



ORGANIC FARMING

Background

Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) in 1990. The OFPA required the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to develop national standards for organically produced agricultural products to assure consumers that agricultural products marketed as organic meet consistent, uniform standards. The OFPA and the National Organic Program (NOP) regulations require that agricultural products labeled as organic originate from farms or handling operations certified by a State or private entity that has been accredited by USDA.

The NOP is a marketing program housed within the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). Neither the OFPA nor the NOP regulations address food safety or differences in the nutritional value of organically produced agricultural products.

The NOP developed national organic standards and established an organic certification program based on recommendations of the 15-member National Organic Standards Board (NOSB). The NOSB is appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture and is comprised of representatives from the following categories: farmer/grower; handler/processor; retailer; consumer/public interest; environmentalist; scientist; and certifying agent.

The National List of Allowed Synthetic and Prohibited Non-Synthetic Substances, a section in the regulations, contains specific guidance on what substances are allowed and prohibited in organic production. The regulations also prohibit the use of genetic engineering and ionizing radiation in organic production and handling.

Organic crops are raised without using most conventional pesticides, petroleum-based fertilizers, or sewage sludge-based fertilizers. Animals raised on an organic operation must be fed organic feed and given access to the outdoors. Animals fed or treated with antibiotics or growth hormones may not be used in organic food production.

Labeling standards are based on the percentage of organic ingredients in a product.

Certification standards establish the requirements that organic production and handling operations must meet to become accredited by USDA-accredited certifying agents. Accreditation standards establish the requirements an applicant must meet in order to become a USDA-accredited certifying agent. The standards are designed to ensure that all organic certifying agents act consistently and impartially.

Imported agricultural products may be sold in the United States if they are certified by USDA-accredited certifying agents. USDA has accredited certifying agents in several foreign countries.

U.S. sales of organic food and beverages grew from \$1 billion in 1990 to an estimated \$14.5 billion in 2005. Organic retail sales have grown between 20 and 24 percent each year since 1990.

On January 26, 2005, a decision was issued in the case of Harvey v. Johanns that challenged various provisions of the regulations implementing the OFPA. The court upheld the Secretary's rule against a number of challenges, but invalidated two regulatory provisions allowing the use of synthetic substances in the processing of organic products, and a provision easing the organic feed requirements in the conversion of dairy herds to organic production. However, the 2006 Agriculture Appropriations Act restored various provisions of the NOP that had been overturned in the Harvey v. Johanns ruling.

General Opinions Expressed

- Many comments suggested that USDA should increase the resources dedicated to organic production.
- Many comments noted that organic farming would help U.S. producers become more competitive in international markets.
- A number of comments encouraged USDA to provide more support for small organic farmers.
- Some comments suggested that USDA should reward organic farmers for practicing sustainable agricultural production.
- Many comments encouraged USDA to provide incentives, such as tax breaks and low-interest loans, for producers who switch from conventional farming practices to organic farming.
- Other comments noted that international and U.S. markets are demanding more organic products and fewer genetically modified crops.
- Many comments supported funding the organic certification cost-share program at a mandatory \$2 million per year.
- A few comments stated that the NOP should comply with international standards for certification and accreditation as defined by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).
- Several comments discouraged USDA from weakening current organic standards.
- Several comments supported expanding the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program to serve beginning organic farmers.
- Some comments suggested that the Conservation Security Program should be restructured so that organic practices are rewarded. Cover cropping and crop rotations should be emphasized, while organic farm plans should be accepted as proof of compliance with the highest tier (III) of conservation.
- Some comments suggested that the 2007 farm bill should provide funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), including payments to farmers who make the transition to organic production.

- Other comments suggested that USDA fully implement the Organic Production and Marketing Data Initiative as directed in the 2002 farm bill.
- Several comments indicated that the Natural Resources Conservation Service should designate an organic agriculture coordinator position to oversee organic activities within USDA conservation programs and to provide outreach to the organic community.
- Some comments suggested increasing funding for the Integrated Organic Program (IOP) to \$10 million mandatory per year. The expanded program should focus on a higher number of smaller grants and should not be included in the National Research Initiative.
- A few comments suggested that an organic program should be developed within USDA's Agricultural Research Service with the oversight of a National Program Leader (NPL) for Organic Agriculture.
- Other comments recommended amending the Hatch Act to direct land-grant universities to spend an increased percentage of agricultural research dollars on organic research.
- Several comments supported amending the Smith-Lever Act to direct cooperative extension programs to spend an increased percentage of funds on organic initiatives and research.
- A few comments supported a 5-fold increase in Agricultural Research Service (ARS) resources specifically allocated for organics. As a reflection of the organic share of U.S. retail food sales, it was recommended that ARS receive \$20 million in mandatory funding per year for organic research.
- Other comments recommended that the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service's (CSREES) Integrated Pest Management Centers be included in USDA organic activities. "Strategic Plans for Organic Best Management Practices" could be an example of an organic service provided by CSREES.
- Some comments recommended funding for the USDA National Agricultural Library's Alternative Farming Systems Information Center (AFSIC) so that the Department can operate the www.OrganicAgInfo.org Web site. The site would serve as a public database of research and extension information specific to organic production and marketing.
- Some comments suggested that the National Research Initiative/Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems should be funded at its authorized level. Funds should be directed toward plant and animal breeding research on varieties suited to organic systems, ecosystem management, and economic viability of small and mid-sized organic farms.
- Several comments recommended the establishment of a competitive grant program designed to fund marketing, economic, and policy-related research for the organic industry. Such a grant program should be part of the CSREES Integrated Organic Program and fall under the oversight of the National Program Leader for Organic Agriculture.

Detailed Suggestions Expressed

- Programs supporting organic agriculture should be located throughout USDA agencies and mission areas. An organic component should be included in all USDA grant requirements.
- The Integrated Organic Program should be funded at least at \$15 million per year.
- Funding should be made available for organic price reporting.
- Future farm policy should support new technologies such as drystack houses and other waste management systems that help control ground, air, and water pollution as well as providing a fertilizer source for organic farming.

- Farmers should be educated on the benefits of organic farming, specifically regarding ways in which organic processes strengthen and sustain the land without chemicals.
- The Organic Certification Cost Share programs provide important assistance to help producers create specialized markets.
- The Organic Cost Share Certification program should be made permanent.
- Support research on organic sprays for weed control.
- USDA should provide funding to restart organic farmer associations, such as in Hawaii.
- Organic farming is not safe because some insects, diseases, and fungi need to be treated with chemicals.
- Organic farming is a fad which will be gone in 15 to 20 years.
- The U.S. should import more organic food from Europe.
- It should be easier to purchase crop insurance for organic production.
- Encourage more careful labeling of organic products.
- Promote the production of organic cotton.
- All foods produced with genetically modified organisms (GMOs) should be labeled as such.
- Create subsidies for new farmers to buy land for organic farming only.
- Promote organic farming by providing free educational programs for small farmers who explore environmentally sound agricultural practices.
- Organic certification should be streamlined so that producers of several varieties of fruits and vegetables can receive blanket certification as opposed to certification for each commodity.
- Teach rural Americans how and why organic farming is preferable to conventional farming.
- Shift subsidies from corporate farms to organic farms.
- Organic farm operations need infrastructure improvements such as certified organic livestock auctions, feed and seed operations, and farm implement dealers.
- Organic experiments and methods should be taught at universities.
- Providing farmers access to healthy organic seed stocks will help promote organic agriculture.
- Organic research, especially organic soil fertility management, should be funded.
- The National Organic Standards Board needs to clarify the pasture access standards for livestock.
- Establish a timetable for eliminating the current ability of organic dairies to increase herd size by acquiring calves from conventional farms. Encourage the breeding of organic livestock.
- Provide assistance for aspiring young farmers who want to operate small organic dairy farms because banks are reluctant to provide financing with unstable milk prices.
- USDA should release the names of current National Organic Standards Board candidates.
- Make organic designations easier to understand and more affordable to obtain.
- The Market Access Program (MAP) can be used to establish foreign markets for organic products. Organic exporters are currently not eligible for MAP assistance.
- One commenter provided the following recommendations: provide the NOP with the staffing and funding resources necessary to carry out the duties of the program; reject efforts that would slow the growth of organic milk, such as requiring replacement heifers to be organic from the last 1/3 of their mother's gestation; and reject requiring a minimum of 30 percent dry matter intake from pasture for a minimum of 120 days.

- USDA should educate consumers on how to read labels, such as organic.
- Organic and sustainable agriculture do not need government regulations in order to succeed, but rather USDA should provide a level playing field with conventional agriculture.
- One commenter provided an entire organic title for the next farm bill, which included the creation of an Organic Production Office within USDA to coordinate all organic activities between various agencies. The proposed farm bill title also included the following AMS-specific recommendations:
 - (a) Strengthen accreditation program.
 - (b) Fund adequately for continuing ISO 61 compliance.
 - (c) Provide funding for annual internal audits to be performed by the American National Standards Institute.
 - (d) Create an organic price report.
 - (e) Create a whole-sector organic marketing order for research and promotion.
 - (f) Authorize and provide funding for an organic-specific direct marketing program, through farmers markets, farm stands, direct-to-retail, and farm-to-school.
 - (g) Require marketing orders to promote a proportional share of funding for organic products.
 - (h) Authorize and provide funding for accredited certification agent training.