolution, OTA lost much of its farmer membership. The OTA 2002 Board noted reincorporating a farmer voice in OTA work was important,¹³ yet the lack of a national organic farmer voice made realizing this intention more difficult.

The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture merged with the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition in 2009, becoming the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC).¹⁶ During the years leading up to this merger, the Organic Committee lacked the protected space to monitor and advocate for strong organic standards that upheld farmers' and consumers' shared vision for organic integrity. In 2003, the National Organic Coalition (NOC) was formed by an alliance of organizations¹⁷ seeking a platform for diverse stakeholders— from farmer organizations to food businesses, consumers, and environmental groups— to share perspectives and advocate for organic interests in Washington, D.C.

MULTIPLE TURNING POINTS

It is difficult to say who first recognized the need for a national organization for organic farmers, but there are many accounts of farmers and stakeholders discussing the need for such an organization throughout the 2000s.

In 2006, noting the lack of a clear vision for the future of the US organic industry, leaders at the Rural Advancement Foundation International-USA (RAFI-USA) and NOC launched the National Organic Action Plan.¹⁸ This plan, modeled after organic action plans in Europe, was meant to establish clear industry benchmarks and motivate coordinated efforts to grow the US organic industry. To create this plan, dialogue meetings were hosted in 28 states, engaging 300 participants in day-long discussions about the future of organic agriculture. Jim Riddle, who was on the NOAP planning team and later chaired OFA's Steering Committee, recalls that while meeting with organic stakeholders to discuss NOAP priorities, establishing a national Organic Farmers Association was clearly identified as a need and NOAP recommendation.¹⁹



The NOAP Summit in 2009

Meanwhile, tensions were building within the organic industry as OTA pushed forward with a policy to create an organic commodity checkoff program that farmers were largely against²⁰. In response, the No Organic Checkoff coalition, a group of organic farmer member organizations and businesses, was formed to provide a farmer voice to counter this effort²¹. Though much smaller than OFAC, this was the second time organic farmers were seen mobilizing nationally. Some farmers and farm organizations previously involved with OTA felt underrepresented and saw the need for a new separate organization focused on organic farmer priorities. Even those who were satisfied with the work of NOC recognized the importance of having a farmer-only voice in the national organic conversation.

What are Checkoff Programs?

Checkoff Programs are dedicated to promoting or researching specific agricultural commodities. Producers and handlers selling any of 22 commodities (including milk, pecans, and mangos) are required to pay a small tax on marketed products to fund national research and promotion boards administered by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. The proposed organic checkoff could have taxed all organic producers and handlers to support promotion of individual organic sectors as well as all organic. As of 2016, organic producers are exempt from paying into conventional checkoff programs.

[**Learn more here**](#)

Membership on the OFA Organizing Committee grew as organic farmers and organic farm organizations learned of the effort, and in 2015, this group of volunteers contracted with Kate Mendenhall, now the executive director of OFA, to help facilitate this committee, survey farmers nationally to assess farmers' interest in a national organic farmer voice, and then direct the creation of this organization.

The founding OFA Organizing Committee members appointed the first OFA Steering Committee in 2016 representing two organic farmers from each of OFA's six regions and one organizational representative from each region for an interim 18-month term to work with the Organizing Committee to review, discuss, edit, and ratify the foundational principles, bylaws, policies, and procedures for how a national Organic Farmers Alliance would function, communicate, and take action, and prepare for the first national election of OFA leadership in 2018.

Around this same time, OFA learned from Jeff Moyer that Rodale Institute had also been working to create a national organization for organic farmers called the Organic Farmers Association.

Both the Alliance and Rodale Institute believed that having two similar organizations would disorganize the movement, so they discussed a merger. While OFA had done the grassroots work of organizing farmers, they didn't have much in the way of financial means, so it quickly became clear that merging with Rodale Institute as the group's fiscal sponsor would be mutually beneficial.

EARLY OFA

Bob Quinn, a Montana organic farmer, and Michael Sligh, a North Carolina organic farmer and Policy Director at RAFI-USA, both served on the first NOSB in 1992 and reconnected two decades later. Realizing that they had both unknowingly been working towards the same goal of forming a national organic farmer organization, with Quinn connecting with farmers in the West and Sligh mobilizing farmers in the rest of the country through NOAP and NOC, they combined forces to create an Organizing Committee of the Organic Farmers Alliance (OFA) with fewer than 10 members.



OFA members in Lacrosse, WI in 2017

Finally, at a 2017 meeting in Lacrosse, WI, the Organizing Committee and Steering Committee voted on the merger, and the Organic Farmer Alliance became what we now know as the Organic Farmers Association (OFA). Later that year, OFA farm members elected its first Policy Committee and held its first meeting on October 10, 2017, via conference call. OFA elected its first Governing Council to replace the appointed Steering Committee in March 2018.



OFA's first advocacy day in 2018

A month later, it held its first advocacy day in Washington, D.C., bringing farmers from across the country to educate Congress on organic farmer priorities and advocate for policies that strengthen organic farms. In 2020, OFA was established as an independent 501(c)(5) nonprofit organization and also maintained a fiscal sponsor relationship with Rodale Institute for educational programming support. And, as of a few weeks before this article's publication, OFA was granted 501(c)(3) status, launching a new era in our journey and a fitting milestone to mark a decade of meaningful work. 🌱



Aparna Nidamanuri is OFA's Fall 2025 communications intern. She graduated from the University of Minnesota in 2024, with a BS in Agriculture and Food Business Management, and for the past year was an AmeriCorps VISTA, serving in Rhode Island. Now she lives with her family in Illinois, and is excitedly learning more about organic everyday.

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In the field...

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