



ORGANIC FARMERS ASSOCIATION

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Time to Invest in Organic

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Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, and members of the House Agriculture Committee – Thank you for coming to Minnesota to seek input for the next Farm Bill.

My name is Jim Riddle. My wife and I raise certified organic fruit, including blueberries, black currants, elderberries and aronia, at Blue Fruit Farm near Winona, MN. I also serve as an advisor to the National Organic Coalition; steering committee chair for the new Organic Farmers Association; and chair of the Minnesota Organic Advisory Task Force, which advises the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and University of Minnesota on policy issues and research needs. I served on the USDA National Organic Standards Board from 2001-2006.

Data compiled by the National Organic Coalition shows that the US market for organic food has grown 80% over the last six years, while the amount of certified organic American cropland has only grown 12% during the same period. This situation has led to a massive increase in questionable imports, and points to several major opportunities for the next Farm Bill.

As the Washington Post (5/12/17) has reported, cargo ships of conventional corn and soybeans from Turkey, Ukraine, Romania and elsewhere have been sold in the US as “organic.” This situation has undercut markets and prices for bona fide American organic farmers, and allowed fraudulent grain to be sold as “organic” to meet the growing demand for organic poultry and dairy products. The USDA’s National Organic Program

and National Organic Standards Board must have the resources and support they need to improve and enforce our organic regulations.

Currently, 70% of organic soybeans and 40-50% of organic corn are imported. If any crops can be grown organically in the US, its corn and beans! But American farmers are reluctant to go through the 3-year transition process to enter the organic market, given market uncertainties and a lack of Farm Bill support during transition.

The next Farm Bill must include a safety net to provide financial and technical support for conventional, beginning and underserved farmers to switch some or all of their land to organic, comparable to the support they receive by staying conventional. A level playing field is needed, so that transition to organic is a production choice, not an increased risk.

Research shows that organic systems are profitable and maintain rural vitality, while protecting water quality and quantity; building soil health; enhancing biological diversity, including pollinators; and producing foods without pesticide residues and dairy products with favorable fatty acid profiles. But much more research is needed to understand and improve organic systems.

HR 2436 has been introduced in Congress to increase funds for the Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) from the current level of \$20 million/year to \$50 million/year. Such an increase would be a wise investment, given growing market demand, and the fact that organic research findings are often used by non-organic producers to improve their management systems and bottom lines.

A unique cost faced by organic farmers is the fee associated with annual organic certification. The next Farm Bill must maintain Organic Certification Cost Share Programs that provide organic farmers with modest reimbursements for a portion of their annual certification fees. These programs, which began in Minnesota in 1998, should be renewed with adequate mandatory funding to meet projected demand.

Organic and transitional producers face all the normal production challenges – extreme weather; changing markets and prices; access to capital; and government red tape. On top of that, organic producers are required to take steps to protect their farms from pesticide drift and GMO contamination. Better mechanisms are needed so that organic farmers have a right to farm their land organically, free from contamination.

The next Farm Bill presents a unique opportunity to invest in organic systems, which are market-driven, health conscious, and based on farmer-led environmental protection plans. We are counting on you to invest our tax dollars wisely. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Riddle
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