



Alternatives to a Check-off for generating money for research

Check-Off funds can only be used to promote a commodity, not to show one (Organically certified product) is better than another. USDA (who will vet any use of funds) sees the organic seal as just another marketing label for production practices. Farmers feel privately run funds can be more aggressive, more nimble and available now rather than having to wait 4-5 years for access to dollars.

Farmers prefer to be able to support the many and various research and promotion efforts, with their resources of both money and cooperation, in projects that are initiated by collective groups that represent their best interest. Grower research requirements to produce organic crops and livestock of the quality demanded by consumers and the industry are in many cases different than for other sectors. They point to many successful local and regional initiatives, and feel that a federally mandated program is a move away from their ability to assure a return on their investment. They believe local and regional initiatives, as opposed to a mandated federal program, is good for them and for the entire organic stakeholder community; growers to consumers included.

So what if—instead of using a failed USDA program that has already put family farmers out of business in many commodities—Organic designed a program committed to the growth of organic farmers and farms as well as organic sales?

In promoting the label, we would also be promoting the type of U.S. agriculture and food production that is good for all of us—keeping our farmers in business and supplying healthier food for everyone.

A tall order? Sure. But the organic community has already re-defined what food and agriculture can be. Let's step it up and change our conventional food delivery systems as well.

Proposed alternative models for an organic checkoff:

- Get involved with the conventional checkoff programs – If you believe in the power of checkoffs and their ability to translate producer dollar into agricultural research get involved in advocating for use of existing dollars. For example the growth in demand for GMO feed will need different production practices that will need research that could be useful to organic production as well. Some checkoffs are already studying alternative methods for dealing with pest without the use of chemicals because of consumer demand.

- The SARE model – the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program is a decentralized competitive grants and education program run by four regions (North Central, Northeast, South and West) each governed by a volunteer Administrative Council that makes grants and sets regional priorities. The councils include farmers and ranchers along with representatives from universities, government, agribusiness and nonprofit organizations. They always need support and active participation from farmers. They are very open to funding research on production practices that will benefit organic production.
- Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board – is a nonprofit organization funded by dairy farmers that promotes the more than 600 varieties, types and styles of Wisconsin cheeses. Representatives are elected by producers by district not appointed.
- Farmers Advocating for Organics (FAFO) – which uses check-off dollars from CROPP/Organic Valley farmer member-owners to protect and promote the organic marketplace by investing in organic research, education and advocacy. A committee of farmers gives one year grants and demand accountability before more funding is given.
- Marketing Orders – organized under the USDA these marketing orders can be highly successful and effective with assessment
- Trade organization membership dues: for example; the American Pistachio Growers is an agricultural trade association representing members who are pistachio growers, processors and industry partners in California, Arizona and New Mexico. These states represent 100% of the domestic commercial pistachio production. Pistachio nutrition research, government affairs, product development and market development are key activities conducted by the Association. Other examples are of dues being assessed from voluntary participation based on volumes of product sold, for example the New England Apple Association.
- Voluntary donations and support by corporations and major processors that allocate money within their business expenses to go towards research to increase domestic production of organic product. If they can't budget for essential research and promotion on their own it may be time for them to use a new business model. After all, a lot of corporate America seems to be able to make a go of it without a checkoff. When is the last time GM taxed their suppliers and workers in order to pay for their promotion and research? They don't. They include it as a cost that's included in their price to the final consumer.
- Programs by organic commodity: Many producers feel that a better approach would be to have programs by existing commodity, for example organic dairy, organic beef, organic soybeans. The thinking is that commodity specific programs could more clearly identify the needs of different producers from a research and production perspective.
- Individual choices – So long as there is no organic checkoff individual producers and processors could direct their reclaimed check-off monies directly to the educational and

organic promotion programs initiated by producer and consumer controlled organizations like OFARM, NODPA, WODPA, MODPA, CCOF, NOFA, OFRF and MOSES.