



Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont

An organization of farmers, gardeners, and consumers working to promote an economically viable and ecologically sound Vermont food system

NOFA-VT 2007 Farm Bill Recommendations

Written testimony submitted to the United States Senate Agriculture Committee by Enid Wonnacott, Executive Director, NOFA-VT, March 9, 2007

While organic production and organic products still comprise a small percentage of the nation's overall food economy (2-3%), it is the most dynamic sector and continues to expand on the order of 25-30% per year.

In Vermont, there were 394 certified organic farmers and processors, with over 66,000 acres in certified organic production in 2006. By the end of 2007, 200 dairy farms in Vermont will be certified organic, representing 18% of the state's dairy farms.

This growth has been driven by deep-rooted values and growing public concerns related to our food system. Consequently, the potential for the continued growth in organic production and consumer demand for organic food is great; published estimates indicate that in the next decade organic production and products may reach 10% of the nation's food economy.

The remarkable growth of organic food production and consumption have created significant economic, environmental and public health benefits for Vermont's farmers, communities and people. Vermont is recognized as a leader in the development of new organic businesses, products, programs and initiatives. Organic agriculture is providing new opportunities for farm families and others to develop and manage successful, sustainable farms and food enterprises.

As in other realms of agriculture, the full realization of organic agriculture's potential will require significant and continuing public support in developing new knowledge, technologies, and markets; and considerable investments in education, training and technical support programs. As such, it is critical that robust new policies and programs to support organic agriculture be included in the 2007 Farm Bill. The following proposals are priorities for NOFA-VT:

Certification Cost Share Re-Authorization: According to a recent USDA Economic Research Service report, Vermont ranks seventh in the nation in the number of certified



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organic operations (farms and processors). This impressive finding is, in no small part, due to federal cost-share funds (up to \$500) to defray annual (re)certification expenses to individual farmers and processors. In 2006 these National Organic Program (NOP) funds were fully expended in most states leaving farmers and organic food processors to shoulder the full expense - which may be up to \$4000 dollars per year. Certification cost-sharing is particularly valuable for family farms and small- and micro-scale food manufacturers. Cost-sharing enables them to afford to produce and market value-added, certified organic food and food products. In Vermont and across the country these enterprises are making significant contributions to the vitality of rural economies and communities.

- NOFA-VT recommends that the NOP Certification Cost-Share Program be re-authorized and that annual funding be increased to fully fund program needs throughout the life of the Farm Bill and that the current cost share limit for farmers and processors be increased from \$500 to \$750/year or 75% of the cost.

Conservation Programs: In order to be certified, organic farmers must develop and implement whole-farm plans to insure that soils, pastures, nutrients, manure and water resources are managed responsibly. Organic Farm Plans require mitigation measures and best farming practices that are largely congruent with those of the Conservation Security Program (CSP), Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), and other programs administered by the Natural Resource and Conservation Service (NRCS). Recognition of this congruence is long overdue; corrections to conservation programs' rules are needed so that conservation grants, incentive payments and cost-sharing funds are more easily available to transitioning and certified organic farmers. These changes will not only provide an important stimulus to organic food production but will also help these conservation programs' objectives to be achieved to more efficiently and economically.

Organic Transition: Implementation of organic production practices and compliance with organic standards involves specialized technical understanding of and accurate, up-to-date information. Experienced conventional farmers who are interested in transitioning to certified organic production, as well individuals who wish to develop new organic farm enterprises, require ready access to technical information, practical advice, educational opportunities, business planning services and on-farm evaluations of e.g., facilities, pastures, soil and water resources.

- NOFA-VT recommends the development of a technical assistance program, modeled after Vermont's Dairy and Livestock Technical Assistance Program, that provides on-farm technical assistance in production and business planning from a team of advisors including university researchers, agency personnel, extension, non-profit service providers and other farmers.

Research: Organic agriculture's future depends upon a solid framework of scientific knowledge and economic data to support the development of better practices, improved products, and effective problem-solving. Significant expansion of basic and applied

research in soil sciences, pest management, organic livestock health, crop and pasture management, and plant and animal breeding suited to organic systems of production are urgently needed.

Organic producers and food manufacturers also require complete and reliable production, price, trade and marketing data to enable them to make better production planning, manufacturing and marketing decisions. Without such information the organic marketplace will not function efficiently, our farmers and processors will find it difficult to plan to meet growing consumer demand, and organic imports will continue to expand. Despite these critical needs, USDA research programs have not kept pace with the growth of organic agriculture. Although organic currently represents about 3% of total US food retail market, the share of USDA research targeted to organic agriculture and marketing only represent about 0.6 percent annually (\$12 million). A significant increase in this funding is required to address the critical needs of organic agriculture and to insure that domestic organic agriculture continues to thrive and develop.

- NOFA-VT recommends significant increases in USDA-ARS resources and program activities devoted to organic research in order to achieve a “fair share” of support for organic agriculture.
- NOFA-VT recommends that comparable increases should take place to fund USDA Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) programs, priorities and initiatives devoted to organic agriculture, including (1) the Integrated Organic Program (which has been significantly under-funded), (2) the National Research Initiative (NRI), to include priority funding of classical plant and livestock breeding research programs to support organic production systems and (3) fully fund SARE, one of the most valuable programs to NOFA-VT.
- NOFA-VT recommends expansion of programs and funding to support economic and policy research devoted to the (1) production, analysis and reporting of organic markets and production data, (2) identification of policy and program opportunities and barriers bearing on organic production and markets, including risk assessment and indemnification of losses caused by natural disasters and contamination by genetically modified organisms. Both conventional and organic farmers are losing market share because of GMO contamination. The risk assessment of new technologies, such as GMOs, needs to take place at the federal level so that states are not forced to develop policies without sufficient research.
- Develop food safety regulations that are scale specific, friendly to small and medium size growers and processors and support farmers selling products directly to consumers.

Food and Nutrition Programs: Programs that effectively educate people about the importance of proper nutrition and sustainable food production systems lay the foundation for addressing critical issues related to public health, environmental degradation, and long-term food security.

- NOFA-VT recommends creation of a Youth Nutrition Program, comparable to the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, to increase the access of fresh, local foods to youth participating in summer feeding programs, and low income child care centers.
- NOFA-VT supports funding for Farm to Cafeteria, including one-time grants to cover the start-up costs of farm to cafeteria programs coupled with technical assistance (training for food service providers, and recipe development incorporating local foods). In addition, one of the greatest needs to create incentives for local purchasing is to allow for geographic preferences and increased flexibility for school and institutional procurement of local and regional foods; and allow geographic preferences in Department of Defense (DOD) purchase of local products.
- Expand the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program to all 50 states.
- Couple market development for farmers with nutrition programs, so that farmers' markets, CSAs and farmstands, for example can be certified for WIC fruit and vegetable vendor status and EBT benefits can be used at farmers' markets. There is over \$40 million dollars of food stamps spent in Vermont annually, which is currently not captured by farmers because the technology does not exist at markets to be able to receive electronic benefits transfer (EBT) debit cards.
- Restore the SFMNP CSA share reimbursement to \$100, while allowing for program expansion.
- Reauthorize Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program (CFP)

National Organic Program:

The continued development of organic agriculture depends upon the adoption and enforcement of USDA national organic standards that are consistent with the values and expectations of millions of consumers of organic products. If consumers lose confidence in the integrity of the USDA Organic Label demand for organic products will stagnate, opportunities for farmers to transition to organic production will diminish, and the markets and investments of many thousands of certified organic farmers and food manufacturers will be placed in jeopardy. As such, it is imperative that the process of developing and enforcing national organic standards be fully transparent, vigorously implemented, and adequately funded. National organic standards must be sensitive and responsive to the desires of the vast majority of organic producers, whose lives and businesses are critically affected by them, as well to the expectations of organic consumers that the integrity of organic products be beyond question and reproach. Recent controversies and questions pertaining to the long-delayed and still unpublished proposed final rule pertaining to pasturing of ruminant livestock highlight growing concerns among many producers and consumers that the National Organic Program lacks the resources, procedures and, according to many, the will to develop, promulgate and enforce the necessary stringent standards. The NOP requires the funding – and the oversight – to fulfill its mission and its responsibilities to organic producers, processors and consumers.

NOFA-VT supports fully funding the NOP and the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), and supports more authority for NOSB recommendations.