Growing Organic, State by State

A Review of State-Level Support for Organic Agriculture

By Laura Driscoll and Nina F. Ichikawa

This brief summarizes key takeaways and recommendations from the report, "Growing Organic, State by State." Read the full report at food.berkeley.edu/organicstatebystate.

Executive Summary

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, facing state departments of agriculture 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 American 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 this study, twenty-one states across four distinct regions were chosen 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?

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

A summary of recommendations follows on the next page.

What can state departments of agriculture do?

The following recommendations emerged from this study.

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 instructions 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 higher-quality data about the organic market and state governments are well-suited to produce local data that would be widely useful.

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