

February 14, 2008

Senate and House Farm Bill Conferees

TO: H.R. 2419 Conferees

FROM: Undersigned Groups and Businesses

RE: Organic Conversion in the Farm Bill

Dear Conferee:

As you prepare to reconcile the differences between the House and Senate versions of the Farm Bill, we are writing to urge you to include a strong Organic Conversion Program in the final package, with access to mandatory funding.

Organic is one of the fastest growing sectors of our food system. U.S. organic food and beverage retail sales have been growing steadily at about 20 percent per year for the last 10 years, and similar growth patterns are projected into the future. Yet domestic production of organic agricultural products has not kept pace with the growing demand. Some US farmers have taken advantage of this growing market opportunity by converting to organic production, but the majority of US farmers have been deterred by the risks and costs associated with transitioning to organic production, resulting in the US being increasingly reliant upon organic imports from abroad to fulfill consumer demand.

One of the reasons for the impressive growth in organic consumption is that consumers are attracted to the strong production standards that are required for organic certification. Because these standards are stringent, the process for farmers to convert to organic takes three years. During this conversion process, farmers incur the higher costs associated with organic production but do not receive the higher price premiums that come with final organic certification. In addition, many farmers looking to transition to organic production systems lack the technical expertise and knowledge to do so, which can be as serious a limiting factor as the financial risks.

Recognizing the need to help farmers address these barriers, both the House and Senate versions of the Farm Bill include provisions to provide incentives and technical assistance for producers to convert to organic. While a few States, such as Montana, New Mexico, and Minnesota, already use their Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds to support farmers wanting to convert to organic, this option should be available to farmers in all States.

In order to adequately meet these needs a successful organic conversion program must not only provide conservation cost share and incentive payments to farmers to help defray the costs involved in transitioning to organic production, but technical and educational assistance to farmers to help them successfully transition, working primarily through non-profit organizations, consultants, and agency personnel with expertise in organic transition. In addition, the funding

source for the program must be reliable and consistent, and not subject to the uncertainties of the annual appropriations process.

Therefore, we are writing to support:

- 1) the inclusion of the Organic Conversion Program within the umbrella of the larger Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), as specified in the Senate version of the Farm Bill, with additional language to clarify that the program be made available in to farmers in all states; and,
- 2) the use of a per-operation payment limit of \$20,000 per year; and,
- 3) the inclusion of strong technical assistance language, as specified in the House version, combined with the special organic technical assistance language in the Senate bill, to assure that adequate resources are devoted to helping farmers gain access to the technical assistance necessary to make the shift in their production practices, including clear language to give qualified non-profit organizations, institutions, consultants and third-party providers a substantial role in assisting USDA with this vital task.

Thank you for your strong consideration of these concerns and recommendations.

Sincerely,

Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association
Beyond Pesticides
California Coalition for Food and Farming
Center for Food Safety
Center for Rural Affairs
The Cornucopia Institute
Dakota Rural Action
Equal Exchange
Food and Water Watch
Georgia Organics
Kansas Rural Center
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Services
The Minnesota Project
Missouri Organic Association
National Catholic Rural Life Conference
National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT)
National Cooperative Grocers Association
National Organic Coalition
Nature's International Certification Services
Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance
Northeast Organic Farming Association Interstate Policy Council
Northeast Organic Farming Association of Connecticut

Northeast Organic Farming Association of Massachusetts
Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Hampshire
Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey
Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York
Northeast Organic Farming Association of Rhode Island
Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont
Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society
Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association
Oregon Tilth
Organic Consumers Association
Organic Farming Research Foundation
Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture
Pennsylvania Certified Organic
The Rural Advancement Foundation International - USA (RAFI-USA)
Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group
Union of Concerned Scientists
Virginia Association for Biological Farming
Washington Sustainable Food and Farming Network