



The Organic Voice

Organic Farmers Association – No. 22 • September 2026

Grazing Livestock in Organic Orchards

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COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

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From Our President

I'm a disappointment as a technologist. Having graduated from an institute with "technology" in its name and having worked for over 30 years with brilliant inventors and software developers, I ought to be at the front of the technology bandwagon as it roars toward the inevitable, utopian future. But 10 years of organic farming seems to have ruined me for that role. Instead of automatically enthusing over the latest, shiny innovation, I consider how its widespread adoption will change my neighbors' livelihoods and lives, the food we produce, and the world we live in.

But I'm neither a neo-Luddite nor an antique collector. While I started my farm with an 8-speed, manually shifted tractor and a 40-year-old combine, my equipment shed now holds a GPS-guided, self-steering tractor and a highly computerized combine along with a collection of more primitive machines and implements. The modern equipment enables me to farm more precisely and carefully than I could before, and I wouldn't go back for anything.

Technology adoption needs to be done thoughtfully, though, with serious consideration of its long term consequences. With automation, the human understanding of an operation is replaced by the automated process, and soon that technology upgrade results in the operator being downgraded, and in a decade or two that operator's knowledge is lost. Some of those losses won't be mourned (for example, how to bind sheaves of scythed grain), but others may be sorely missed in future years and prove difficult or impossible to re-learn (for example, how to control pigweeds without herbicides). What should one consider when offered a new technology or practice for adoption?

"Can the human user understand the technology, can they adjust it, and can they live without it?"

That's a coarse, three-part standard for assessing the wisdom of adopting a new device or process or product.

First, can the person using it understand how it works? If the technology is a "black box" which the human user cannot see into (like the large language models being called "AI"), then the user cannot understand how it decides what to do and has to hope that the creator correctly accounted for all contingencies (which is rare, to say the least).

Second, can they tweak it to meet the needs of the situation and moment? If the technology is proprietary (like copyright-protected software running an onboard controller) then even if they understand it, they cannot legally adapt it to their unique needs and are limited to whatever the creator implemented.

And third, if the technology stops working correctly, is there a fallback that the user can make do with?

The opposite of resilience is brittleness, and new technologies which fail one or more parts of my standard are more likely to add brittleness to a system. In agriculture, where the system is responsible for feeding and clothing people and for preserving our natural world, those brittle failures mean people going hungry, places becoming unlivable, and families losing their homes. The companies promoting shiny equipment and flashy advancements should slow their headlong rush toward the future and take a page from farmers' cautious, considered approach to new technologies.

Sincerely,



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



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Fall Organic Policy Outlook

By Lily Hawkins

WILL WE HAVE A FARM BILL?

On August 6, the Senate Agriculture Committee met to discuss and vote on their latest version of a Farm Bill. However, due to a failure to reach a compromise over SNAP rules, the bill failed to secure Democratic votes, and did not advance. Committee Chair Boozeman has stated they will reconvene and vote again after the 5-week August recess. This plan hinges on good attendance by Republicans. Senator Mitch McConnell's absence in August meant margins were too slim to push through legislation with no bipartisan support. Reports say that the Kentucky Senator transferred to his home from a hospital facility in early August, but a date for his return to Washington, D.C. had not been set at the time this article was written.

WHAT'S IN THE BILL SO FAR?

While the Senate bill eliminates some of the most harmful provisions proposed in the House bill and includes several key policies that the Organic Farmers Association (OFA) has advocated for, **the bill still falls short of what is needed for organic producers.**

Wins for Organic Farmers:

The Senate bill does a little better for organic farmers than the House version. OFA is pleased to see the following provisions included:

- **Language from the Organic Imports Verification Act (OIVA):** Restores a level playing field for domestic producers by requiring the USDA to test high-risk bulk imports of organic feedstuffs for prohibited residues. This prevents fraudulent imports from undercutting U.S. organic farmers.
- **Language from Risk-Based Oversight for Integrity Act (ROI):** Modernizes organic inspections by aligning oversight intensity with actual risk. This reduces administrative burden on low-risk operations while strengthening enforcement where it is needed most.

- **Conservation Funding:** Slightly increases access to conservation programs for organic and transitioning producers by expanding the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) set-aside (the House bill provides a larger increase).
- **National Organic Program (NOP) Funding:** Provides small, stable, "stairstep" budget increases to support the long-term growth and oversight of the organic sector.
- **Cost-Share Support:** Authorizes an additional \$8 million in discretionary funding annually, in addition to the existing \$8 million mandatory allocation (subject to the annual appropriations process).

Missed Opportunities:

Despite these positive steps, the current Senate bill, like the House version, misses a critical opportunity to invest in organic. Funding increases for existing programs and new policies to expand markets, infrastructure, and research are needed to support domestic organic production. Without these, the bill will leave American producers at a disadvantage during a time of growing consumer demand.

OFA supported a number of organic friendly-amendments that ultimately did not move forward, but we will continue to advocate for them this fall.

These amendments would:

Strengthen Organic Integrity:

- Provide increased, stair-stepped funding for the National Organic Program to keep pace with the growing organic sector.

Make USDA Programs Work for Organic Farmers:

- Include statutory language for Organic Dairy Data Collection.
- Increase funding and the maximum reimbursement rate for the National Organic Certification **Cost Share** Program (NOCCSP) to \$1,500.
- Include provisions in the **Opportunities in Organic Act**
- Provide **parity for organic producers using EQIP** by eliminating the separate lower payment cap.

Invest in the Future:

- Include provisions from the **Organic Science and Research Investment Act** to provide funding for the Organic Agriculture Research Initiative (OREI) and the Research the Transition to Organic Program (RTOP), currently known as the Organic Transitions Program (ORG)
- Include the provisions in the **Domestic Organic Investment Act** to reduce dependence on foreign supply chains and keep organic production and businesses thriving in the U.S. by investing in domestic infrastructure

See the list of organic marker bills OFA is advocating for throughout the Farm Bill process on the next page and the full list of bill in our marker bill tracker.

And contact your Senators today and urge them to fight for a Farm Bill that truly supports our organic farming communities!

WHAT COMES NEXT?

If the bill is voted out of the Senate Agriculture Committee in mid-September, it will still need to have a vote on the Senate floor, where more amendments could be introduced. From there, it must be reconciled with the House bill and the resulting compromise legislation returned to each chamber for a final vote before being sent to the White House to be signed into law. 🌱

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.



VIRTUAL ORGANIC JOB FAIR, NEW DATE



The Organic Job Fair hosted by the Organic Career Network was postponed from its original date in August until **November 5, 2026, from 11 AM to 3 PM PST / 1 PM to 5 PM CST / 2 PM to 6 PM EST.**

Organic agriculture isn't just a cause, it's a career. The organic sector is bigger and more diverse than you might think, and roles exist across farming, policy, education, certification, marketing, supply chain, and more.

That's why we're hosting an online organic job fair for employers, job seekers, and students.

VIRTUAL ORGANIC JOB FAIR

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THE
DATE**



5TH

**NOV.
2026**

This is your chance to connect directly with organizations doing meaningful work and find out what they're looking for in new talent. We hope to see you there!

REGISTER NOW





FARM BILL MARKER BILLS OFA IS TRACKING

Priority Area	Bill (House/Senate)	What The Bill Does	Legislative Progress	Advocacy Status
 Food Systems	Domestic Organic Investment Act (DOIA)	Directs USDA to reduce reliance on imported organic goods and create grants for U.S. producers	An amendment containing these provisions was introduced in the 2026 House, but did not pass	House self-imposed rules won't allow them to include this, push for inclusion in Senate Bill
	S. 3427 H.R. 6593			
 Climate & Conservation	Agriculture Resilience Act (ARA)	Aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions for U.S. agriculture to net-zero by 2040	2026 House Farm Bill includes higher payment limits for EQIP, but not the parity with the broader program	Continued advocacy needed for parity with the broader EQIP program
	S.1507 H.R.3077			
 Organic Integrity	Organic Imports Verification Act	Requires USDA to test high-risk bulk imports of organic feedstuffs for residues of substances that are prohibited in organic	Language was incorporated in the Senate version (2026)	Advocate with members of House Ag to build support, ask for inclusion during conference committee, etc.
	S. 1398			
 Organic Research	Organic Science and Research Investment Act (OSRI Act)	Provides continued, needed investment in organic agriculture research and market analysis		OFRR is leading advocacy for organic research in the Farm Bill
	S.1385 H.R.5703			
 USDA Programs	Opportunities in Organic Act	Builds on the existing Cost-Share Program, and adds flexible funding to build on elements of the USDA Organic Transition Initiative		
	S. 3717 H.R. 7318			
 Organic Dairy	Risk Based Oversight for Integrity Act	Requires the USDA to modernize organic inspection by matching oversight levels to actual risk to organic integrity	Included in the 2026 House bill via amendment. Revised version included in 2026 Senate Bill	
	H.R.8157			
 Organic Dairy	Organic Dairy Data Collection Act	Provides improved data collection to better understand and address the challenges organic dairies face	Included in 2026 House Bill & working to have this included in future Senate versions	Continued advocacy needed to ensure inclusion in future versions of Senate Bill
	H.R.4110			
	ODAIRY	Requires USDA to design a functional safety-net program for organic dairy farmers & provide investments in infrastructure		
	S.2442			

FIND MORE MARKER BILLS OFA IS WORKING ON WITH ALLIES TO SUPPORT ORGANIC
organicfarmersassociation.org/farmbilltracker



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Thank you, Organic Dairy Farmers

Our mission is to sustain family dairy farms in the North Bay region of California by producing high quality and minimally processed organic dairy products for consumers to enjoy. Amidst great challenges to the industry, our purpose is more important than ever. We are grateful for the tremendous partnership and personal relationships we have with our network of dairy farming families. Thank you to the Straus, Tresch, Hughes, Correia, Silacci, Spaletta, Moretti, R. McClelland, Nosecchi, Bordessa and Camozzi family farms for your incredible organic land stewardship and positive contributions to our local community.

Learn more about our 2030 carbon neutral dairy goal and structured commitment to economic resilience for dairy farms at www.strausfamilycreamery.com



FEATURED STORY

Grazing Livestock in Organic Orchards

By Harriet Behar

Image courtesy of Claire Hintz

Organic farmers seek out innovative solutions to production issues by building resilient, ecosystem-based methods based in nature. Agroforestry mimics natural systems by incorporating grazing livestock with perennial nut/fruit trees, wine grapes, and bramble fruits, relying on traditional wisdom and cutting-edge research in design and implementation. This perennial cover system optimizes resource use, provides symbiotic benefits to the crops and livestock, and lessens climate change through carbon sequestration.

BARRIERS UNDER THE ORGANIC REGULATION

The current organic regulation, which mandates no “manure application” for 90 days before harvest of a human-consumed crop that is not in contact with soil, has been a barrier to implementing this system on organic farms. The Organic Farmers Association (OFA), along with growers, researchers, and organizations nationwide, has been working to remove this obstacle. Farmers brought this issue to OFA’s attention in the annual OFA policy survey, and OFA acted upon it. Twice a year, the [National Organic Standards Board \(NOSB\) meets](#) and takes public comments. OFA requested a change to the manure application rules to allow for livestock in orchards, and after two requests, it was put on the NOSB work agenda! The NOSB has a discussion document and numerous farmer oral and written comments with specific wording on how to modify the regulation or guidance to allow for agroforestry.

FOOD SAFETY

Concerns about adjusting manure application to allow grazing in an agroforestry system have included food safety impacts. Food safety guidelines are overseen by the FDA’s Produce Safety Regulation. FDA personnel have indicated by telephone that they are comfortable with this system as long as mitigation measures ensure no manure ends up on crops sold for human consumption. This could include having fruit pickers hold onto ladders by the rails rather than the rungs where their feet move up and down, or avoiding ladders altogether by picking when standing on a wagon that also holds the fruit bin.

Nut producers have numerous steps to wash and heat nuts before sale. Fruit that might be cooked or fermented has a “kill step” to prevent foodborne illness. As with all good handling practices, if manure is seen on a fruit, don’t pick it. Research projects tracking possible food safety concerns have shown preliminary findings of little to no difference in pathogenic bacteria between rotationally grazed livestock orchards and those that have wildlife (ground and aerial) moving through the orchard. Manure deposits from grazing livestock are much lower in volume (pounds vs. tons) per acre. A diverse vegetated understory has vibrant soil life that also helps break down the isolated manure deposits from grazing livestock.

LIVESTOCK AND CROPS BOTH BENEFIT

The trees provide windbreaks, dappled shade, and protection from inclement weather for livestock, and they allow the vegetated, forage-based understory to regenerate during the warm, sometimes dry summer days. The deep roots of the trees and understory forages hold soil in place to control erosion, improve water retention rather than runoff, and support nutrient recycling.

Rotationally grazed livestock provide fertility from manure, deposited throughout the orchard during the spring, summer, and after fall harvest. Depending on the species and timing of livestock placement, pest and disease cycles are interrupted, lessening or even eliminating the need for pest or disease management inputs and other strategies. Farmers and ranchers can choose livestock species to target specific production problems. Poultry (ducks, geese and chickens), sheep and pigs are typical in agroforestry, but cattle can also be used in tall trees such as mature walnuts and pecans.

By blending livestock and perennial crops, farmers greatly reduce the need for mowing, improve soil health through less compaction, and gain time and money to spend on other activities. In California, sheep that browse woody plants and graze land fairly short have been invaluable in controlling brush in wine grape vineyards, reducing their susceptibility to wildfires. Agroforestry breaks the mold of industrial agriculture monocultures, improving ecosystems and economic resilience, while enhancing biodiversity.

FARMERS EXPERIENCE ADVANTAGES

Agroforestry systems that include livestock can create one or more additional income streams for the farm, beyond just fruit, nuts, or berries. Both small- and large-scale operations can profit from this dual use. Farmers can raise and sell wool, meat (pork, lamb, beef, poultry), eggs, and youngstock, expanding risk-management strategies if one crop fails. Maintaining a healthy forage understory reduces feed costs, especially with pasture-based breeds.

More than one species can be run in the same area; for example, chickens can follow sheep in the grazing schedule. Swine can consume low-quality nuts, using seconds for an on-farm value-added enterprise. While these strategies reduce production inputs and can save money, they do create a more complex system to manage.

NUMEROUS WAYS TO MANAGE THE SYSTEM

Rotating the livestock through the orchard or vineyard is essential to retaining a healthy groundcover for forage. Claire Hintz of [Elsewhere Farm](#), on the shores of Lake Superior in Wisconsin, runs her Guinea Hogs (a small pasture-suited non-rooting pig) under all of her trees and bushes, which include a wide variety of nuts and fruits. She has noted that the pigs tend to stay more in the central part of the orchard than the edges of the paddock, noting those outer rows are the areas where she has had some apple maggot, illustrating that the pigs are doing their pest-management job in the central orchard.

Jono Neiger of [Big River Chestnuts](#) in Massachusetts has collaborated with [Meadow Fed Lamb](#) (and chickens) for nine years; they bring their 100 sheep and 500 chickens through Jono's orchards. They work together on where the animals graze, moving them every 18-30 hours. They work together on where the animals graze, moving them every 18-30 hours. They graze only in the aisles, not directly under the trees, which gives Jono full access to his trees whenever needed. Matt and Rachel of Meadow Fed Lamb handle all the fencing, moving, loading, and unloading, and stay in contact with Jono. Good communication is key with this type of setup. High-quality wool, much of it naturally dyed as a value-added product, is another product sold besides lamb meat, along with eggs from the chickens. The two entities don't exchange dollars, since both benefit from the relationship. Meadow Fed Lamb also runs their animals at [Preservation Orchard](#), which makes mostly cider from their apples.



Image courtesy of Claire Hintz



Image courtesy of Big River Chestnuts

CHANGE IN THE FUTURE?

The USDA now recognizes the ecological benefits of agroforestry, with numerous Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Practices offering cost-share dollars to help farmers implement silvopasture practices. In addition, the [Savanna Institute](#) educates and promotes silvopasturing nationwide and offers valuable resources.

OFA SUGGESTIONS TO THE NOSB

Definitions:

***Manure application:** The planned placement of livestock waste (solid, slurry, or liquid) by broadcasting, injecting, or surface applying to land in order to supply crop nutrients.*

***Manure deposit:** The direct excretion of waste products (feces and urine) by animals while on pasture.*

§ 205.203 Soil fertility and crop nutrient management practice standard.

.....

(1) Raw animal manure, which must be composted unless it is:

(iv) *Deposited by grazing animals in vegetated grape vineyards, nut tree orchards, and fruit tree or shrub orchards, not less than 21 days before harvest of the crop. Harvested fruit must be hanging from the vines, trees, or shrubs, and nuts harvested from the ground must have a post-harvest method to clean the outer shells.*

OFA testified to the NOSB and the National Organic Program (NOP) in Spring 2026 that NRCS Practice Standard 590 for Nutrient Management provides guidance for a definition of manure application as the planned placement of livestock waste (solid or liquid) onto land to supply crop nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus, potash) while maintaining or improving soil quality. NRCS refers to manure as organic waste from livestock—including feces, urine, and associated materials like bedding, litter, or feed waste.¹ Because farmers in an agroforestry situation are not directing each manure drop from grazing livestock, OFA argues the term “manure application” should not apply to silvopasture. OFA clarified that this system will only function if the land grows healthy forage and remains vegetated; bare feed-lot-type orchards with over-grazing should not be considered “agroforestry.” The European Union’s definition of “manure deposit,” which describes the system of agroforestry with livestock grazing² OFA’s Agroforestry Farmer Workgroup suggested a withholding time-frame of 21 days for the livestock to leave the orchard before harvest begins. The collaboration between the public and the NOSB on this issue illustrates that when a strong farmer-led case can be made, change can occur!

OFA and our workgroups of farmers and organizations will continue this discussion and work toward an updated NOP interpretation that allows animals to graze in certified organic nut and fruit tree orchards. If you wish to be part of this discussion, or have other areas of the organic regulations that you feel need modification, contact OFA Farmer Services Consultant Harriet Behar (harriet@organicfarmersassociation.org).



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.

1 - Natural Resources Conservation Service, “Conservation Practice Standard: Nutrient Management Code 590 (ac),” 590-CPS-1, May 2019, https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2022-09/Nutrient_Management_590_NHCP_CPS_2017.pdf

2 - Council of the European Union, “Council Directive of 12 December 1991 concerning the protection of waters against pollution caused by nitrates from agricultural sources,” 91/676/EEC, Updated 3/2/2026, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/1991/676>

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**ORGANIC FARMERS
ASSOCIATION**

Three Organic Farmers Using Technology to Maximize Efficiency Without Sacrificing Care

By Kendal Thomas

Organic farmers don't cut corners, so they deserve top-notch technology that makes their honest work just a bit easier. Some of this technology is being created by organic farmers themselves, giving them products they can trust in an age when new technology is often met with skepticism. Organic farmers are natural problem solvers; when it comes to technology, they aim to maximize efficiency without sacrificing care. This is proven by three organic farmers, Matthew Fitzgerald, Angela and Kerry Knuth, and Dave Chapman, who are using different types of technology to elevate their farms' quality and production.

FARM FLOW & FITZGERALD ORGANICS – MATTHEW FITZGERALD

Matthew Fitzgerald and his father, Joe, operate [Fitzgerald Organics](#) in Hutchinson, Minnesota, a grain farm managed by Matthew's original software, [FarmFlow](#). This technology, developed with software developer Kirsten Auker, manages the complexity of organic farming; record-keeping is often an obstacle for farmers, yet it is imperative for organic certification and ensuring team unification. Once an analog system on a 4x8-foot whiteboard, this digitized platform handles record-keeping for organic certification, tracks inventory and storage, trains employees, and more, all contributing towards clearer priorities and higher yields.

Because FarmFlow evolved from an analog system, farmers anywhere on the technological spectrum can adapt it, including Amish farmers who want to use the system.

This tool also uses AI for two aspects of the platform: weather tracking and training documents. The training documents can onboard new employees or share farming practices with other grain farmers. Compared with other methods for sharing farming methods, like Facebook Groups and field days, FarmFlow's feature is more efficient and protects farmers' data. The AI platform keeps farmers' input private and generates farming instructions in minutes.

FarmFlow is in the startup phase, aiming to increase usage and gather feedback from farmers. Matthew's goal is to provide a productive tool for organic grain farmers in an age when margins are slim, and labor is shrinking. "If we don't build a tool, somebody will build some kind of tool that will be extractive of farmers," Matthew said.

GREENFIELD ROBOTICS & KNUTH FARMS – ANGELA AND KERRY KNUTH

While Matthew Fitzgerald created his FarmFlow technology to digitize administrative tasks, other farmers are using technology to change the physical labor of farming.



FarmFlow Dashboard

Angela and Kerry Knuth of [Knuth Farms](#) in Mead, Nebraska, use [Greenfield Robotics](#) to manage their 2,200-acre grain farm. These weeding robots allow the Knuths to transition their farm to regenerative no-till organic in an area where conventional farming is the norm. On their organic fields, which make up 17% of their farm, they use the robots to make their no-till regenerative practices possible. These robots were developed by Clint Brauer, a farmer from Kansas, with whom the Knuths work closely to ensure the robots' effectiveness. "The amount of technology that's in agriculture, it just seems like a logical step to explore," Angela said.

These robots save the Knuths on labor costs, tilling equipment, and chemical inputs by cutting weeds at the base without disturbing the soil, eliminating the necessity for inputs. The Knuths have also been able to use the robots on their conventional fields, eliminating the need for a second spray pass. The labor required by these robots is limited to changing the batteries and getting them unstuck from coyote holes in the field, which is still time-consuming. As the Knuths plan to hand down their farm to their son, Gregory, in the upcoming years, incorporating this labor-saving technology gives them peace of mind that they are setting their son up for success.

For the past three years, the Knuths have worked with Brauer to improve the robots' effectiveness. Angela explained that working with another farmer adds a layer of trust: "He is for the farmer."

It takes a farmer to know exactly what tasks would be most helpful for a robot to complete rather than a tractor or physical labor. They look forward to the robots becoming autonomous, hopefully by 2028.

DUTCH GREENHOUSE TECHNOLOGY & LONG WIND FARM – DAVE CHAPMAN

This technological innovation by an organic farmer reaches beyond the field and into the greenhouse. Dave Chapman of [Long Wind Farm](#), Vermont, uses Dutch heating, cooling, and cart technologies on his 2.5-acre tomato farm, which he started in 1984. His technology includes a computer-run heating and cooling system, which also integrates a mobile cart that allows workers to easily move up and down the tomato vines, which would otherwise be labor-intensive.

Dave describes his system as a combination of many techniques that are standard in the Netherlands. He did not buy the system from a single company; instead, he built it by combining elements from several sources. The computer system Long Wind Farm uses to control the temperature is called [Priva](#).

For cooling, the greenhouse has cooling pads and exhaust fans on opposite sides. The fans suck in air through the cooling pad, making the air approximately 6 degrees cooler and more humid inside the greenhouse than it is outside. This process works, Dave explains, only if the outside air is dry enough to undergo the phase change. To heat the greenhouse in cold months, the farm uses a hot water system. Hot water pipes run down each path, providing a consistent temperature throughout the greenhouse, which is otherwise difficult to achieve.

Image courtesy off Knuth Farms



These pipes also serve as a transportation track for electric carts that move horizontally and vertically, allowing workers to tend the tomatoes more easily, whereas otherwise they would expend energy climbing ladders and lifting vines. This system makes Dave's farm more energy efficient in heating and cooling the greenhouses and reduces the labor required to tend the tomatoes. This technology supports a reliable greenhouse system, which is especially important as Dave transitions his ownership of Long Wind Farm.

Each of these farmers is using technology for different purposes, but they represent a central value to organic farming—problem solving without forfeiting organic integrity. Whether it be creating a digital record keeping platform that makes organic certification easier, to robots who make organic weed control possible, to energy efficient greenhouses, these farmers have found solutions to propel their farms into the organic future.

Matthew Fitzgerald summarizes this idea: “Ultimately, this tool does not replace being a great farmer and having intimate understanding of the soil and plant health, right? This is a supplemental tool, not a replacement tool.” With a mindset like this, organic farmers will continue to innovate for the better, finding a productive balance of efficiency and care. 🌱

Kendal is a recent graduate of American University, with a degree in Communications Studies and a Minor in American Studies. Having grown up in rural Pennsylvania and now living in Washington D.C., Kendal has a deep passion for regenerative agriculture, food access, and community building.



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
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Write a Letter

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Whether you farm organically or support those who do, your voice is critical right now as we shape policies that will define the future of organic farming.

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Advocacy rooted in real experience – OFA was built by organic farmers, so our policy work reflects the realities of the field. Your membership ensures decisions are informed by those who actually do the work.

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FEATURED STORY

The Virtual Reality of Fencing 21st Century Farms

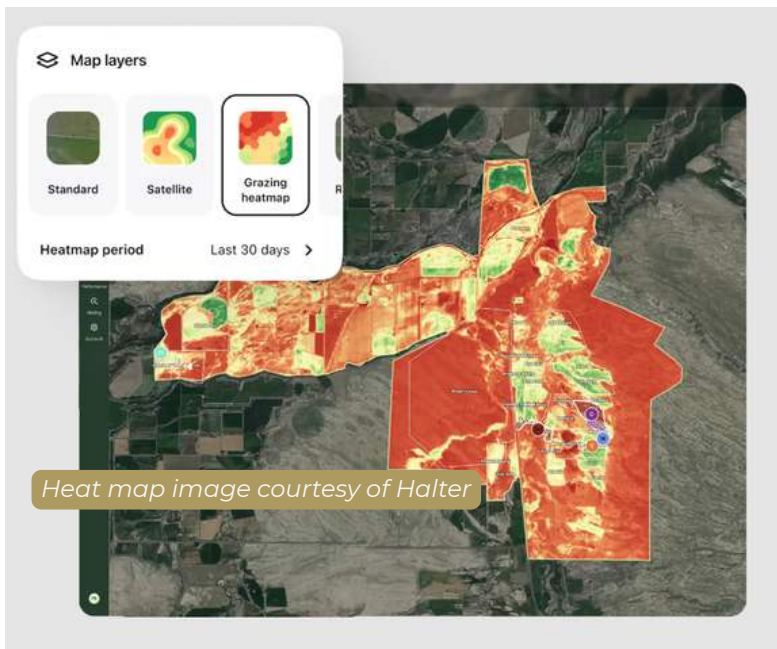
By Bailey Jo Kelly

In recent years, virtual fencing has emerged as an alternative to conventional physical fencing. From barbed wire to portable electrified fencing to virtual fencing, this third wave of fencing innovation enables grazing and pasture management without physical boundaries. A key consideration for ranchers and farmers is the shift from land-based physical fences to animal-based virtual fences. While physical electric fencing provides a visual cue for incoming electric pulses as cattle approach grazing boundaries, virtual fencing provides an auditory cue emitted from an animal-mounted collar. The boundaries are defined using Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) technology.

In these virtual systems, if the animal moves beyond the established virtual boundary despite the auditory cue, the collar delivers a low-energy electric pulse, which encourages it to move away from the virtual fence line. Trials have shown that animals learn to associate the auditory cue with the electric stimulus and can be effectively contained by virtual fencing through this process. Investing in virtual fencing can reduce costs and labor requirements in the long run, especially as farmers face rising production expenses, growing labor scarcity and costs, and more consistent ecological stress such as drought and wildfire.

In April 2026, Halter launched the first virtual fencing system that uses satellite communication, enabling ranchers in remote, rugged regions with limited cellular connectivity to manage cattle anywhere their animals can see the sky. Direct-to-satellite collars eliminate the need for cell towers or on-ranch infrastructure, further reducing costs and increasing the productivity and sustainability of implementing virtual fencing.

Virtual fencing is gaining political support in Montana, where both the governor and the director of the Montana Department of Agriculture have endorsed its benefits for the state's ranchers. A key benefit of virtual fencing is its minimal environmental impact, keeping migration paths open for wildlife and targeting grazing in the most optimal areas. In eastern Montana, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offers a Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP) to help producers adopt sustainable grazing practices. This plan aims to address the imbalance of overgrazing in certain areas and undergrazing in others, both of which are suboptimal for pasture and rangeland health. Virtual fencing improves grazing management, which promotes wildlife habitat, soil health, air quality, carbon sequestration, and plant productivity.



Another striking advantage is improved herd health through heightened health management. Halter's recent upgrade, BeefPro, provides ranchers with data on feed demand and behavior through grazing-intensity heat maps and behavior monitoring. This data can enable more individualized care; for example, customizing feeding based on calving date or physical condition.

FARMER THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES

Albert Straus, a California certified organic dairy farmer and owner of [Straus Family Creamery](#), says, "Halter was developed for dairy in New Zealand, but they don't know the U.S. market." Straus sees immense potential in virtual fencing to help with recordkeeping for pasture intake by grass-fed cattle for organic certification, as well as improving pasture utilization for more effective grazing. Organic dairy cows must be on pasture or have access to pasture year-round unless there is a risk to water, soil quality, or animal health, so increasing feed and grass productivity is a huge return on investment of virtual fencing. In New Zealand, the virtual system can automatically call cows in for milking or feeding, change paddocks, and provide added benefits like heat detection and rumination data.

Mike Kline is the Mideast Divisional Manager for Organic Valley, host of the podcast [Rooted in Organic](#), and an organic farmer in Ohio. He owns 93 acres of certified organic pasture where he recently experimented with virtual fencing with a small herd of eight goats.

Kline would not have considered a goat herd without virtual fencing; he says, "Fifteen years ago I bought a herd of goats and a bunch of fencing and sold them within a few weeks because I could not keep them in." Now, a year after bringing goats back to the farm with Nofence virtual collars, his herd has doubled in size and manages nine acres of brush without Kline worrying about them escaping the effective virtual parameters.

He says, "With small ruminants it's not if they get out, it's when." Kline loves when his friends come up his long driveway and arrive with immediate concern that his goats got out because he can respond with a speech about virtual fencing and how it works for him and his farm. Kline is amazed he can run his goats within fifteen feet of his big garden and keep it safe. He has also learned a lot about goat behavior from watching their movement. For example, when Kline grants his herd a larger feeding area using virtual parameters on his cellular device, within 10 minutes they locate the new perimeter and consistently eat along the new outer edge before working their way inward. Kline has had only two escapes over the last year, when his virtual fencing system alerted him that a goat left. In both cases, the animals got back inside the virtual fence on their own within seconds.

“***My thought process was: If I can get the collars, I can get the goats. I got the goats because I was going to get the collars!***”
— Mike Kline

Kline has been pleasantly surprised by the learning curve and states it has been much easier to train the goats than he expected. Impressively, most of the kids never get shocked because they learn how the virtual collars work from their mother at the very beginning of their lives.

Kline sees virtual fencing as the future of grazing, especially for the organic dairy industry, commenting, "I think the potential for that is absolutely off the charts, and when you see what they are doing with virtual fencing in New Zealand and Norway, it is just amazing."

He is hopeful Halter will roll out a stronger virtual collar option for U.S. dairy farmers within the next 12 to 18 months, but also recognizes it is a much smaller piece of the pie when compared to the beef industry. He worries that the Halter system lacks research and data on the diversity of U.S. pasture environments and that the New Zealand data, where pastures are primarily fast-growing rye grass, may not apply to U.S. organic dairies.



Image courtesy of Mike Klein

VIRTUAL FENCE ASSESSMENT

Overall, virtual fencing has pros and cons for every farmer to consider, and it is important to research the variety of virtual fencing companies available and identify which option best matches you and your farm. Virtual fencing works across all major ruminant species, typically achieving containment rates above 90% once animals complete species-appropriate training.

Cattle are highly predictable, food-motivated, and risk-averse, making them the ideal candidate for virtual fencing. Sheep respond well to virtual fencing, but their behavior is influenced by flock mechanics rather than individual boundary learning. Goats can be harder to contain because of their intelligence and tolerance for discomfort, but they have shown good containment with virtual fencing.

One factor to consider is state fencing laws. In "Fence-In" states (most of the eastern half of the country - Midwest & Great Lakes, Northeast & Mid-Atlantic, South & Southeast), livestock owners have a strict legal duty to build and maintain physical structures that prevent their animals from running at large. Virtual fencing would likely not hold up in court as sufficient if an accident occurred or an animal got out and damaged a neighbor's property.

In Western "Fence-Out" states, this risk is reversed. Landowners must build physical fences to keep neighboring livestock out of their property, so virtual fencing may pose less risk in these states. Proximity to state and federal highways could increase a farm's risk as they are considered "closed range" corridors, even in open-range states, and prohibit livestock owners from allowing animals to roam freely on major public roads.

NRCS now supports virtual fencing in all 50 states through updated EQIP payment schedules, providing cost-share in years 1-5. Applicable Practice Standards include 382: Fence and 528: Grazing Management. Contact your local NRCS office to learn more about how this funding can support your operation's consideration of implementing virtual fencing. Several virtual fencing companies currently operate in the United States. If you are hoping to cost-share with NRCS, make sure they approve the company you are interested in for your NRCS plan.

Speak with other farmers using these systems to see how they perform under conditions you may experience on your farm.

- **Gallagher eShepherd:** GPS neckbands and software for cattle producers to move and fence herds remotely with tracking.
- **Halter:** Uses solar GPS collars and satellite, offering remote herd shifting, 24/7 tracking, and automated calving detection. Designed for beef and dairy cattle.
- **Nofence:** Cellular GPS collars designed to manage multi-pasture boundaries from a smartphone. Collars designed for sheep, goats, and cattle.
- **Monil:** Lightweight collars that utilize GPS positioning and direct cellular connectivity for Herd monitoring and virtual fencing in one system. Made for small and medium-sized US cattle producers.
- **Vence:** A Merck Animal Health virtual fencing management system for cattle movement, open-range grazing behavior, and animal location and movement. Uses base systems with (GPS) transceivers. 



Bailey Jo Kelly is the fall OFA Farmer Services intern. Bailey Jo is a firm advocate and strong believer in organic agriculture and localized food systems, and sees food as medicine and has continually found healing in approaching eating and farming this way. Bailey Jo holds a Bachelor's Degree in Human Nutrition and Food Science from Colorado State University.



**ORGANIC FARMERS
ASSOCIATION**

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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.

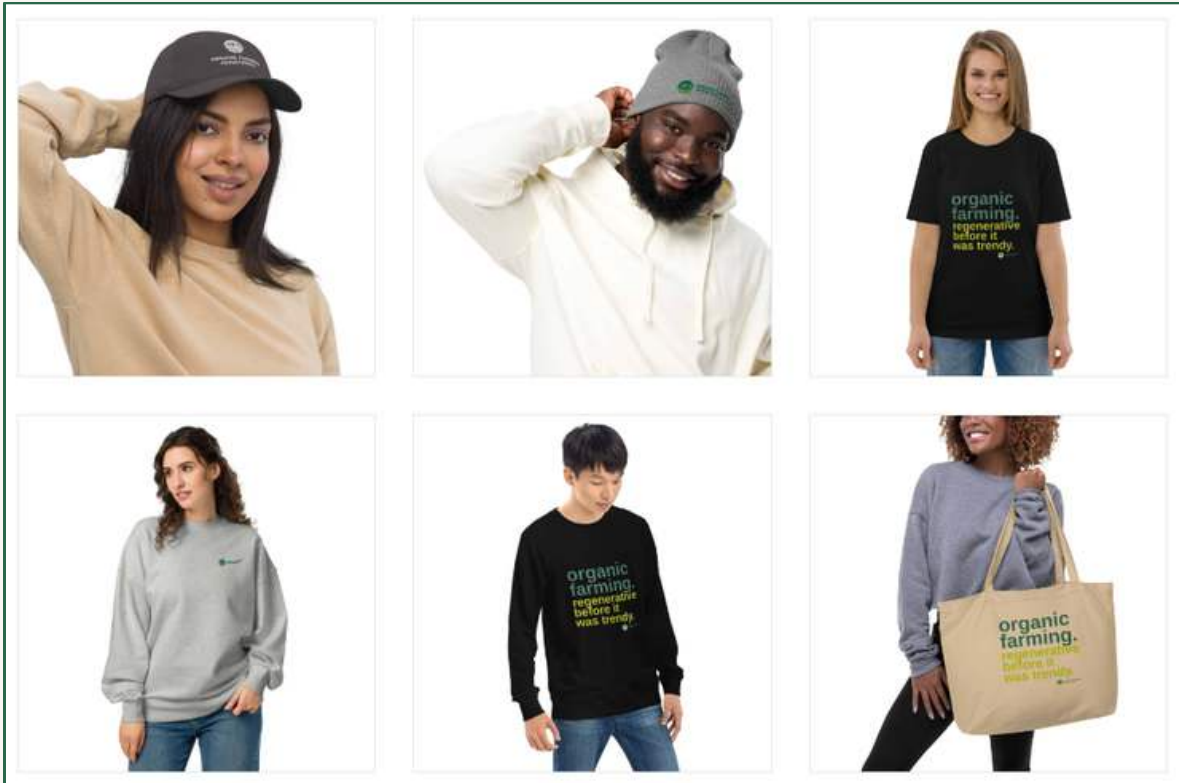
- **NOSB Workgroup:** A short-term, targeted workgroup that will meet ahead of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) meeting to form comments for the board and prepare members to also to share comments.

 **REGISTER NOW**

- **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.

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Store**



And OFA Farmer Members, be sure to order your member farm sign here!



Uncorking Change: How Candoni Wine is Supporting Organic Farmers for Organic Harvest Month

Every harvest tells a story. This September, during Organic Harvest Month, a new partnership between Candoni Wines and the Organic Farmers Association (OFA) is adding a new chapter to that story, connecting an organic Italian winemaking tradition directly to the fight for a stronger, more accessible organic food system right here in the U.S.

For every case of Candoni organic wine sold this September, Candoni will donate \$2 to OFA. The proceeds will help fund OFA's farmer fly-in next March, when organic farmers from across the country travel to Washington, D.C. to meet with lawmakers and advocate for policies that make domestic organic farming more viable and organic food more available to U.S. consumers.

It might seem unexpected at first: an Italian wine brand funding American farmer advocacy. But the logic is simple. Organic agriculture is a global movement, and support for it in one corner of the world strengthens the whole. When you choose to support organic farming anywhere, you're investing in healthier soil, cleaner water, and more resilient farms everywhere, including the small and mid-size organic farms that form the backbone of rural America.

CANDONI ORGANIC COLLECTION & PARTNERSHIP WITH OFA

As a family and sisters, Candoni Wines believes that great wine begins with healthy soils, respect for nature, and the people who dedicate their lives to farming. While Candoni is built on generations of family heritage, its emotional heart is sisterhood.

Barbara and Caterina represent a new generation of Italian wine, one that is welcoming, inclusive, and deeply personal. Their relationship reflects the way the family has always approached wine: with warmth, generosity, and the belief that the best bottles are those shared around a table. Raised in both the United States and Italy, the sisters naturally bridge two cultures, helping wine lovers discover Italy in a way that feels authentic, approachable, and personal.

"Over the years, we made a conscious decision to expand our commitment to organic viticulture because we truly believe organic farming is one of the best ways to protect our land for future generations while producing authentic, high-quality wines," said Caterina De Zan of Candoni Wines.

That commitment led Candoni Wines to build long-term partnerships with carefully selected organic family growers in regions such as Sicily and Abruzzo, where the Candoni Organic wines are produced. These sun-drenched regions are naturally suited to organic viticulture.



Caterina & Barbara Candoni De Zan, Candoni Wines

With abundant sunshine, consistent coastal breezes, and a dry Mediterranean climate, vineyards experience lower disease pressure, allowing growers to significantly reduce the need for interventions while cultivating healthy, expressive grapes in harmony with nature.

Caterina explained: "For us, organic wine is about much more than certification. It's about preserving the environment, supporting family farmers, strengthening rural communities, and proving that doing the right thing can also produce exceptional wines. That's why partnering with the Organic Farmers Association felt so natural. We share the same belief that farmers deserve a strong voice, access to education and resources, and the opportunity to thrive. Through this partnership, we're honored to support the people who are shaping the future of organic agriculture and inspiring the next generation of farmers."

RAISE A GLASS, RAISE THEIR VOICES

This Organic Harvest Month, every case of Candoni Organic Wine sold does double duty: it brings an authentic, sustainably farmed Italian wine to your table, and it helps send American organic farmers to Washington, D.C. to advocate for the policies that will define the future of the industry. It's a partnership built on a shared belief that great wine and a strong organic movement both start with the people who tend the land. Learn where you can find the wines here, or how to make a direct donation to OFA to honor Organic Harvest Month. 🍷



ORGANIC FARMERS
ASSOCIATION

Celebrating Organic Food & Farms

September is Organic Harvest Month and a time to celebrate and stand up for organic farming.

3 Ways to Support Organic Today

- 1. Sign up & take action:** Protect organic standards from being weakened
 - 2. Become a member** (or renew your membership!): Fight for policies that support organic foods and farms
 - 3. Donate:** Help organic farmers travel to D.C. next spring to advocate for supportive policies
- givebutter.com/2026-organic-harvest-month

**Organic farming
doesn't happen
without advocates
like you. Your support
powers the movement.**

Small-Scale Equipment Is Available for Any Farm Task

By Harriet Behar

Fear not, small-scale growers—there is no reason to break your back or suffer with blistered fingers from using only hand tools to till, cultivate, plant, and harvest. Equipment tailored to small-scale intensive vegetable growing has expanded your options. Even equipment typically pulled by a tractor over large fields has small-scale counterparts such as finger weeders, cultivators, grain planters/harvesters, and hay raking and baling equipment. Tillage, planting, cultivating, spreading fertility inputs, and harvesting all have ingenious small-scale cousins to the larger-scale equipment doing the same jobs.

Small-scale vegetable growing is attractive because it provides access to higher prices through direct-to-consumer markets such as Community Supported Agriculture, farmers markets, roadside stands, local grocery stores, and restaurants, which offer higher profitability than wholesale. Farmers with high-quality, intensively managed vegetables can earn \$10,000-\$50,000 per acre or more. Access to land, especially near urban areas, is expensive and hard to find, keeping many production areas between 1-5 acres. Tractors and their implements, while labor-saving, work best with large spaces between rows, rather than intensive bed systems.

Depending on neighbors' equipment availability for heavy tillage or other activities, farmers can choose which equipment handles the most essential tasks for the highest return. "Walk-behind tractors" are heavy-duty rototillers that can be fitted with a variety of implements, giving growers the flexibility to do a variety of chores.

Two popular manufacturers are BCS and Tilmor, with an astonishing number of attachments for any need. For basic tillage, BCS offers a rear tine tiller, moldboard plow, power harrow, and subsoiler. Tilmor has a disc for their walk-behind tractor.

In high tunnels, where space is at a premium, small, lightweight equipment helps growers reach corners and the edges of the structure. The tilther from Johnny's Selected Seeds uses a cordless drill to drive a small tiller about 2 inches into the soil to top finish a bed for planting small seeds.

For planting small plants, the paper pot planter is a walk-behind transplanter that offers a variety of sizes of rectangular pots connected in a flat chain to make planting many vegetables (from onions to tomatoes) easier on your back and more time-efficient.





Paper Pot Planter

Another handy tool for transplanting is a dibbler. These roll over a prepared bed, making holes in the soil or through plastic film mulch, to then receive the plant.

There are numerous seeders available that can plant numerous rows of very small to large seeds for beds, such as greens and carrots. Single-row seeders can also attach to each other to seed three or more rows at the same time, planting straight rows for efficient land use.



Dibbler

Another seeding tool is a row marker, which helps keep rows straight in the prepared bed, ready for hand seeding or transplanting.

A hand-pulled compost spreader applies a thin or thick layer of compost to keep crops healthy and productive. Many companies sell these handy items.

For weed management, a hoe can be laborious, but items like a hand-held tine weeder for dense bed plantings or attachments to your walk-behind tractor such as finger weeders, tine weeders, or cultivators can assist row crop plantings.

Flame weeding is effective at killing small weeds before the newly seeded crop germinates or after certain crops are large enough to handle some damage at the lower end of the stem like sweet corn, and comes in both single-row and multiple-row models.



Flame Weeder

While harvest is primarily done by hand, many harvesters work well for greens or herbs grown in beds. These have a power-driven cutting bar and a way to collect the greens in a bag or tub behind the cutter; some have fingers that push the greens into the tub.

If you are collecting tree fruit from the ground for cider or other processed items, a small sweeper helps pick it up into an easy-to-empty hopper.

If you have an ATV or UTV, a very small seed drill would be useful for planting cover crops on planting beds. BCS has both a hay cutter/rake and small round baler to help you produce your own mulch or livestock bedding.

While many hand tools are available through local garden centers and hardware stores, these are meant for home gardeners and may not be ergonomically designed nor hold up under the intense use on a farm.



Small Round Baler

Many of these tools can be expensive, costing thousands of dollars each. However, strategic planning focused on investing in the areas that will most increase your efficiency and improve your farm's production yields can be overall advantageous. Used equipment might be available. Ask local growers at conferences and farmers markets to find those who have tools for sale. Facebook groups such as Market Gardening Success and Gardening for Market may also list used equipment for small-scale growers. 🌱



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.

This article was written with the help of Sam Oschwald Tilton, an advisor who helps organic farmers choose the machinery and improve their systems through field days, workshops, and more. Find more information at Glacial Drift Enterprises. <https://www.glacialdrift.net>

All photos are from manufacturer or seller websites:

- [Johnny's Selected Seeds](#) - many hand tools, transplanters, tillage
- [Tilmor](#) - their walk-behind tractor and implements
- [Small Farm Works](#) - paper pot transplanters
- [Pro Hoe](#) – High-quality Rogue hand tools
- [Earth Tools](#) - BCS walk-behind tractors and implements, high-quality hand tools
- [Jang seeders](#) – Heber Growing Equipment is one of many suppliers
- [Vevor](#) - Compost spreader
- [ATV-pulled seed drill with cultipacker](#)



2026 - 2031



2026 - 2031



2026 - 2031



2026 - 2031



2026 - 2031



2025 - 2030



2025 - 2030



2025 - 2030



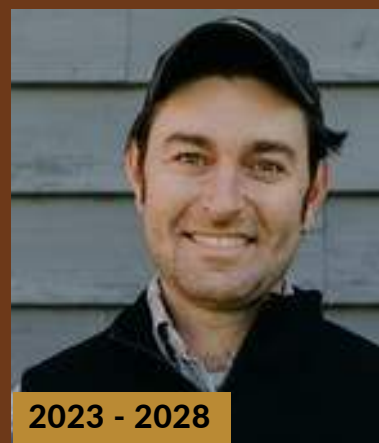
2025 - 2030



2025 - 2030



2023 - 2028



2023 - 2028



2022 - 2027



2022 - 2027



2022 - 2027



NOSB
FALL
2026

NATIONAL ORGANIC STANDARDS BOARD

FALL 2026 NOSB MEETING

The National Organic Standards Board will meet virtually for its fall 2026 meeting, with public comment webinars on October 20 and 22 from 12 to 5pm ET. The public meetings will take place on October 27, 28 and 29 from 12pm to 5pm ET and [registration is open for all sessions now](#).

Farmer voices are needed when this body makes important organic regulatory recommendations. Based on the spring NOSB meeting, the numerous crop, livestock and handling materials to be reviewed at sunset appear that they will be relisted for another five years.

Other topics of discussion include:

- Approval of chitosan as a crop production aid
- allowing grazing livestock in organic orchards with a couple of weeks of nut or fruit of harvest
- increasing the use of organic seed
- asking for a new work agenda item that would add support for increased domestic production of organic pork

OFA is also working with other organizations to develop comments on the emergency use of parasiticides to address the current threat of New World screwworm (NWS).

OFA NOSB WORKGROUP SESSIONS

Join us for one or all of our workgroup sessions to help OFA develop public comment and prepare your own. OFA relies on organic farmers to inform our NOSB comments, so please share your voice!

The one hour zoom meetings are scheduled for 2pm ET:

- Thursday, September 10
- Thursday, September 17
- Thursday, September 24

Register here:

<https://organicfarmersassociation.org/workgroups>

NOSB RESOURCES

Use these resources if you'd like to learn more about the NOSB or how to get involved.

Spring 2026 NOSB Meeting Recap

Page 24 of the June 2026 issue of *The Organic Voice Magazine*

Five Newest Members of the National Organic Standards Board

On August 17, USDA announced the appointment of five new members to the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), filling seats that had remained vacant since January

Current NOSB Members

Current NOSB members are listed on this page chronologically according to when their term on the Board started

Demystifying the National Organic Standards Board

What it is, how it works, and how it impacts your farm

The National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances

Outlines what materials may be used in organic production and handling

OFA's Past NOSB Comments

Written testimony to the NOSB crafted by organic farmers and submitted by OFA

WHAT IS THE NATIONAL ORGANIC STANDARDS BOARD?

4

Farmers

3

Consumers/
Public Interest

3

Environmentalists
/ Resource
Conservationists

2

Processors

1

Retailer

1

Scientist

1

Certification
Agent

CURRENTLY 5 ORGANIC FARMERS SERVE ON THE BOARD



Javier Zamora (CA)
Farmer Seat (22 - 27)
JSM Organic Farms



Nate Lewis (WA)
Environmentalist
Seat (23 - 28)
Oyster Bay Farm



Corie Pierce (VT)
Farmer Seat (25 - 30)
Bread & Butter Farm



Scott Sechler (PA)
Farmer Seat (26 - 31)
Bell & Evans



Jerry Matzner (MN)
Farmer Seat (26 - 31)
Century Farm
Organics

The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) is a Federal Advisory Board to the USDA National Organic Program (NOP). The NOSB was established by the 1990 law, Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA), to represent the organic community in the public-private partnership between the USDA NOP and the organic community. The NOSB consists of 15 public volunteers with designated seats representing the diversity of the organic community. While four seats are reserved for organic farmers, two additional farmers currently serve in other categories.

The NOSB has been meeting since 1992 and helped develop the framework for the National Organic Standards and National Organic Program at USDA. The NOSB considers and makes recommendations on a wide range of issues involving the production, handling, and processing of organic products. The NOSB has statutory powers over the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances.

Each NOSB member is appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture for a term of one to five years. Typically, the USDA publishes a call for nominations each Spring, and newly appointed members begin service in January of the next year.

The NOSB meets twice a year at a public meeting, typically in April and October, to discuss the items on its work agenda, vote on proposals, and make recommendations to the Secretary. These meetings invite public input via submitted written comments and virtual and in-person oral comments. All meetings are free and open to the public.

If an NOSB proposal receives a decisive vote (two-thirds majority) by Board members in favor of the proposed motion, it becomes a recommendation to the USDA Secretary and the NOP.

The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont & Vermont Organic Farmers thank OFA for bringing farmers' voices to the national conversation.



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Organic Farmer Storytelling: Sharing What Happens Behind the Farm

By Aayushi Soni

This year, Organic Farmers Association (OFA) partnered with the Northwest Transition To Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) to create an Organic Farmer Storytelling project that trains farmers to strengthen how they tell their stories, build trust with buyers and consumers, and support demand for a stronger domestic organic supply chain. Research informing the project found that buyers and consumers trust farmers most when it comes to understanding their food. The project was developed to help farmers use that trust to share more about their farms, organic practices, and the reasons behind their choices.

OFA hosted two virtual workshops, Story Lab 101 and 102, where farmers worked through exercises, shared their stories with other farmers, and received feedback. Story Lab 101 focused on why farmers chose organic, why domestic and regional organic matters, and who they want to reach. Story Lab 102 built on that work by exploring organic farm practices and how one story can be adapted for different audiences and formats.

The workshops are only one part of the larger project, which also includes workbooks, audience profiles, storytelling frameworks and guides, an interactive knowledge base, and free one-on-one technical assistance. Farmers can use these resources to continue developing their ideas and get personalized help with writing, strategy, social media, or other storytelling needs.

OFA spoke with three organic farmers who participated in both Story Lab workshops about what they took away. Their experiences were different, but they all highlighted how much work, thought, and care goes into organic farming that customers may never see.

FINDING THE STORY

Rhianna Simes of Verdant Phoenix Farm in southern Oregon spends a lot of time in agriculture. She is a third-generation farmer, teaches gardening, farming, and soils classes, and runs an 11-acre diversified organic farm. Being surrounded by farming made it easy for her to overlook what set her own experience apart. “I kind of forgot about how special my story is,” she said.



Image courtesy of Rhianna Simes

One Story Lab 101 exercise asks farmers to reflect on why they chose organic. For Rhianna, that meant looking back at her family's farming history. Her grandparents farmed conventionally, and she said she had often felt embarrassed to talk about that part of her story. During the workshop, she started to see that differently.

Her experiences growing up around chemical agriculture, followed by her education in botany, helped lead her to become deeply committed to organic farming herself. "I realized through the Story Lab experience that I do have a story and it does matter," she said.

The peer-sharing exercises stood out to her because hearing another farmer respond to her story helped her see it differently. What felt ordinary to her was new to someone else, and that gave her more confidence to share those experiences with customers.

WHO YOU'RE TALKING TO

The owners of [Whitestone Mountain Orchard](#) came to the Story Lab workshops with a different challenge. The Washington orchard transitioned from a conventional operation that sold mainly through packing houses to a diversified organic farm selling through several channels, including farm-to-school, online sales, wholesale buyers, and value-added products. They already knew marketing was an area they wanted to improve.

Hal Jackson, who co-owns Whitestone Mountain Orchard with his wife, Claire Lichtenfels, said the farm is trying to reach very different customers. "We're trying to get produce buyers in grocery store chains. We're trying to keep those customers that do our online store happy."

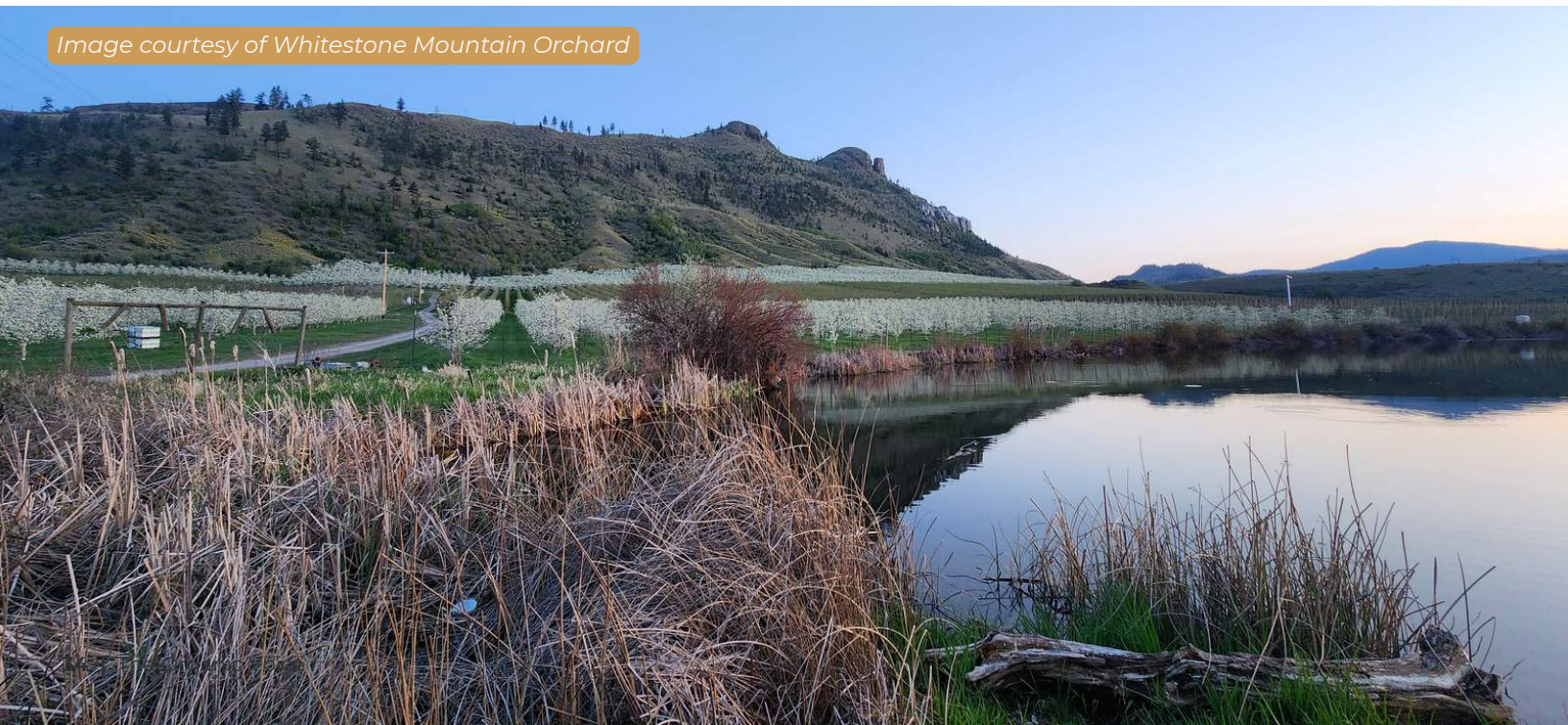
He was especially interested in the project's work around different audiences and storytelling mediums. For a farm selling through several channels, a story intended for a grocery buyer needs to be presented differently than for an online customer. Hal also saw firsthand how much people respond to authentic stories about what is happening on the farm.

After the Sinlahekin Fire recently threatened Whitestone Mountain Orchard, he sat down and wrote about what their crew and community had gone through. The post became their most engaging social media post to date. For Hal, it was a good reminder that some of the strongest stories tell what is already happening on the farm.

USING ONE STORY IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Sebastian Interlandi participated in the workshops from both a farming and technical assistance perspective. He previously ran [Creative Shepard Farm](#), an organic farm in New York where he farmed for more than a decade, and now works as a technical assistance specialist with Florida Organic Growers.

Image courtesy of Whitestone Mountain Orchard



He went through the Story Lab exercises using his own farming experience while also thinking about how he could share the ideas with the farmers he supports in Florida.

One part of Story Lab 102 stood out to him most. The exercise focused on taking one story and adapting it for different mediums. “It was kind of nice to be able to think about how to present the same story in all of these different formats,” he said.

The same story could become an email, a short video, a newsletter, a social post, or something a farmer talks about directly with customers.

Sebastian has already shared some of the Story Lab exercises and ideas with about half a dozen farmers he works with. He also saved the frameworks and plans to use them again when he has more time for marketing his own business.

WHAT CUSTOMERS DON'T ALWAYS SEE

One thing that came up with all of these farmers was how much happens in organic farming that customers never get to see. Each farmer talked about different parts of that work, from the choices they make on the farm to the time, cost, and personal commitment behind growing organically.

For Hal at Whitestone Mountain Orchard, that connects to combating growing consolidation in agriculture. He said larger agricultural businesses have more resources for branding and marketing, making it harder for customers to understand how independent farms actually operate. “I think it’s essential that people understand the value of regenerative practices that build healthier soils,” he said, “along with the benefits those practices can have for employees, customers, and the environment.”

Sebastian echoed the idea, describing organic farming as a “labor of love” and said that for many farmers, life is closely tied to the farm, the land, and the community around it. That connection can be hard for customers to understand if they only see the final product.

For Rhianna of Verdant Phoenix Farm, organic farming is closely tied to why she farms in the first place.



Image courtesy of Sebastian Interlandi

She wants to grow food and medicine people can trust and give her children the experience of growing up connected to the farm and the food they eat. Even while the farm is still becoming financially established and the cost of organic certification has not yet paid for itself, she said their commitment to organic comes from their values more than the financial return. “We put our whole heart into it,” she said.

For Rhianna, sharing those stories is ultimately about building a stronger relationship with the people who support her farm. She sees each purchase as more than a transaction. When people understand who they are buying from and the values behind that farm, their dollars become a way of supporting the kind of food system and world they want to live in. These farmers already had plenty to say before they found the storytelling resources. The Storytelling Project gave them a chance to step back, recognize what was worth sharing, and think more intentionally about how to share it. 🌱



Aayushi is the NW TOPP Storytelling Intern for OFA. She is a recent graduate of The Ohio State University, where she studied Environment, Economy, Development, and Sustainability. She recently completed an Oregon Farm Corps apprenticeship at Peachwood Orchard, a 3.5-acre organic peach orchard, and now lives in Portland, Oregon.



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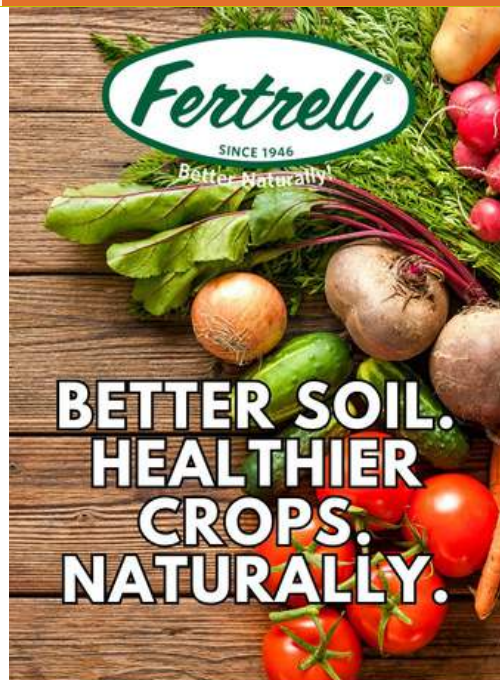
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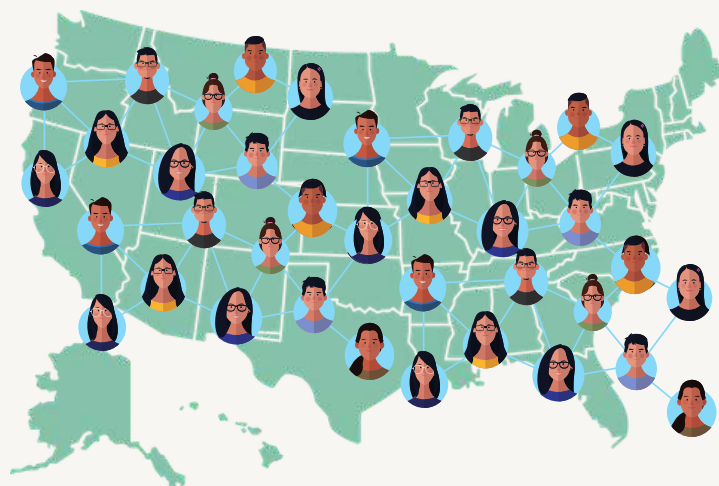
Scan to learn more about
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The Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) is a network assembled by the USDA's National Organic Program to support transitioning and organic producers with mentorship and technical assistance.

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A Kansas Organic Farm Tour

By Julia Barton

OFA partnered with [Kansas Black Farmers Association \(KBFA\)](#) to host a Kansas field day in Eastern Kansas on August 20th. KBFA is a nonprofit organization existing to preserve the Kansas minority farmer legacy through education, promotion of the agricultural lifestyle, and collective niche product development. The farm tour highlighted two farms, an urban farm using organic practices and a rural, longtime certified organic farm. KBFA members, OFA members, and community members from both Eastern and Western Kansas attended.

Ms. LaToya Adams, owner/operator of [Adams Family Farm](#), started the day with a local breakfast and tour of her mixed vegetable farm and bee yard in Shawnee, southwest of Kansas City. The tour highlighted her production practices, weed management strategies, and companion plantings. Adams has lived in Shawnee for 25 years and is involved in her community, focusing on healthy food issues. Poised at the rural/urban interface, Adams Family Farm is surrounded by sand mining, warehouse development, conventional grain production, a local park, and a residential neighborhood. While she is willing to co-exist with her neighbors, she has unsuccessfully tried to address sand blowing from nearby mines onto her house and property.

Adams uses organic practices and is curious if she could maintain certification with the surrounding environment. This question ignited a lively discussion regarding her site, including plans for a possible NRCS cost-shared windbreak, creative partnerships being built with child care centers, farmers, farm schools, and local producers in and around Shawnee, the state of organic in Kansas, and organic transition. The event attracted a number of members of the Kansas House of Representatives, including Adams' Representative, Angela Stiens (R-KS HD-39), who became interested in helping support Adams' right to farm. Kansas House members, Representative Courtney Sappington (R-KS HD-5) and Representative Lauren Bohi (R-KS HD-15) and Kansas gubernatorial candidate Cindy Holscher also attended the field day, hoping to learn more about Kansas organic agriculture.

Following the tour of Adams Family Farm, attendees traveled northwest to [Geiger Farm](#) in rural Northeast Kansas. Jack and Deborah Geiger, manage the family farm that has been serving Kansas since 1856, and has been certified organic for 30 years. The Geigers produce organic grain, organic seed, and beef. Jack has started his career as an organic vegetable farmer, and later converted a former hog operation into the current farm he stewards today. His decades of experience is shared through a mentorship program, which pre-dates the TOPP mentorship program. Currently, he mentors fourteen farmers and serves on the board of the Kansas Farmers Union. He recently decided to run for public office and declared candidacy for the Kansas House of Representatives to represent District 62 as Kansas's first independent.



Farmer Jack Geiger discussing organic corn yields

Jack led a tour of his cattle operation and discussed how animals are integrated into the organic system. His whole farm is fenced, which allows him to graze the cattle in each part of the farm each year. Jack also showed the attendees his corn and soybean fields and discussed organic yield projections.

The urban and rural farms offered attendees a diverse perspective on organic production and programs available to farmers in the region. Organic farmers have created and sustained a generous culture of opening their farms to the greater community to learn more about the benefits of organic practices and what organic farms need to be successful. We are grateful to both Adams Family Farm and Geiger Farm for having us, and to KBFA for co-hosting and planning this event!

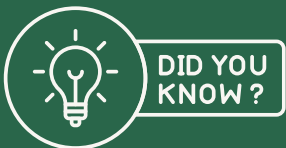
Partnerships matter, and true partners are super valuable as we work together to build an organic future. To take inspiration from one of the event participants, Mahasia Abdullah, “We can all work together, or we can perish as fools.” 🌱



Julia Barton loves working with farmers to identify challenges and find solutions! She has served as Farmer Services Director with the Organic Farmers Association since 2023. She, along with her husband and two boys, runs Octagon Acres, a small organic farm, and Northridge Blueberries and Chestnuts, both in Northeast Ohio.

Thank you to the Transition to Organic Partnership Program Plains Region, for its support of this farm tour!

United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
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Organic Thriving in the Plains

OFA was in Kansas this August with organization member the Kansas Black Farmers Association for an Organic Farm Tour.

The event was an opportunity for farmers, growers, and supporters from Kansas and Missouri to come together, connect with legislators, and have real conversations about the issues impacting our farming communities (read more on page 39). Thank you again to our partners and the farmers who make events like this possible!

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