



United States Department of Agriculture

USDA Accomplishments 2009-2011

Secretary Tom Vilsack

Organic Agriculture

USDA is committed to helping organic agriculture grow and thrive. At the start of this Administration, Secretary Vilsack set the ambitious goal of increasing the number of certified organic operations by 20% – and we expect to meet that target. Since then, the Secretary elevated and strengthened USDA's National Organic Program to increase consumer confidence in the USDA organic seal.

Progress is being made. The retail value of the organic industry grew almost 9.5% in 2011 to \$31.4 billion. Organic foods continue to gain market share in the food industry, climbing to 4.2% of U.S. retail food sales in 2010. And we are creating opportunities for farmers and ranchers: the number of operations certified organic grew by 1,109 – or more than 6% – between 2009 and 2011.

To break down silos and help this growing sector of the agricultural economy, the Secretary required all USDA agencies to participate and identify ways they can better respond to the needs of organic farmers and ranchers. As described below, significant new activities in support of organic agriculture are underway across the Department.

Strengthening the National Organic Program

The central mission of the National Organic Program (NOP) is protecting the integrity of the USDA organic seal, both in the U.S. and abroad. The program is responsible for developing clear, enforceable standards, thereby enabling farmers and handlers to understand the requirements for obtaining and maintaining their organic certification.

- In spring of 2009, the NOP was elevated to its own division within the Agricultural Marketing Service, decreasing levels of bureaucracy between the NOP and the Office of the Secretary. A new Deputy Administrator, with more than 20 years experience in running a state organic certification program, was hired to improve operations and increase transparency of NOP actions. The President's budget proposed increases in NOP funding to facilitate increased enforcement and standard setting activities. The program has implemented numerous improvements recommended by the USDA Office of the Inspector General.
- To make sure consumers can trust the organic seal, the NOP enforces the organic regulations, reviewing complaints and conducting investigations when violations are suspected. In 2011, the NOP completed 128 complaint investigations, and issued ten civil penalties for willful violations of the NOP regulations. To keep mislabeled products out of the marketplace, the NOP launched a new way to notify buyers when fraudulent organic certificates are identified. The NOP also regularly conducts surveillance audits of certifiers and operations certified in foreign countries.
- The NOP has been working on a backlog of National Organic Standards Board recommendations that had accumulated by early 2009. We promulgated new standards, including specific requirements for access to pasture for organic dairy and beef operations. And, at the Board's request, we reviewed over 200 substances and clarified policy related to the use of substances used in organic farming and handling.

Growing Markets for Organic Products

- We have worked to remove barriers to exporting organic goods. In 2009, we signed an organic equivalence arrangement with Canada which allows organic products certified in one country to be sold as such in the other. This is particularly important for small and mid-sized operations that cannot afford the time and money necessary for duplicative certifications, fees, and inspections. In February 2012, we established a similar equivalence arrangement with the European Union. To ensure that the terms of all trade agreements are being met, the NOP conducts periodic audits of foreign countries' organic programs.
- In 2010 USDA successfully petitioned the U.S. International Trade Commission to establish specific tracking codes for selected organic imports and exports. Until this point, no accurate information was available on U.S. trade in organic goods. Reliable trade data is now available for 26 export products and 21 import products.

Support for Conservation, Research and Organic Producers Beyond the National Organic Program

- To assist the USDA-wide approach to advancing organic agriculture, we hired a long-time organic farmer in the Office of the Secretary to chair the USDA-wide Organic Working Group and advise USDA leaders on organic and sustainable agriculture. Regular meetings, work plans, and a formal listening session have provided new momentum. In 2012, the Group will launch a training program to help a wide range of USDA employees better understand organics and services available to organic producers.
- USDA provides financial and technical conservation assistance to farmers who want to address natural resource concerns and transition to organic crop and livestock production. 1,667 farms benefitted from these services in 2011, a 20% increase from the year before. USDA will again provide up to \$50 million for the EQIP Organic Initiative in 2012.
- Organic producers are being provided better risk management tools. In 2011, for the first time ever, USDA offered crop insurance for organic producers that reflects organic pricing of cotton, corn, soybeans, and processing tomatoes. In addition,

a 5% surcharge on premiums for producers of 13 types of organic crops was eliminated.

- USDA provides up to 75% of the cost of organic certification, to a maximum of \$750. Although this is particularly helpful for small farmers and handlers, and those new to organic standards, many eligible participants are unaware of this assistance. As the result of proactive outreach, we saw a more than 25% increase in the number of certified organic operations taking advantage of this program between 2009 and 2011.
- Over three years, USDA has supported internal science and university researchers with more than \$117 million focused on improving the productivity and success of organic agriculture. For example, USDA research on weed management research for organic vegetable production has produced techniques and tools that can help control 70% of weeds at 15% of the cost of hiring workers to weed by hand. Extending USDA organic research findings to people in the field is critical and the "eOrganic" electronic extension service funded by USDA has become an essential tool for compiling and disseminating knowledge about organic production.

Charting a Path for the Future of Organics

- To help promote coexistence among the various sectors of agriculture, including organic farmers and farmers growing traditional and biotech crops, USDA re-established the AC21 Advisory Committee to help address economic impacts of the unintended presence of genetically engineered materials in other crops. The Committee is considering whether it might be appropriate to establish a mechanism that could compensate farmers for economic losses caused in such situations, and if so, how such a system might work.
- USDA has increased its support of local food systems through the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food (KYF) Initiative. Whether it's support of farmers markets, value-added producer grants, food hubs, or a host of other things, this is helpful to organic operations. The KYF Compass is a terrific tool that provides details of how USDA can help farmers, businesses, and communities advance local organic agriculture.

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