

2026 OFA Farmer Fly-In Recap

By Anay Shah

On March 3, 2026, over 30 OFA members from across the country converged in Washington, D.C. for the Organic Farmers Association's Annual Farmer Fly-In. Despite the gloomy weather, spirits were high as leaders representing the full breadth of organic agriculture—from dairy to mixed vegetables to wheat—engaged legislators on the issues that matter most to their operations. Whether advocating for greater integrity in organic imports or emphasizing the importance of fully staffed regional USDA offices, members made a strong showing on Capitol Hill. At a moment when many programs central to organic farming face uncertainty even as demand for healthy food continues to grow, the fly-in was an important reminder of what the organic community can accomplish when it speaks with one voice.

FROM FARMS TO THE TABLE: ORGANIZING THE VOICE OF FARMERS

One of OFA's defining features is its commitment to advancing the interests of farmers in a space where they are often unheard. Perhaps the most powerful tool OFA employs is the Annual Policy Survey, a comprehensive gathering of the various issues facing organic farmers and translating those into policy priorities. Some of the issues brought up by members this year included organic certification costs, NOP enforcement, and corporate consolidation of the organic market.

The most pressing issue, however, was making USDA programs such as crop insurance, disaster assistance, NRCS, and FSA work for organic farmers with over 49.23% of farmers expressing concern. This is a shift from last year's highest priority issue which was managing organic import fraud. The 2026 focus on USDA programs could in part be explained by the numerous staffing losses, payment delays, and general expertise decline in regional USDA offices that farmers reported on multiple occasions throughout the survey.

With these concerns in mind, the farmers descended upon Washington, D.C. for OFA's final fly-in preparation meetings. A notable one was the Policy Committee Meeting on March 2, where Chair Scott Myers, an organic farmer from Ohio attending his fourth fly-in, led the members in debate, discourse, and fruitful discussion on the various proposed policy stances from the farmer survey for OFA. By the end, they had made significant progress, approving many key proposals while sending others back to workgroups for revamping. This meeting served as an important marker for the various priorities farmers would go on to advocate for in their Hill meetings the very next day.

THE USDA NATIONAL ORGANIC PROGRAM & ADVOCACY ON THE HILL

The OFA advocacy day began at the USDA headquarters in a meeting with leaders from the National Organic Program. The majority of the meeting was spent in conversation with the Deputy Administrator of USDA's NOP, Dr. Jennifer Tucker, who listened and heard organic farmers speak about the various issues they faced on a day-to-day basis. Some particular areas where OFA recognized progress were in Tucker's inclusion of a definition for soil in the Strengthening Organic Enforcement Act as well as her mention of possibly introducing a two-tier risk-based certification system.

Following this meeting, farmers dispersed on the Hill for their individual meetings with their various congressional offices in both the House and the Senate. Pryor Garnett, a farmer from Oregon and Chair of the Governing Council, mentioned a productive meeting with Sen. Jeff Merkley's (D-OR) office in which they expressed their interest in the Organic Imports Verification Act (OIVA) as well requested input on appropriations requests for organic.

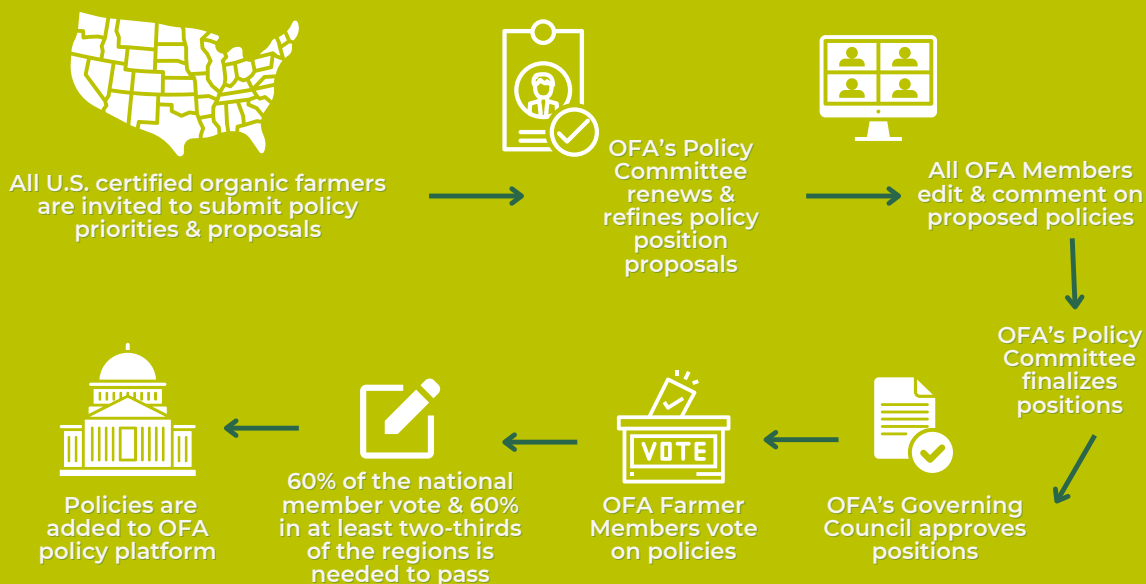
Brooke Gentile (Executive Director Organic Association of Kentucky (OAK) and OFA Governing Council Member) and Bryce Baumann, OFA farmer from Kentucky, also described positive meetings with Rep. Andy Barr (R-KY) and Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY), as both offices expressed their support in making USDA programs work for farmers.

Another point of progress in these visits for OFA was in expressing discontent for Rep. Dan Newhouse's (R-WA) bill to remove the mandatory three-year organic transition period as well as promoting Sen. Chellie Pingree's (D-ME) amendment to remove pesticide preemption language from the 2026 Farm Bill. The offices of both Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY) and Rep. Mike Thompson (D-CA) expressed their support for the removal of the pesticide preemption language, demonstrating OFA's ability to garner bipartisan support. At the same time, OFA farmers were able to take advantage of these meetings as not only moments of advocacy, but as a means of organic education. Melissa Spear (Executive Director, Tilth Alliance and Policy Committee Member) from Washington explained that although Rep. Emily Randall (D-WA) and her staffer were relatively new, the meeting was an amazing way of "getting OFA in as a resource."

ORGANIC FARMERS ASSOCIATION

OFA Policy Process

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FLY-IN TAKEAWAYS

The 2026 Farmer Fly-In demonstrated meaningful progress in OFA's ongoing relationships with congressional offices and the USDA-NOP. Farmers reported productive, substantive conversations not just on policy priorities, but on the day-to-day realities of running an organic operation.

Perhaps most significantly, this year's meetings generated plans for follow-up farm visits during upcoming congressional recesses. When legislators and their staff see firsthand the operational realities organic farmers navigate from certification costs to USDA service gaps, policy priorities become personal. Mike Appel from Oklahoma recounted his experience with Sen. Markwayne Mullin's (R-OK) Chief of Staff: "he was super engaging and told me that he feeds his whole family organic food. He also wanted to make a site visit to my farm." Jesse Buie, a long-time organic farmer from Mississippi also noted that his representatives were eager to make site visits as well.

If you are interested in hosting your legislator on your farm this summer, email Lily Hawkins lily@organicfarmersassociation.org, OFA's Policy Director.

These connections reflect OFA's broader approach: sustained, relationship-driven engagement that builds trust over time rather than stopping at a single meeting. The bipartisan interest and support OFA secured this year is a testament to that strategy. As OFA's leadership begins planning for 2027, the relationships and policy groundwork established during this year's fly-in will continue shaping the organic sector's priorities. The work doesn't end when farmers leave Washington—in many ways, that's when it begins.



MY INTERN EXPERIENCE

Serving as OFA's Policy Intern for Spring 2026 has been an incredibly rewarding experience. From diving into workgroup discussions to preparing materials for the fly-in, each step offered a new window into how organic policy is shaped from the ground up. Witnessing farmers advocate so passionately for their livelihoods in committee meetings and on the Hill alike deepened my appreciation for the work OFA does and the community it represents.

This internship also opened my eyes to the organic world in ways I didn't anticipate. Learning about the challenges farmers face, from certification costs to USDA program gaps, gave me a much richer understanding of our food system and the people who sustain it. Seeing how advocacy, research, and relationship-building come together to move real policy has also reinforced my interest in agricultural policy and how it shapes the lives of producers, communities, and markets in tangible ways. I am grateful to OFA for the opportunity and look forward to carrying these lessons forward as I continue building my career. 🌱



Anay is a freshman at Georgetown University pursuing a B.S. in International Economics with a certificate in Global Development Studies. He is deeply interested in the intersection of economics and agriculture and sees organic farming as a powerful space for more equitable policy and resilient rural economies.

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO CONGRESS

I'm Annabelle. I'm 14, and my family grows organic produce in Western North Carolina. My dad, Steven Belatram, is on the OFA Policy Committee and he brought me to Washington, D.C. for the annual fly-in. We met with the head of the National Organic Program Jennifer Tucker, who was really honest and direct with us. We talked about how there used to be 85 people working at NOP and now there are 50, this affects what work can get done. We also talked about how to make sure that imports are actually organic and controlling fraud.



Next, we met with the House Ag committee majority Thompson's staffer, Senate Ag committee majority Boozman's, staffer and Senate Ag committee minority, Klobuchar's staffer. During all three of these meetings we mostly talked about the OIVA bill and destaffing of Farm Service Agency offices. After our group meetings we had our individual meetings with Congressman Edwards and Senator Budd's staffer Benjie. In both of these meetings we discussed destaffing of our Farm Service Agency offices and how that means we are not getting our disaster relief money. We talked about crop insurance and how in our district we think it should be expanded to specialty crops and we also talked a little about the H2A visa program and how we need to make it effective and affordable. We discussed how we think the change in AEWR Adverse Effect Wage Rate, which is a minimum hourly wage that employers must pay people with H2A guest worker visas, needs to be made permanent.

It was really fun to get to see all the pretty architecture and talk to other farmers from around the country about their farms. Through this experience I learned a lot about how our government works and about how lobbying is one way that we can make a change in our government and our communities. It was really meaningful for me to get to meet with my elected representatives and share my concerns with them.