

Thoughts on an Organic Checkoff

Jim Riddle

If a check off is implemented, I am concerned that organic agriculture could be forever relegated to a niche market status, when the larger goal is to change all of agriculture to be ecologically sustainable. Organic should be integrated into all agricultural programs, including research and promotion, rather than being pushed off to the side with its own pot of money. Along those lines, the organic community's focus could shift from getting our fair share of all agricultural funding to the promotion of specific organic products. (With all of the energy recently put into organic checkoff discussions, I am concerned that this may already be happening, since funding for all organic programs from the 2008 Farm Bill was lost in the 9 month Farm Bill extension.)

I am also concerned with the proposal that organic be categorized as a commodity in order to establish a checkoff program. Organic is a production system, and certification validates that the production and handling systems comply with Federal regulations, following a process-based verification of the system. A commodity is a product. If organic is re-classified as a commodity, there may be unintended consequences, shifting organic from a process-based to a product-based certification, focused on the end products rather than the methods of production.

There are two concepts that I could support at this time, neither of which involve re-classifying organic as a commodity. The first is a novel idea that came from a discussion I had with someone not familiar with checkoffs. He asked if a checkoff would mean having a box on his State or Federal tax return where he could check that a certain amount of money, additional to his tax liability, be designated for organic research. (We have a similar checkoff on Minnesota tax returns for non-game wildlife habitat protection.) I thought this was a brilliant, if inadvertent, idea!

Or, I could support reform of the existing 16 checkoff programs so that either: 1) money already paid in by organic producers is earmarked for organic research and promotion by the existing councils who control disbursement of funds; or 2) money currently paid in by organic producers does not flow to the existing councils, but is set aside to fund generic organic research, administered under the existing NIFA Organic Agricultural Research and Extension Initiative. (Which consistently only has enough money to fund about 10% of the proposals deemed worthy of funding by NIFA review committees.)

I am very skeptical regarding the creation of a USDA-appointed Organic Research and Promotion Board. Having served on the NOSB, I am hesitant to support the creation of any new organic-related bureaucracy by the USDA. It

takes a lot of money to support the bureaucracy itself, and the appointment process is easily manipulated by those with money and political influence.