

# Sowing Seeds for an Organic Future

The *Organic Foods Production Act* at Twenty Years Old

By Michael Sligh

*The following is testimony of Michael Sligh, on behalf of the National Organic Coalition, before the Senate Agriculture Committee, September 15, 2010.*

*Mr. Sligh is an organic farmer, author, first chair of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organics Standards Board. He currently directs the Just Foods program at the Rural Advancement Fund International-USA (RAFI-USA). Working with a variety of farm, community, university and government groups, RAFI - USA promotes sustainability, equity and diversity in agriculture through policy changes, practical assistance, market opportunities, and access to financial and technical resources. The Just Foods program promotes a systems-based approach to a more sustainable food and fiber system. He began farming organically in the 1970's.*

Chairman Lincoln, Ranking Member Chambliss, Distinguished Members of the Committee, I am here today on behalf of the National Organic Coalition, of which I am a founding member. The National Organic Coalition is a national alliance of organizations working to provide a "Washington voice" for farmers, ranchers, environmentalists, consumers and progressive industry members involved in organic agriculture. Our goal is to protect and enhance the integrity of the organic label, which is at the heart of continued consumer confidence.

Thank you for this opportunity to engage with you in this reflection and celebration about the great progress of organic

agriculture since the 1990 passage of *Organic Foods Production Act* (OFPA). Even more important than commemorating the past, this hearing is about looking forward and setting a clear course for the next 20 years of organic agriculture and beyond.

In that context, my testimony will not only focus on my experiences in the early years of organic agriculture and the progress that I have witnessed in the last 20 years, but I would also like to talk to you about the efforts that our Coalition has made to engage the organic community in a multi-year dialogue about the future of organic agriculture through the establishment of a *National Organic Action Plan* (NOAP).

But first, to step back for a moment, I would like to talk about my background and the history of my work on organic agricultural policy issues. I got into this line of work, honestly enough – having come from a long line of family farmers and converting my own operations to organic in the 1970's. Mostly because of having watched the struggles of my elders, I was interested in finding a way to better reward farmers for their stewardship and to provide farmers with a way to farm that was both profitable as well as serving the consumer demand for greater marketplace food choices.

I took what I thought was to be a short sabbatical from farming in the early 1980s to work for the non-profit public interest sector partially because of the looming farm crisis, as it was called at the time. Little did I know that the crisis would last so long or that changing agriculture policy is more like watching a tractor rust than just making hay. (No offense.)



Farming organically had been relatively easy, but we also understood that organic could not grow without a clear federal program, complete with clear, consistent standards and regulatory oversight. We supported both Congressman Jim Weaver's fine attempt at national organic legislation in 1984 and then Senator Wyche Fowler's later attempt, and finally, the successful leadership package by Senator Leahy and Congressman DeFazio for the passage of OFPA. I believe this legislation stands as a model in both defining and implementing a successful public/private partnership in a very vigorous, hyper-participatory and transparent manner.

One of the key aspects of the public/private partnership of OFPA was the creation of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), to give members of the organic community a formal role in advising the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) about key aspects of the National Organic Program (NOP) and the organic standards.

I was recruited to be a member of the first National Organic Standards Board in 1992, and was elected as its founding chair. As volunteer Board members, we took our call to serve our country seriously and held meetings and hearings across the country for over five years to present USDA with a sound, comprehensive and a well-vetted community consensus, which now serves as basis for the NOP.

Through the early years of the NOP, there have been many twists and turns, some serious failures to communicate, major lapses of fair play, and many "hiccups." However, through it all not only has organic survived, but it has actually thrived –against all of the odds. The combination of strong farmer innovation, common sense and entrepreneurship along with a strong and very loyal consumer demand, coupled with sound federal policy, has served us all quite well.

We do indeed have much to be proud of. Organic agriculture is emerging from the margins to the mainstream, and is now start-



ing to hit its stride. A few noteworthy milestones to date for organic agriculture include:

- The first marketplace label for sustainable agriculture with verifiable "third party" certification and accreditation systems;
- Continued brisk growth for over two decades, even during this most current period of economic downturn;
- Over 86 million acres worldwide under organic production; and over 4.1 million acres in the U.S.;
- Strong consumer confidence with over \$50 billion dollars in sales worldwide. The U.S. is the world's largest organic market with over \$26 billion dollars in annual sales;
- A truly global response, with organic farmers and organic farming associations in almost every country, and nearly 60 countries in the process of developing national organic regulations;

- Significant contributions to ongoing reduction in the use of potentially toxic chemicals and technologies, reducing farmer and farmworker health exposures;

- A demonstrated increase in yields for some of the poorest farmers in world by converting to organic, as noted in a United Nations study;<sup>1</sup> and,

- Improved consumer choice and local food security for sustainable, nutritious, and healthy food.

So, to sum up, organic agriculture produces high yielding crops while reducing the adverse impacts of agriculture and directly contributes to increasing the viability of family farms by adding new green jobs for rural communities.

Organic has been a success story with concrete benefits. These benefits are inspiring farmers and consumers to strengthen organic integrity, grow for fair organic markets and increase the uni-

<sup>1</sup>UNEP-UNCTAD Capacity-building Task Force on Trade, Environment and Development, 2008. *Organic Agriculture and Food Security in Africa*.

versal access to healthy organic foods worldwide.

The role of Congress and USDA in fostering these successful milestones has been critical. The 2008 Farm Bill, under the leadership of this Committee, included landmark provisions to address many of the needs of the organic sector. A few highlights of that bill include:

- Additional funding for the organic certification cost-share program, which ensures that limited resource and smaller farms are not priced out of the growing organic market opportunities by high certification costs;
- Increased funding for organic research;
- Greater access for organic farmers to crop insurance programs; and,
- Recognition of the need to foster the conservation benefits of organic agriculture within the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

We are also very pleased by the commitment of USDA to organic agriculture, not only in terms of bringing greater transparency and enforcement to the NOP, but also the ongoing effort to have each of the USDA sub-agencies recognize their role in supporting organic agriculture in a well-coordinated manner.

### Looking Forward

While the successes of organic agriculture are exciting, there is much unfinished business and many significant challenges to be addressed.

Organic agriculture has much to offer with regard to many of the environmental, natural resource, and public health challenges facing us today. Yet that potential has been largely untapped. Organic can and should be part of the solution to the problems of environmental degradation, climate change, food safety, and toxic chemical exposures in the environment and residues on

food.

However, to fully tap into the full benefits of organic agriculture, we must shift our thinking both in and outside of government to recognize organic not just as another marketing program, but as a food system with multiple health, environmental, rural and social benefits to society. We must find our collective public voice to better articulate and reward all of these multiple benefits from the organic approach.

To that end, the National Organic Coalition and other partner organizations sponsored a five-year process of dialogue and consensus-building within the organic community to develop a roadmap for organic into the future. Each member of the Committee has received a copy of the final report of the process, called the National Organic Action Plan. Our long-term goals are to establish organic as a strong and stable choice for food and agricultural production systems across the U.S., and the report lays out very specific goals and benchmarks in a number of key areas.

Here are a few broad policy goals that arose from the NOAP process.

- Doubling the amount of organic products, number of farms, animals, acreage, and public land use under organic management, without undermining fair prices to farmers and workers;
- Expanding the research scope from simply an agronomic focus to a more interdisciplinary systems evaluation of multiple benefits of organic and the documentation of the full societal costs of the currently externalized impacts of the industrial food production models. This includes creating a more “open source” and participatory organic research and extension model that increases the direct involvement organic farmers;
- Expanding local organic seed production capacities;
- Increasing local organic production and processing infrastructure and regional food systems;





- Increasing the commercial availability and U.S. production of all organic agricultural ingredients; and,
- Implementing fair and appropriate crop insurance and other safety nets for organic farms.

We are very pleased that USDA and Congress in their wisdom have already taken action on several key recommendations of this National Organic Action Plan, since its publication in January of this year, through the:

- Appropriation of additional resources for a more fully functional and fully staffed NOP;
- Publication of the much-overdue regulatory clarification on pasture requirements for organic livestock;
- Public commitment by USDA to ongoing third-party oversight of the entire NOP program;
- Appointment of a USDA Organic Coordinator; and,
- Publication of a NOP program manual, to help ensure greater consistency of enforcement of organic standards.

In talking to stakeholders across all parts of the organic sector – farmers, processors, handlers, and consumers– a few key overarching themes arise consistently as significant barriers for organic agriculture, and each of these are areas where the role of the federal government is critical:

**GMO Contamination.** We have heard loud and clear from our NOAP stakeholder process and more recently from USDA itself in a recent article for *Choices* magazine that we must address the issue of shifting more of the liability and responsibility for pre-

vention of GMO contamination back to the manufacturer/patent-holder. I would add to that the requirement for the labeling of GMO foods. It is clear that this novel technology cannot and will not stay put and is creating contamination, new and novel plant pests, and undue economic harm to the farmers and businesses that are serving both the non-GMO and GMO markets.

To be clear, this issue is hurting and affecting all farmers. This must not be misunderstood as a fight between farmers, or between environmentalists versus farmers, but as an urgent need for overall market clarity and policy fairness. It is one of corporate responsibility and the need for real governmental oversight.

**Food Safety.** There is a growing body of research that organically managed soils, and the rich beneficial microbial action in those soils, are more able to break down pathogens than conventionally managed soils. Yet many past food safety actions by federal and state agencies, as well as private buyers, have imposed regulations that have the effect of steering farmers toward chemically intensive farming practices, inadvertently discouraging and penalizing organic farming systems. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Congress need to be cognizant of this problem, and recognize the latest research about pathways of pathogen contamination. In addition, food safety must be viewed from a holistic perspective, taking into consideration the public health concerns of pesticide residues as well as pathogens. Organic agriculture can be part of the solution to the growing food safety problems we are witnessing in the country.

**Concentration in the Seeds Markets.** In an economy as vibrant and technologically advanced as ours, we should be seeing an increase in the diversity and availability of seeds and germplasm to meet the expanding needs of farmers and consumers. Yet, the opposite is occurring. A few large market players are controlling an alarming percentage of the germplasm of this nation and, as a result, seed costs to farmers are skyrocketing, and the diversity of seed options is dwindling, particularly for publicly held varieties.

There is an urgent need to reinvigorate our public plant and animal breeding capacity to develop public cultivars and breeds that can meet the changing and growing consumer demands for more healthy, local and nutritious foods. This will position us well for dealing with the implications of climate change by encouraging a much more diverse and less genetically uniform agriculture. In the

2008 Farm Bill, Congress mandated this as priority for competitive grants within the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) program, but that mandate has yet to be fully implemented. We strongly urge a fully distinct institute within USDA to meet this need. This will not only further organic agriculture but serve as a major benefit to all who farm.

**Lack of Funding for Organic Research.** Despite important gains in funding for organic research in the 2008 Farm Bill, organic research funding still pales in comparison to that devoted to conventional agriculture. Given the multiple benefits of organic agriculture to society, organic research should receive at least a fair share of funding. Organic represents 3.5% of the U.S. retail market share, but according to estimates from the Organic Farming Research Foundation, explicit organic research represents only 1.8% of the USDA-Research Education and Economics (REE) mission area budget.

Areas where greater research is necessary include addressing the role of organic agriculture in:

- Sequestering carbon and mitigating the effects of climate change;
- Reducing pesticide residues in food;

- Addressing food safety concerns; and,
- Meeting nutritional needs.

**Lack of Access to Organic Food for Vulnerable Populations.**

There is a growing body of evidence about the nutrition and public health benefits of organic agriculture, particularly for children. Yet, many barriers remain within federal nutrition programs, such as the Women Infants and Children (WIC) program, limiting access of vulnerable populations to organic food. These barriers must be removed to maximize the public health benefits of these important programs.

With the strong public-private partnership fostered by the *Organic Foods Production Act*, we have seen many gains for organic agriculture. But the opportunities and challenges of the future are greater still.

History will not only judge us by how well we managed our resources today but how well we defended opportunities of future generations. Now is the time for us to set the course ahead.

For more information on the National Organic Coalition or National Organic Action plan, visit [www.nationalorganiccoalition.org](http://www.nationalorganiccoalition.org). For more information on RAfi-USA, visit [www.rafiusa.org](http://www.rafiusa.org).

**Public Participation: Making organic better**

You can help protect the integrity of the organic label and have your voice heard. While organic agriculture is far better than chemical-intensive conventional agriculture for people and the environment, there is always room for improvement. The organic regulatory process provides numerous opportunities for the public to weigh in on what is allowable in organic production.

USDA maintains a “National List” (NL), set by the NOSB, of the synthetic substances that may be used and the non-synthetic substances that may not be used in organic production and handling. The *Organic Foods Production Act* (OFPA) and NOP regulations provide for the sunset of NL substances every five years and relies on public comment in evaluating their continuing uses. The public may also petition to amend the National List. In both cases, sunset and petition, the NOSB is authorized by OFPA to determine a substance’s status. Currently Beyond Pesticides’ executive director serves on the NOSB.

To more fully participate and make your voice heard, see the current issues before the board on Beyond Pesticides website at [www.beyondpesticides.org/organicfood/action](http://www.beyondpesticides.org/organicfood/action). This webpage also provides information on how to file a petition. You may review the substances currently on the National List here: <http://bit.ly/national-list>. For more information or for assistance, contact Beyond Pesticides, 202-543-5450 or [info@beyondpesticides.org](mailto:info@beyondpesticides.org).

