Acknowledgments

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List of Abbreviations

- ACA – Accredited Certifying Agent
- CCOF – California Certified Organic Farmers
- FSA – Farm Service Agency
- SOP – State Organic Program
- NASDA – National Association of State Departments of Agriculture
- NASS – National Agricultural Statistics Service
- NOCCSP – National Organic Certification Cost Share Program
- NOFA – Northeast Organic Farming Association
- NOP – National Organic Program
- NOSB – National Organic Standards Board
- OTA – Organic Trade Association
- USDA – United States Department of Agriculture

About BFI

Berkeley Food Institute is a multi-disciplinary research center at UC Berkeley dedicated to transforming food systems to expand access to healthy, affordable food and promote sustainable and equitable food production. Learn more at food.berkeley.edu.

Recommended Citation

Organic agriculture is a rapidly growing sector of the food economy due to its proven economic, environmental, and health benefits. As a result, consumer demand for organic products has outstripped supply. This report seeks to highlight the tremendous opportunities, as well as challenges, that state departments of agriculture face as they respond to market and farmer demand to increase organic acreage.

State departments of agriculture play a crucial intermediary role in the development of the nation’s organic agriculture and products industry. Some act as certifiers, reporting to the USDA’s National Organic Program. Others provide information and resources while private sector actors are official certifiers in their respective states. In this study, we chose twenty-one states across four distinct regions as a representative sample. We compiled data on the availability of services, as well as unique characteristics of each state, through personal interviews, literature reviews, state government documents, and other sources.

This report makes recommendations designed to improve services for existing organic farmers and to support prospective organic farmers in order to increase overall organic production to keep up with demand.

### What Are the Main Lessons?

1. **State government’s role (as a certifier or not) greatly impacts the experience of organic farmers.**
2. **State organic budgets are stretched too thin.**
3. **Informational outreach is important for strengthening regional organic economies.**
4. **States can promote organic by linking with non-governmental groups or extension services.**
5. **States struggle with low cost-share participation.**
6. **With state transfer of cost-share facilitation to the federal government, attention to organic farming may decrease.**
7. **Support for non-English speakers is uncommon.**
8. **There is no one “right place” to house organic within state departments of agriculture.**

### Recommendations for State Departments of Agriculture

1. **Expand Dedicated Organic Support at the State Level:**
   Most states should expand dedicated organic support to keep up with the growing organic market.

2. **Incorporate Organic Agriculture Fully into State Marketing and Promotion Efforts:**
   By leveraging existing infrastructure and expertise, this strategy can grow “state pride” campaigns and organic agriculture at the same time.

3. **Clarify and Further Disseminate NOP Guidance to States:**
   Technical Assistance Instruction 2614 and other NOP guidelines can help to clarify the limits and freedoms of state government certifiers.

4. **Work Closely with Outside Groups that Serve Organic Farmers:**
   Outside groups are key partners with expertise in organic agriculture and can both enhance and extend state government efforts.

5. **Monitor Transition of Cost-Share Administration:**
   As the USDA Farm Service Agency takes over responsibility for cost-share administration, this process should be closely monitored to ensure that existing cost-share recipients do not fall through the cracks.

6. **Expand Language Access for Existing and Prospective Organic Producers:**
   Farming populations are diverse and would be well served by increasing language access across all programs and support materials.

7. **Support Future Research and Data Collection:**
   The industry needs better data about the organic market. State governments are well-positioned to collect local data that would be widely useful.
Purpose and Methodology

We undertook this report to assess the range of support services that organic farmers can access at the state level through departments of agriculture, and to understand the impact of state-level support on organic agriculture. Agricultural patterns, state government delivery structures, and political climates differ by location, creating unique opportunities or challenges for organic in each state. We aimed to make this information useful to state departments of agriculture, regional conservation districts, state marketing and promotions boards, commodity groups, Farm Bureaus, land-grant universities, and any other entities actively involved in state-level agricultural policy and business development. By sharing best practices, we hope states can learn from each other and continue to test and perfect public policy tailored to local environments.

We designed this assessment to provide a representative sample of US states, since an evaluation of the entire country is not feasible at this time. States were first selected for the assessment based on geographic region. Within geographic regions, we chose states to maximize diversity of agricultural contexts and approaches to organic agriculture. The resulting sample includes twenty-one states in four regions.

Selected States by Region

We collected data through informal interviews, a survey of department websites, written reports, published state budgets, and departmental guidance documents for farmers. Interviews were conducted with staff at each state’s department of agriculture, in addition to local NGOs, USDA staff, and representatives of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA). At each state department of agriculture, we sought to speak to the individual(s) most knowledgeable about the department’s activities regarding organic agriculture. An early draft of the study aims and research questions was shared with topic experts at the state and national level, and shaped by their feedback.

Introduction

In the 1970s, growing environmental and health awareness created a demand for food produced using environmentally friendly methods and less reliance on harmful chemicals. As the United States organic movement gradually took shape in response, producers sought to institutionalize their methods and give customers a way to verify products grown or produced using these methods. There was also a need for more standardization of organic production methods and labeling across states. As a result, the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 authorized the USDA to administer a National Organic Program (NOP), which would establish consistent standards and facilitate interstate commerce in organic food, feed, and fiber. It also established the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), which would make recommendations on which chemicals and rules should be included in the organic standard.1, 2
Demand for Organics Is Growing

In a 2015 nationwide survey conducted by the National Agricultural Statistics Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, organic agriculture represented 12,818 certified organic farms, and 4.4 million acres of land that year, an increase of 20 percent over 2014.1 Since its beginnings in the 1970s, organic agriculture has grown rapidly, and organic is now the fastest growing sector of the U.S. food industry. Although organic foods still represent only 5.3 percent of US retail food sales and less than one percent of acreage nationwide for crops like wheat, soybeans, and corn,1 organic food sales have increased by more than ten percent annually over the last decade, out-pacing the growth rate for the overall food market.2 2015 saw the industry reach $43.3 billion in total organic product sales, and log its largest year-on-year dollar gain ever recorded.

Meanwhile, increasing numbers of studies show evidence of multiple ecological,3 economic,4 and public health benefits from organic farming for growers, consumers, and related issues like pollinator decline.5 This has resulted in increased opportunities for food and farming companies.6 Data suggest that today’s organic consumers are increasingly mainstream, and price premiums for organic producers remain high despite growth trends.7

Supply Is Also Growing—but at a Slower Rate

In recent years, the market demand for organic products and ingredients has accelerated, outstripping domestic supply. Imported foods are increasingly filling the gap, which has led to lost market opportunities for domestic producers. Although the USDA’s survey of certified organic producers revealed that 37 percent intended to increase organic production on their land over the next five years,8 the existing gap in production has revealed an urgent need for greater assistance for food and farming companies.9 Data suggest that today’s organic consumers are increasingly mainstream, and price premiums for organic producers remain high despite growth trends.10

State Departments of Agriculture Are Critical in Expanding the Market for Organics

The Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 set out a process for establishing accredited organizations to certify organic businesses that meet the stipulations of the organic standard. Certifiers may be private businesses, non-profits, or public agencies. The NOP is a federal program, and, like all other US government programs, relies on cooperation and shared power with state governments for effective implementation. NOP provides no funding to states beyond certification cost share reimbursements; funding for state departments of agriculture is determined by individual state budgets. Meanwhile, state departments of agriculture serve the role of communicating federal policies (such as the requirements of the NOP) to agricultural enterprises, conducting inspections (if they are certifiers), and offering support services to promote state agriculture. States also administer federal programs that may not be earmarked specifically for organic producers, but are often used by organic producers like the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. Since there is considerable flexibility in how states participate in the NOP, the amount of funding available for organic programs and services, and how information is distributed, farmers in different states may encounter quite different environments under which to grow and sell organic crops. The process of getting informed, getting certified, and finding appropriate market channels can vary widely.

Criteria

This report evaluates the availability in each state of twelve types of programs or services that can be provided or managed at the state level to benefit organic producers. These include the following:

Certification is a USDA-regulated role that verifies through inspection that a given entity is abiding by NOP guidelines and permits the sale of goods carrying the organic seal.

Registration is the process of requiring certified organic operators to register with the state in order to sell organic products, in addition to obtaining organic certification.

Direct education and trainings may be given at conferences, trade shows, or other events, in which state department staff provide specific information on subjects of local importance to agricultural producers—in this case, on organic practices and/or certification.

Informal advice, links, or referrals include any assistance, given over the phone or via the department’s website, in which organic producers might be directed to external resources or receive information through an informal conversation.

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Informal advice, links, or referrals include any assistance, given over the phone or via the department’s website, in which organic producers might be directed to external resources or receive information through an informal conversation.

Guidance Documents include all printed or electronic materials that aim to furnish general information on organic practices, NOP requirements, or resources available to producers.

Technical assistance includes direct troubleshooting and problem-solving advice given to farmers by state departments in response to requests from producers.

Events and conferences are gatherings open to agricultural producers, at which many types of training, networking, or information are offered under the auspices of private entities, university extension personnel, state agencies, or a combination of the above.

1 This order requires federal agencies to prepare a plan to improve access to their programs and activities for eligible people with limited English proficiency. The USDA plan, Departmental Regulation Number 4590-005, was issued in 2013 and can be found at: https://www.lep.gov/USDA_LEP_guidance.pdf
Survey Results

Responses were gathered from all twenty-one states in the sample, for each of the twelve factors evaluated. In this sample, support programs for organic vary greatly from state to state and region to region. Below is a representation of programs and services available to organic producers at the state level. A detailed review of findings follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Department Budget</th>
<th>Organic Staff†</th>
<th>Division Housing Organic Work</th>
<th>Certification</th>
<th>Registration</th>
<th>Direct Education/Trainings</th>
<th>Informal Advice/Links, Referrals</th>
<th>Guidance Documents</th>
<th>Tech Assist.</th>
<th>Events/Conferences</th>
<th>Organic Cost Share</th>
<th>Marketing Services/Advice</th>
<th>Roster of Organic Farms</th>
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</table>

† Approximate full-time equivalent (FTE) staff working on organic issues.
The states we surveyed represent over **$5 billion** in sales of organic products and over **3 million** acres in organic production across the US. A few highlights:*

### Organic Champion State
Minnesota’s Department of Agriculture offers a myriad of services, including: a yearly Organic Conference for beginning and experienced farmers, a state level Organic Advisory Task Force, a Sustainable Agriculture Program that coordinates statewide efforts on organic and conservation issues, a searchable directory of organic farms in the state, a detailed status report on organic production and farm issues prepared every two years for the state legislature and available publicly online, easily accessible links and lists of resources for organic farmers and those interested in transitioning, and informational guides on organic transition, organic business management, and sector-specific production.

### Of the state governments we surveyed:

- **57%** do not function as certifiers, but offer other services
- **43%** act as USDA-accredited certifiers

### North Star States: Providing Guidance

**Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Washington** all had a strong commitment to organic agriculture at the state level, along with significant programmatic support for organic farmers.

### Groundbreaker State: First in the Nation

In 1979, **California** became one of the first states to regulate organic production, with the signing of the Organic Food Act. Today, California is the only US state to have its own State Organic Program (SOP), under the auspices of the National Organic Program.

### Busy Bee State: Doing More with Less

**Vermont** has only one staff member working on organic, and that person does not work full time on organic matters. The state of Vermont does not have an Organic Advisory Committee, and the department of agriculture is not an organic certifying body. However, within this limited framework for organic support, the single partial staff member coordinates an impressive suite of offerings including direct education and trainings, informal advice, links and referrals, organic guidance documents, marketing services for organic farmers, technical assistance as needed, and more.

### Sunshine States: Transparency and Helpfulness

Many states in this sample were quite helpful in gathering and providing information for this assessment, and we are grateful to all who participated. Special distinction goes to the departments of agriculture in **Mississippi, Iowa, and Vermont** for especially generous and detailed assistance.

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*The 21 states surveyed are in green in the map above. The highlighted states emerged from our analysis as particular leaders for their regions and nationally. More research is needed to assess all 50 states.*
Survey Analysis and Lessons Learned

State Government’s Role Greatly Affects Experience of Organic Farmers

Despite the strong growth of the organic sector and growing public demand for organic agricultural products, organic still struggles for attention at the state policy level. A common sentiment expressed by many department of agriculture staff consulted during the course of this study was that departments have such a wide range of pressing duties to carry out that organic agriculture does not receive as much priority as it could or should. Across all the states in our sample to varying degrees, organic agriculture issues make up just a small part of departmental priorities. Only a few of the western states consider organic a top programmatic priority with broad institutional buy-in and recognition of overall economic importance. In many other states, organic is mostly considered a sector-specific issue that receives strong departmental support in the context of specific crops (e.g. maple syrup, dairy products, apples), while comparatively little attention is given to organic agriculture as a broader theme beyond those specific crops.

Experience of Organic Farmers

State Organic Budgets Are Stretched Too Thin

A few challenges and difficulties affected many or all states in the sample. First, all states felt that departmental budgets and staff were stretched thin. Demand for services outstripped departments’ ability to supply assistance, or were just barely met by existing staff. Several certifying states recognized that they were unable to certify everyone who sought certification from the department of agriculture, and had to turn some applicants away. This reflects a larger difficulty for state departments of agriculture. Although legislative mandates often originate at the federal level, states bear the responsibility for local implementation of both state and federal programs, often in the face of inadequate and uncertain funding resources. As described by former NASDA president Steven W. Troxler in a 2013 letter to the president and congressional leadership, “In addition to the state programs our agencies manage, we are responsible for many federal compliance and enforcement programs. We have largely been able to find ways to maintain credible programs in spite of previous budget cuts, but the continued erosion of funding risks rendering them ineffective. This will send an unacceptable and unfortunate message to the regulated community and to the public.”

As mentioned above, the majority of departments in our sample are only able to maintain one to two staffers who focus on organic, even in some departments that offer organic certification. These institutional shortcomings...
can constrain vital business services like the gathering of state-level organic data, or result in data that are hard to access and not always gathered on a regular schedule.

Several certifying states recognized that they were unable to certify everyone who sought certification from the department of agriculture, and had to turn some applicants away.

Our results suggest that overall support for organic agriculture needs improvement to keep pace with the growth of the national organic industry, planned growth in organic acreage, and the growth in consumer demand for organic products. Departments of agriculture currently support organic farmers with very small proportions of total department staff, and limited resources. Current levels of staff devoted to managing organic are in many states already inadequate to meet existing demand for services, and will not be adequate for expected future growth.

### What is working well?

- **Staff member(s) or a division within the department devoted explicitly to organic matters:** The presence of specialist staff who understand and can be responsive to the unique needs of organic farmers provides a ready source of organic-specific information and more effective support services.
- **A strong Organic Advisory Committee, or similar body in the state, that includes organic farmers as members:** Although the need and desire for an organic advisory body may vary from state to state, its presence is associated with a better understanding of the local organic sector.
- **Comprehensive state-level data on organic production, challenges, and performance of key departmental support programs:** The departments of agriculture in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington, California, and New Hampshire each gather and maintain a significant amount of data on farmers’ use of departmental services, and the performance of the state’s organic economy year by year, providing a useful, locally specific supplement to existing national data gathered and published by USDA. That said, budget constraints mean these data can be hard to access and are not always gathered on a regular schedule.

### Informational Outreach Is Important for Strengthening Regional Organic Economies

OTA’s 2016 report “U.S. Organic Hotspots and Their Benefit to Local Economies” revealed that areas with high levels of organic agriculture and programmatic support exist in various locations around the United States, contributing to broader social benefits such as higher median incomes and decreased poverty rates. OTA’s report found the largest cluster of hotspots in the far Western states, stretching essentially unbroken from southern California to northern Washington. Two smaller bands of hotspots stretch across the Northeastern states and the northern Midwest. Almost no hotspots can be found in the southern states, with the exception of a single spot in Arkansas and a small cluster in south Florida. Our survey of state departments of agriculture found similar results, with the strongest support for organic coming from the Western region, followed by the Northeast and Midwest, and much more limited support found across the South. The two biggest factors in hotspot formation were the presence of outreach services by certifiers, and certification services affiliated with or operated by state government agencies.

The results of our survey add an additional angle. Our research suggests that informational outreach services are critical in creating regional energy around the organic sector, and that certification may have a dampening effect on some informational outreach. Of the 48 accredited certifying agents in the United States, 14 are state departments of agriculture, nine of which formed part of our study. In our sample, key differences emerged between the array of organic support services offered by certifying states, and organic support services offered by states whose departments of agriculture do not function as certifiers. Non-certifying departments had, on average, far fewer staff handling organic matters, resulting in less state-level attention to organic. However, even with fewer staff, these same non-certifying states reported offering quite comprehensive informational services to organic farmers such as guidance documents, advice, trainings, technical assistance, and marketing assistance. In contrast, certifying states had many more staff dedicated to organic matters, but tended to offer extremely limited informational services. Staff in certifying states explained that they refrain from offering these services because of their role as certifiers. The NOP requires that all accredited organic certifiers refrain from engaging in “consulting services,” because they could present a conflict of interest in the certification process. Certifying departments are expected to act in a detached, evaluative mode rather than an informational and outreach-oriented mode. Respondents in certifying states indicated that they wished they could offer more of these services to support organic farmers with general advice and guidance, but that their departments preferred to steer far clear of any possible NOP violation.

NOP regulations do not prevent a state government acting as a certifying body from offering technical assistance and other forms of informational outreach, while recommending that the line between consulting and informational outreach remain clear.

NOP is aware that the line between permitted informational activities and prohibited consulting activities may not be clear for all departments, and has responded by releasing detailed guidance to resolve uncertainty and misconceptions (a document called “NOP 2614 Technical Assistance Instruction 04 08 13”).

NOP regulations do not prevent a state government acting as a certifying body from offering technical...
States can Promote Organic by Linking with Non-Governmental Groups

Despite feeling unable to act freely as a source of information, some certifying states were quite knowledgeable about other resources farmers could consult for the kind of information they themselves could not dispense. Several of these states admitted to providing informal referrals to a large range of external informational services that their departments were unable to provide. Referrals were made to an array of private sector groups, NGOs, and extension personnel at land-grant universities, many of whom were long accustomed to filling the needs of these referrals. Our survey suggests that certifying states which offer limited informational services, but maintain strong links to outside information resources may be able to provide the best of both worlds: a strong focus of staff time, personnel, and attention to organic at the state government level, as well as facilitated access to effective informational outreach services. The degree of cooperation and connection between state and private entities that serve as resources for organic farmers may be especially important for creating and maintaining vibrant regional organic economic zones or “hotspots.”

Support for Non-English Speakers Is Uncommon

While the USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service provides the National Organic Program Handbook in Spanish,15 only three state departments of agriculture in this sample currently provide support for foreign language access (California, Colorado, and Washington), and those three provide only limited resources, which could be improved. The resources provided include online general guidance materials and informational pages in both English and Spanish. California and Colorado also offer translation software built into the departmental website. No assistance in languages beyond English and Spanish was offered in any of our sampled states.

States May Transfer Cost-Share Facilitation to Federal Government

Change is currently underway in the administration of the federal cost share program, entailing the transfer of administrative responsibilities for the program from the hands of state departments of agriculture to local branches of the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA). Our study suggests that there is regional inconsistency in how cost share will be handled, with some departments opting to continue the program while others plan to cancel it to avoid public confusion and inefficient use of departmental funds. Although FSA’s entry into the cost share program does not prevent state departments from continuing to accept cost share applications, concerns about budgets and staff time are leading many departments to consider abandoning efforts that are duplicated elsewhere. Many of these states plan to stop offering cost share facilitation as early as late 2017, leaving FSA as the sole provider of this service. In states where the primary reason for the existence of any staff time and resources for organic agriculture is the administration of the cost share program, the transfer of cost share services out of the department raises serious questions about the likelihood of continued energy and action around organic. Already limited staff time and resources for organic farming may be further slashed in states that discontinue administration of cost share.

It will be critical to ensure that state departments remain aware and supportive of organic farmers beyond the cost share program transition. Additionally, departmental facilitation of cost share has traditionally brought benefits to organic businesses beyond the farming realm, such as organic processors. Businesses who do not have ready access to FSA may not be able to obtain reimbursement as easily as they could through the state department of agriculture, and may suffer if the department stops administering the program.

What is working well?

• A broad array of informational services, and quality relationships with producers: As mentioned previously, some states offer more informational services than others, primarily based on whether each department offers organic certification services. States with more organic services on offer reported more regular contact with organic farmers, a deeper understanding of the unique needs of the state’s organic operators, and a greater sense of connection between farmers and the department.

• Marketing assistance for organic farmers: Regardless of whether marketing services are provided by specialist organic staff or by a department’s separate dedicated marketing division, the presence of some degree of marketing assistance for organic operators ensures greater access to resources for both new and established farmers.

• Links to non-governmental providers of information: Both certifying states and non-certifying states reported stronger overall support for organic and wider support offerings when they maintained connections to regional organic resources outside the department. External links are particularly important for certifying states to fill in gaps in informational outreach services.
There Is No One “Right Place” to House Organic

From state to state, organic programs are housed in very different divisions of each department, suggesting differences between their approaches to organic agriculture. Variations in internal organization may also be the result of differences in funding and priorities at the state government level, and differential participation in federal programs. States house organic work under divisions as varied as food safety, plant health, regulatory services, and marketing and business development. This suggests some departments see organic as a health issue, while others see it more as a regulatory compliance issue, or a marketing opportunity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research has provided a benchmark for understanding existing state support for organic. To better understand the factors that contribute to a strong and successful local organic industry in each state, and to enumerate the challenges and policy pathways present in each local context, more research is needed to illuminate the ideal role of state departments in organic support. More insights will explain why organic receives more attention in some places than in others, and shed light on the interplay of specific factors such as state department buy-in, political will, individual actors, private sector entities, offerings by nonprofits and farmer-led groups, and technical support or extension services offered by universities. The combination of these different resources may create more than the sum of its parts, but a full accounting of all resources available in each state and their unique interplay is beyond the scope of this study. More detailed accounting of financial backing for organic at the state level would also be useful to understand why budget resources vary so greatly between departments and how resources can be leveraged most effectively in departments with extremely limited staff and funding.

A survey by OTA released in early 2017 asked a broad coalition of organic stakeholders to identify the biggest challenges to organic agriculture. Among the six top priorities they identified were increased public education, increased investment in land access and resources for new organic farmers, and increased and improved data on the organic industry. Our survey of state departments of agriculture and our selection of best practices echoes this need for increased availability of high quality data about each local organic sector.
Recommendations for State Departments of Agriculture

The following recommendations could significantly support the growth of the organic industry, thereby fulfilling USDA and industry goals of expanding organic acreage to meet market demand:

1. Expand Dedicated Organic Support at the State Level

Our survey found that the presence of state staff who understand and are responsive to the needs of organic farmers can be transformative for those farmers and the industry as a whole. In many states, current levels of staff devoted to managing organic are already inadequate to meet existing demand for services, and will not be able to handle expected future growth. Where possible, state departments of agriculture should hire dedicated experts who can bridge expertise and human capital across general departmental priorities and the organic sector, specifically. This will ensure that farmers can keep pace with the growth of the national organic industry, planned growth in organic acreage, and the growth in consumer demand for organic products.

2. Incorporate Organic Agriculture Fully into State Marketing and Promotional Efforts

As evidenced by OTA’s “Hotspots” report and our research, there can be a significant return on investment for state departments of agriculture that invest in outreach and technical assistance in an organized strategy to promote the growth of the organic industry in their state. Where appropriate, we recommend that states consider their state marketing and promotional efforts (whether for commodities, ranchlands, specialty crops, horticulture, or other sectors) and work to incorporate and highlight organic industries into those efforts.

3. Clarify and Further Disseminate NOP Guidance to States

While NOP issued “NOP 2614” to clarify the separation of consulting and certification in April 2013, it appears this document could be more widely disseminated and translated for various governmental and non-governmental audiences. While certifiers of all types must avoid conflicts of interest, state certifiers can share general information on the National Organic Program and public, voluntary opportunities to assist organic producers. We recommend a renewed look at “NOP 2614” by certifiers and non-certifiers alike.

4. Work Closely with Outside Groups that Serve Organic Farmers

Outside groups are key partners with expertise in organic agriculture and can both enhance and extend state government efforts. Considering budgetary limitations and in the case of some states, restrictions on offering “consulting” services, outside groups can be a crucial link for organic farmers. These groups may include, but are not limited to nonprofits, commodity boards, trade associations, extension personnel and others outside government. Their relative flexibility may allow them to respond quickly to local conditions and provide tailored services to meet local needs. As a result, state governments should consider outside groups key partners and seek to build lists of trusted partners with expertise in organic agriculture.

5. Monitor Transition to FSA Cost-Share Administration

We recommend that this transition of responsibility be closely monitored to ensure that existing cost share recipients do not fall through the cracks as sources of reimbursement change. We also recommend that departments that stand to lose their only dedicated organic staff position(s) due to the cessation of cost share administration renew their efforts to ensure that organic producers receive sufficient attention.

6. Expand Language Access for Existing and Prospective Organic Producers

Farming populations are diverse and would be well served by increased language access in all programs and support materials, both electronic and printed. During our research, we learned that a lack of bilingual staff at the department is one reason for limited or absent language resources, so we recommend that departments seek to add bilingual staff and devote resources to the translation of essential services in order to support farming populations of all languages and backgrounds in their state that are certified or seeking organic certification.

7. Support Future Research and Data Collection

This work aimed to understand state-level support for organic farming through an assessment of programs and materials that state departments of agriculture provide farmers in twenty-one US states. Although the parameters of this study did not permit the assessment to cover all 50 states, it would be useful to have comparison data for all states in order to craft more complete and more locally appropriate policy recommendations.
Detailed State Data

Detailed Profiles by Region and State

The services found in each state are listed and described on pages 9-11. What follows here are more detailed notes and state-specific features from our research. All numerical figures are from 2015 USDA data. Numerical figures for **acresage** and **number of farms** in each state are taken from the USDA-NASS 2015 Organic Certifier Survey. The Certifier Survey gathers information from organic certifying bodies, providing the most accurate picture of large-scale acreage trends. Figures for **value of organic sales** are taken from the USDA-NASS 2015 Certified Organic Survey. The Certified Organic Survey gathers information from individual farmers and therefore provides the most accurate farm-level financial data. Figures for the **total value of agricultural sector production** are taken from the USDA-ERS 2015 Farm Income and Wealth Statistics state-level dataset.

Region 1: The Northeast
Organic fields and farmworkers in Salisbury, Maryland. Photo by USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Region 2: The Midwest
Organic dairy in New Prague, Minnesota. Photo by Cedar Summit Farm.

Region 3: The South
Organic squash and melons at Howdy Farm in Texas. Photo by Kathleen Phillips.

Region 4: The West
Organic strawberry farm near Big Sur, California. Photo by Nate Bolt.
Region 1: The Northeast

In the Northeast, regional issues may take precedence over organic at the level of the state department of agriculture. Specifically, a great deal of energy goes to the maple syrup sector and to the issue of organic dairy viability. Because state department are focused on these regional issues, organic may receive less attention except where it intersects with more regionally prominent issues. Additionally, although organic support is higher in the Northeast than in many other areas of the country, regional pockets of anti-government sentiment and/or farmers preferring to obtain services without an affiliation with government agencies may contribute to a lower-than-expected demand for organic services from departments of agriculture, especially in comparison to other services and concerns.

New Hampshire

New Hampshire’s Department of Agriculture, Markets, and Food offers organic certification. Organic is the most time consuming of all the priorities at the department’s regulatory services division, and receives the most time and effort from that team as a result. But in terms of broader priorities, the department as a whole is more focused on regional issues and locally important commodity crops like maple syrup, and organic is a smaller detail within that broader thinking, not an explicit focus. Department staff also indicate that currently there is no single dominant source for all types of information, education, and consulting for organic in the state, and the department cannot serve that role due to its status as a certifier.
Participation in cost share among New Hampshire farmers is lower than might be expected. Department staff specify that this is likely a consequence of the timing of the due dates for cost share applications coinciding with the harvest timeframe of farmers in their state. Harvest time (late summer) coincides with organic inspections, and certification must be complete and all inspections finished by the time of application to cost share. The cost share application window closes at the end of September, forcing farmers to divide their efforts at precisely the busiest time of year. The cost share deadline is based on USDA’s fiscal year, but does not fit well with the harvest schedule of New Hampshire farmers.

**Pennsylvania**

Department of Agriculture
Total organic acreage: 95,601 acres
Total number of certified organic farms: 836
Total value of organic sales: $331.50 million
Total value of agricultural sector production: $8.72 billion

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture does not offer organic certification. The “PA Preferred” state marketing program for agriculture items is open to organic producers. Department staff provide trainings on pesticide application, food safety issues, farmland preservation, and organic transition, and the department hosts a number of events and conferences each year. These include: the Pennsylvania Farm Show, the Growing Pennsylvania’s Organic Farms Conference, and Farm City Day. Less than a third of all certified organic operations in the state receive cost share funding year to year. Department staff note that this low participation rate is likely the result of lack of awareness of the program, coupled with the prevalence of religious beliefs that prohibit some Pennsylvania farmers from accepting government grants. Pennsylvania sees itself as one of the nation’s foremost leaders in the organic movement, and notes that styles of organic production in the state are very diverse.

**Vermont**

Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets
Total organic acreage: 117,274 acres
Total number of certified organic farms: 493
Total value of organic sales: $108.69 million
Total value of agricultural sector production: $940.66 million

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets does not offer organic certification. The only exception is for maple farmers, who are inspected by the agency in the process of being certified by the Maple Sugar Makers Association. The agency does collect data on their organic industry and agriculture sector in the state as a whole, and distributes this information to farmers as a marketing assistance package. Any services not available through their staff are handled by the local state chapter of the Northeast Organic Farming Association. The agency has said that they intend to continue offering organic certification cost share even after FSA begins administering cost share reimbursements, as they believe that FSA’s offering is different and will reach a different segment of the market. The agency’s main focus is on local food and locally applicable industries such as maple syrup.
Region 2: The Midwest

Despite being among the strongest for organic support, overall, the Midwest states in this sample were less likely to offer marketing assistance to organic farmers. Department personnel indicated that in states where grain growers are a large proportion of the farmers served, marketing channels are generally very well established and easily understood by organic farmers, so they need less assistance. Issues in these states revolve more around pesticide drift, so the departments focus on creating resources and protections for organic farms that wish to avoid or redress the effects of drift. However, staff noted that while the majority of their work may be with larger grain farmers, specialty crop production and other modes of production do exist, and marketing concerns are a higher priority for those groups. Specialty crop producers may have access to fewer resources at the department level due to their minority status in these states. Department staff indicated that they do everything they can to connect those farmers with resources outside the department, because they recognize that their own offerings are tailored toward majority (in this case, mainly grain) producers.

Iowa

Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship

Total organic acreage: 112,785 acres
Total number of certified organic farms: 840
Total value of organic sales: $120.54 Million
Total value of agricultural sector production: $31.40 Billion

The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship offers organic certification. However, demand for certification services is higher than the department’s capacity to provide certifications, and department staff are aware that those farmers who cannot obtain certification with the department are siphoned off to private certifiers. Education, consulting, support materials and outreach are not officially offered by the department. However, on an informal basis a large amount of general guidance is offered and the department readily directs people to private and university sources of information in lieu of supplying these needs directly. An array of private entities and universities do provide consulting and extension services as well as yearly events and conferences which the department attends and assists with, but does not host. From the department’s perspective, marketing assistance for organics is a different sort of need due to the high percentage of organic farmers in the state who are grain and oilseed farmers. Department staff explain that marketing channels for these commodity crops are well established and there is not much guidance to be given to them, but that specialty crop growers would likely benefit from increased marketing assistance that the department is not currently able to provide due to its focus on grain and seed farmers. Issues of great local importance in the state include pesticide drift and do-not-spray lists. The nonprofit DriftWatch site registry (now managed by the nonprofit umbrella organization FieldWatch) assists with registering, tracking, and labelling through signage organic farms sensitive to pesticide drift, and works with the department to report complaints to NOP. Iowa’s department used to collect and provide broad based data on the organic sector in the form of an organic newsletter but stopped in 2010 due to budget cuts and limited staff resources.

Michigan

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Total organic acreage: 83,619 acres
Total number of certified organic farms: 483
Total value of organic sales: $186.92 million
Total value of agricultural sector production: $8.90 billion

The Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development does not offer organic certification. Cost share reimbursement rates are relatively high, but the department has no dedicated staff or budget for organic work, and the costs of administering the cost share program are not fully recouped from overhead fees built into the program. As a result, organic work at the department is done at an overall loss. The department does not have a functioning organic program, but still supports the community of organic farmers through cost share administration, informal advice, and connection to other resources (universities, NOP, etc.). The Michigan Organic Products Act of 2000 requires producers and handlers to register with the department and pay a fee. However, the fees
were generating only $11,000 in revenue which was not enough to administer a full organic program. The department believed that the fees created an unfair playing field, so they stopped collecting the registration fees and hope to rescind part or all of the law at some point.

**Minnesota**

Department of Agriculture
Total organic acreage: 169,094 acres
Total number of certified organic farms: 659
Total value of organic sales: $91.99 million
Total value of agricultural sector production: $19.94 billion

Organic certification is not offered by the department. Commitment to organic at the department is very strong. The department offers a directory of organic farms, guidance publications for farmers interested in going organic or for those preparing for inspections and certifications, a Do Not Spray list, a yearly organic conference for beginning and experienced farmers, trade shows, and an Organic Advisory Task Force, which explicitly connects the department with university extension personnel. The department’s Energy and Sustainable Agriculture Program provides farmers and consumers with information on organic production practices and certification. Money is available to help farmers attend out of state organic conferences. Few growers have so far benefitted from this program, and outreach is underway to raise awareness of this opportunity. The department also provides a searchable directory of organic farms in the state for promotional purposes, and a detailed status report on organic production and organic farm issues prepared every two years for the state legislature and available publicly online. There are a number of easily accessible links and referral resources at the department, as well as lists of resources for organic farmers and those interested in transitioning, and numerous informational guides on organic transition, organic business management, and sector-specific production.

**Missouri**

Department of Agriculture
Total organic acreage: 52,913 acres
Total number of certified organic farms: 308
Total value of organic sales: $92.43 million
Total value of agricultural sector production: $11.05 billion

The Missouri Department of Agriculture does not offer organic certification. The department readily makes links with area NGOs and university resources, and partners with university extension to host workshops and technical assistance offerings. The department also offers Missouri Grown, an outreach program that promotes Missouri-grown and Missouri-made items. This program is available to all producers regardless of organic status.

Many eligible farmers do not participate in cost share year to year, a fact which department staff partly attribute to lack of awareness of the program, and partly to the population of Amish and Mennonite organic farmers in the state—lack of telephone and internet access makes it challenging to communicate the availability of the program, and some also choose not to participate in government programs.

**Wisconsin**

Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection
Total organic acreage: 280,612 acres
Total number of certified organic farms: 1,684
Total value of organic sales: $222.43 million
Total value of agricultural sector production: $12.82 billion

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection does not offer organic certification. Programs offered include one-on-one outreach and technical assistance (which is unusual and has been identified as a crucial need for farmers transitioning to organic),46 farm visits, conferences, field-day presentations and booths, coordination of the Organic Advisory Council, partnerships with other agencies to support research and educational programs, and administration of the federal Organic Certification Cost Share Program. The department also has contact with the Organic Interagency Implementation Team, a group of government agencies that meets with the Organic Advisory Council. In partnership with the University of Wisconsin’s Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, the department produces an organic status report for the state.

Staff and resources for organic remain quite limited at the department with just a single staff member assigned to organic. For the state as a whole, the biggest barrier for organics is the lack of local processing of grains, vegetables, and livestock. Wisconsin continually ranks in the top five of many categories of organic production and the department understands the benefits that brings to the state.
Region 3: The South

Southern states reported the smallest numbers of organic farmers, cost share participants, and general organic interest. They did note that demand for organic appeared to be rising, and that they expected more attention to be devoted to organic production in coming years. For now, to answer that demand, Southern states are focusing on connecting producers and consumers through coordination of farmers’ markets and other direct-to-consumer marketing channels. As a result, the Southern region has consistently gained a larger portion of the national share of farmers’ market operations (based on available, voluntary listings from the USDA) during the 2011–2015 period, while the Western region has consistently lost market share.21

Oklahoma

Oklahoma’s Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry offers organic certification. Resources at the department are limited. Only one staff person is dedicated to organic, and that person works as an inspector for several programs. Less than one full staff member is available to handle all other services including cost share reimbursements. Despite limited staff, the department does offer a searchable roster of organic farms, links and referrals to additional resources, guidance documents for organic farming and certification, and cost share administration. Organic production in the state is still relatively low, so less energy is dedicated to organic than to other locally relevant issues.

Texas

The Texas Department of Agriculture offers organic certification, and the majority of staff time on organic is spent on certification applications and cost share administration. The Texas Organic Agricultural Industry Advisory Board is appointed by the Commissioner of Agriculture under state law (Texas House Bill 2345), and works within the department to develop and promote the Texas organic industry. The department relies heavily on the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) and the Rodale Institute, but does not connect farmers directly to other resources because of NOP’s prohibition on consulting. The department has looked into connecting farmers with university extension services to fill certain information gaps, but does not believe that solutions are feasible or can be counted on in the foreseeable future. The department also works with private organic industry groups in an advisory capacity but those working relationships vary based on the strength of each organization’s demonstrated support for organic agriculture. Those who are strongly aligned with the mission of promoting organic communicate directly with the department, while other organizations have expressed their opposition to organic agriculture, leading to a “complicated relationship” for staffers to manage.

Oklahoma

- Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry
- Total organic acreage: 12,489 acres
- Total number of certified organic farms: 47
- Total value of organic sales: $2.07 million
- Total value of agricultural sector production: $8.45 billion

Texas

- Department of Agriculture
- Total organic acreage: 304,963 acres
- Total number of certified organic farms: 420
- Total value of organic sales: $210.29 million
- Total value of agricultural sector production: $28.57 billion
The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce does not offer organic certification. The department does not offer any training programs or support materials as such. There is a state-level specialty crop grant and some of that money goes to universities for research on organic agriculture. Staff at the department are happy to provide information or referral over the phone but do not typically field enquiries about organic, and have few chances to refer organic farmers elsewhere for support. Staff and resources at the department are extremely limited, and organic is not an issue of high priority. There are few financial resources for programs like trainings or events. Some money is available at the department for working with and promoting farmers’ markets, and that work is ongoing.

The Georgia Department of Agriculture does not offer organic certification. Information is gladly given, but no formal organic support programs are offered beyond administration of cost share. The department refers interested parties to “Georgia Organics,” an outside group that does a yearly conference with trainings and technical assistance. While the department is at times involved in those events, it does not offer those services. The department offers informal assistance and advice to all farmers regardless of organic status, and makes every effort to connect people to outside resources. The department views their role as that of a facilitator, helping farmers however they can, assisting with obtaining certification services, and getting the organic message out to consumers.

The North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services does not offer organic certification. The department offers guidance documents on organic transitioning and preparing for organic certification; links to NOP, to the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, and to other states’ organic pages; as well as a list of certifiers that operate in the state. Marketing help is available for organic producers on request. The department also maintains a searchable online listing of producers by crop, organic status, and many other parameters. Challenges of local importance in the state include organic transition resources, and organic seed supply. There is quite a lot of demand for organic grains right now, but North Carolina does not yet have adequate supply. Additionally, organic production occurs in small pockets around the state. Pockets of production are not always well located to serve the pockets of demand centered on cities. A farmer’s location in the state can affect the ease or difficulty of accessing any given market, presenting a challenge when farmers wish to transition to organic. The department offers marketing assistance, and regularly fields enquiries coming from farmers who have an organic crop ready for harvest immediately, but do not yet have plans for getting it to market. The department struggles to help these farmers and would like to do more outreach before the situation is urgent. Staff are well acquainted with other resources for organic farmers beyond the department, and currently have regular contact with organic farmers on many levels.
Region 4: The West

The Western region in this sample showed strong commitment to organic, but with great variability between sampled states. California and Washington were some of the strongest supporters of organic nationwide, and together account for a large percent of total national organic production. Other Western states focused on organic only in certain sectors (Nevada, Colorado) and/or had less overall support for organic (Colorado, Hawaii).

California

Department of Food and Agriculture
Total organic acreage: 1,208,842 acres
Total number of certified organic farms: 2,500
Total value of organic sales: $2.44 billion
Total value of agricultural sector production: $50.24 billion

California’s Department of Food and Agriculture does not offer certification, due to the unique structure of the state’s organic program. In 1979, California became one of the first states to regulate organic production, with the signing of the Organic Food Act. Today, California is the only U.S. state to have its own State Organic Program (SOP), under the auspices of the National Organic Program. This means that California farmers pay for county-level enforcement of the federal organic standards overseen by the state. The state department registers organic producers, but leaves certification to private certifiers. In order to sell organic products or label products as organic in California, any business making more than $5,000 annually from organic sales must be certified, and also be registered with CDFA. The SOP is entirely funded by the registration fees paid by organic operations, and does not receive any general funds. The SOP is located within the Inspection and Compliance Branch of the Inspection Services Division. This patchwork of responsibilities, along with criticisms of lack of data or technical assistance in the nation’s largest organic production state, led to the passage of the California Organic Food and Farming Act in 2016. This law capped fees, sought to eliminate duplicative paperwork, and expanded the role of the California Organic Products Advisory Committee (which advises the Secretary of Food and Agriculture) to include education and outreach.

The SOP is finalizing a communications/marketing plan that will begin implementation in summer 2017. Some challenges at the state level reflect similar challenges nationwide for organic farmers: preventing pesticide drift or cross contamination from conventional (non-organic) farms and fields; limited options for effective organic pesticides and herbicides compared to conventional options; and the three-year waiting period required by NOP regulations to transition farmland to certified organic.

Colorado

Department of Agriculture
Total organic acreage: 212,091 acres
Total number of certified organic farms: 208
Total value of organic sales: $155.21 million
Total value of agricultural sector production: $8.58 billion

The Colorado Department of Agriculture offers organic certification. The department provides periodic trainings as time allows, but staff are already stretched thin handling certification requests. Budgets and staff are not expected to increase in the near future, so the department does what it can but laments that it is not always adequate. Cost share administration at the department was running at a loss due to low departmental funding, and will no longer be offered now that FSA is accepting cost share applications. Marketing help is provided by the department equally to all farmers regardless of organic status, through a separate arm of the department that is not involved with certification. Organic agriculture in the state has a significant consumer base, but struggles at times to find institutional support at in state government. Within the department’s certification program, staff are...
The Nevada Department of Agriculture offers organic certification. Growers can access links to external resources, guidance documents, technical assistance, and marketing services through a separate arm of the department. The university recently received a federal grant to transition farms to organic, which also comes with two temporary staff to help answer questions for transitional farmers. Referrals are made to local organic research centers, ATTRA (a sustainable agriculture program from NCAT), and local organizations that support organic and natural growing methods. A core of dedicated producers are quite passionate about organic in New Mexico, but challenges include the state’s economic position and a tough farming climate.

New Mexico

Department of Agriculture
Total organic acreage: 13,866 acres
Total number of certified organic farms: 726
Total value of organic sales: $626.45 million
Total value of agricultural sector production: $11.48 billion

The New Mexico Department of Agriculture offers organic certification. The department has a long-standing relationship with New Mexico State University and is housed on the university campus. The department does not offer many services to organic producers beyond inspecting and certifying. Marketing help and grants are both offered through a separate division of the department. An educator was previously employed at the department who filled the gap between certifying and advising, but the position was terminated on the recommendation of NOP, leaving the department with calls that can not be answered because no one at the department can serve that role. The department hosts a yearly organic farming conference and receives guidance from an advisory panel of six producers certified by the department. The university recently received a federal grant to transition farms to organic, which also comes with two temporary staff to help answer questions for transitional farmers. Referrals are made to local organic research centers, ATTRA (a sustainable agriculture program from NCAT), and local organizations that support organic and natural growing methods. A core of dedicated producers are quite passionate about organic in New Mexico, but challenges include the state’s economic position and a tough farming climate.

Hawaii

Department of Agriculture
Total organic acreage: Due to the small number of total organic farms in this state, data withheld by USDA-NASS to avoid breaching privacy by disclosing data for individual farms.
Total number of certified organic farms: 100
Total value of organic sales: $12.58 million
Total value of agricultural sector production: $866.63 million

The Hawaii Department of Agriculture does not offer organic certification. Hawaii supports the organic sector mainly through state- and federally funded projects awarded to non-profits and universities. These include the state-administered cost-share program, the Hawaii Organic Farming Association, the Kohala Center, and the University of Hawaii cooperative extension. Currently eight employees devote 25 percent of their time to organic matters, but the department has no dedicated organic staff. Hawaii’s department is currently renegotiating the suite of services it will provide to organic farmers. Once departmental decisions are finalized, the department’s Quality Assurance Division which currently oversees food safety certification will most likely provide technical assistance to organic farmers. HDOA and the state FSA office both agree that cost share should be offered by one or the other, but not by both agencies, to avoid confusing the public or, worse, having some applications fall through a gap in communication between HDOA and FSA.

Washington

Department of Agriculture
Total organic acreage: 95,282 acres
Total number of certified organic farms: 726
Total value of organic sales: $626.45 million
Total value of agricultural sector production: $11.48 billion

The Washington Department of Agriculture offers organic certification. The department’s current goals include expanding technical assistance and placing a greater emphasis on natural resources and biodiversity on organic farms. The department partners actively with other organizations, including Washington State University extension, WSU students, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Department staff walk fields with NRCS to provide different types of feedback specifically tailored to organic production. The department’s organic work was, at its founding, entirely fee-funded, with no general fund dollars. Referrals are made to NCAT, ATTRA, university extension, and others. The department’s organic program employs a large staff, and the department itself is quite supportive of organic agriculture.
References


8. Concern about the links between synthetic pesticides, particularly neonicotinoids, and the decline of pollinator populations needed for successful farming of pollinator-dependent crops, has led to a variety of state legislation either proposed or enacted, including SB 198 in Maryland (2016) and SB 602 in California (2017).


