

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.)**  
**Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee**  
**Hearing on: The National Organic Law at 20 - Sowing Seeds for a Bright Future**  
**September 15, 2010**

I am delighted to be here today to celebrate the upcoming twentieth anniversary of the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. There are several people here in the room today who were a big part of that achievement, especially Deputy Secretary Merrigan, who I was fortunate to have working for me on this committee while I was chairman and we worked with Ranking Member Lugar to write the 1990 Farm Bill, of which OFPA was a part.

Today we are commemorating this milestone for America's organic sector, and more importantly we are looking to the future to see what the next twenty years may have in store for organic agriculture.

Prior to the passage of the Organic Farm Bill the industry was growing slowly, with farmers, consumers, and retailers facing inconsistent policies and inaccurate labeling procedures across the country. It is hard to believe today, but at the time we had twenty two different states trying to manage and enforce separate regulations for organic foods.

The passage of OFPA brought much needed order to the industry, and it also gave consumers a "USDA Organic" label with real meaning. The Organic law required USDA to develop a minimum national organic standard and set us on the course for where we have arrived today -- certified organic farms in all fifty states, nearly five million acres of organic crop and pastureland, and an industry with sales of more than \$25 billion and growing rapidly every year.

Some folks back then gave me a hard time about this Organics Bill. They kept asking why I was trying so hard for something that was not going to amount to much. But I listened instead to the Vermont farmers who came to me and said, we are willing to meet higher standards and do what is right, but please set a national standard so we can compete on a level playing field.

Since those early days, I have said, and I will continue to say, the only way that the organic sector is going to grow is if the standards are met, followed, and enforced. Strong standards reward farmers who are playing by the rules and also help consumers understand what that label means when they buy something that is USDA Organic. Consumer confidence is a key to the organic industry's growth since then, just as it will be a key to the industry's future. The Organic program has been a clear win for the producers, for those consumers who demand organic food, and for businesses that market organic products.

Of course we have come far from those early days when everyone thought it was just a crunchy granola program. Now organic foods occupy prominent shelf space in the produce and dairy aisles of most mainstream food retailers and even big-box stores. We also see the offerings of organic meats – like the delicious White Oak Pastures grass-fed beef, eggs, breads, grains – such as the Annie's Cheddar Bunnies, beverages, and even peanuts increasing with every passing year. I should add that I was pleased to host Secretary Vilsack this past February at the

Northeast Organic Farming Association's winter meeting in Burlington, Vermont, where he was warmly welcomed by a crowd of more than 1,200 who packed in to see him, no surprise though since Vermont leads the country in number of organic farms on a per-capita basis. But as I recall Secretary Vilsack received an interesting organic product that day: a six-pack of organic certified and Vermont brewed Pumpkin Ale.

Today we have more farms and companies than ever participating in the organic sector, yet we continue to experience occasional shortages of organic products when our farms are simply unable to keep pace with growing consumer demand. I was concerned under past administrations that the Department of Agriculture had not kept up with the pace of organic agriculture and did not do all that it should have to promote organic agriculture. I am pleased today to have an agency that recognizes that it must support a diverse menu of options for all of American agriculture, including organic agriculture. Strong support means maintaining strong standards for the industry and ensuring that the USDA Organic label stands for something.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about the ongoing implementation of the National Organic Standards. I am interested in the recent expansion of the National Organics Program at USDA and what we can do to take organics into the next twenty years. How do we help create the next generation of organic farmers to help meet this growing consumer demand? I also look forward to hearing from all of you about potential challenges you see awaiting this still young and growing industry and what we in Congress, USDA, and you in the field can do to protect organic agriculture and keep it on this successful path.

Thanks to all of our witnesses for taking the time to be with us today, and also to Chairman Lincoln for allowing us to hold this important hearing. I know that for many of my fellow committee members, organic production is currently just a small percentage of the total farmland in their state. But across the country we are seeing significant growth in organic acreage at a time when other agricultural sectors are not doing nearly as well; this is in response to consumer demand and to more farmers seeing the opportunity to earn a premium for their products by embracing the organic philosophy and mindset.

At a time when bad news seems to crowd out much of everything else, it is refreshing to gather today to discuss the good news that has infused so much of the first two decades of the American organic sector.

Welcome to you all.

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