

Letter from Washington

A Seat at the Obama Organic Table

We have a seat on the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB)! I was notified at the end of September that I received an appointment to a five-year term by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack! This is an important opportunity, one that is shared with the Beyond Pesticides family.

You know what organic means to our future. Organic practices are the solution to the problem of pesticide poisoning and contamination. It is clear that organic approaches to land and structural management can no longer be a niche market. Its exponential growth is central to long-term sustainability efforts, a green economy, health and environmental protection, and key to attacking global climate change in a serious way. Our goal now must be to expedite the growth of organic and replace chemical-intensive practices.

Organic integrity and growth

When an environmentalist position became open on the NOSB this summer I kept asking myself, "If not now, when?" With a sense of urgency to ensure the integrity and growth of organic practices, and with the help of many in the environmental and organic community, my name was placed in nomination.

Yes, to ensure integrity and growth, it is incredibly important that organic practices are clearly defined and evaluated on an ongoing basis, that they meet the standards we expect and need to protect our land, air, water, and food, ensure stewardship of the environment, and create a safe workplace (from farm to factory).

I believe that seasoned environmentalists, with their organizational backing, must be at the NOSB table to advance the vision and core values of organic management practices, which replace unnecessary and polluting chemical-intensive methods that are bad for all the documented reasons. That's why when I was a part of the group that advocated for a strong national organic standard in the late 1980's, I urged that environmentalists be represented in the decision making process. Having seen that we were creating markets for organic food production with our daily work to educate the public on pesticide hazards and the organic solution, I believed in 1989, and believe more strongly today, that organic farmers, environmentalists and consumers together are an incredibly positive and powerful force in the "greening" of agriculture and other parts of our economy.

The NOSB, created by an Act of Congress in the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, is composed of 15 members from different segments of the organic community and industry -- consumer/public interest, environmentalists, farmers/growers, handlers/processors, retailer, scientist, and certifier. An environmental view on the board is a critically important perspective that will be well-served by an individual who has strong ties to the environmental community, works with the cross section of people and organizations that comprise it, is connected to grassroots activities nationwide, and is sensitive to local, state, and national efforts that connect people as

environmentalists. With this position, we --together--can strive to turn organic into the predominant approach to food production and land management.

To be sure, there is push back from the chemical industry and there have been appointments to the Obama Administration who have taken positions in the past with which we disagree. However, I believe we can and must align the entire Administration behind a growth strategy for organic.

The schooling of state pesticide laws

In this issue of PAY, we update our landmark report *The Schooling of State Pesticide Laws*, originally published in 1998. The report documents the progress that we are making in taking hazardous pesticides out of the schools all across the country. But a state strategy does not ensure protection for all children, resulting in a learning environment in which toxic chemicals do not impede children's ability to breathe easily and think clearly. We have established that schools, in managing their buildings, typically use hazardous pesticides linked to respiratory problems, learning disabilities, cancer, neurological and immune system problems, and developmental effects. We know that the chemicals used outdoors have similar effects in addition to the environmental poisoning that they cause to waterways, birds and bees. Practitioners have shown us increasingly over the last decade that toxic chemicals are not needed to manage unwanted insects in buildings or create green and lush playing fields. Fifteen states now require integrated pest management (IPM), although we believe the definition of this practice needs strengthening. Connecticut bans the use of pesticides on their school grounds.

The School Environment Protection Act (SEPA) has been introduced in the past several sessions of Congress to set a minimum standard for pest management in schools that is not reliant on toxic pesticides. A form of the legislation has passed the U.S. Senate twice, but failed to move through a joint House-Senate conference committee. The time is now to successfully address this issue --to give every child the right to a pesticide-free learning environment. As Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ), the prime sponsor of the legislation in the House, has said, "SEPA would provide basic levels of protection for children and teachers from the use of toxic pesticides at schools. The School Environment Protection Act offers our nation an opportunity to protect children's health and create a safer learning environment." Let your members of Congress know how you feel about this. For more information on SEPA, please visit our webpage at <http://www.beyondpesticides.org/schools/sepa/> or call us 202-543-5450.



Happy Holidays!

Jay Feldman is executive director of Beyond Pesticides.