

Cultivating Policy Support for Sustainable Farming

BY KRISTINA HUBBARD

Why should we care about the Farm Bill? Because no other piece of legislation determines the direction of food and farm policy more than this law.

In other words, a sustainable food future largely depends on sustainable food and farming policies.

But knowing we should engage in Farm Bill discussions is one thing. Understanding what the Farm Bill is, what it can do for sustainable and organic agriculture, and how to engage is another.

What's the Farm Bill?

Every five years, Congress revisits and passes—under various names, like the “Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008,” but always generally known as the “Farm Bill”—the most important piece of legislation on food, farming, nutrition, and land use. It's a behemoth, an omnibus bill (meaning it covers multiple issues) with a \$90 billion price tag. Food stamps, school lunches, and nutrition programs make up roughly half of the spending. Commodity programs (crop subsidies) eat up more than 30 percent. The remainder goes toward other programs, ranging from conservation, forestry, and

renewable energy to beginning-farmer programs and rural development.

Organic agriculture didn't have a place in the Farm Bill until recently. While a couple of organic provisions were included in past Farm Bills, it wasn't until the last Farm Bill that “organic” made it into one of the title names for the first time (Title X: Horticulture and Organic Agriculture). This is meaningful, in that organic agriculture should no longer be viewed as a small niche market, but as a viable, lucrative industry supported by a community committed to expanding organic food production and policies now and into the future.

Gains in the last Farm Bill

The 2008 Farm Bill included a number of provisions that advance organic agriculture. These gains were primarily seen in mandatory funding for organic research and organic market data collection; programs to assist farmers transitioning to organic, including provisions that coordinate organic interests with existing conservation programs; and increased funding for organic certification cost-share reimbursements.

Significantly, the National Organic Program, in

charge of regulating organic standards and certification, received an increase in funding. This was a much-needed boost; the organic industry has grown substantially, but funding for oversight of the standards on which the label is based has not kept pace. (Other 2008 organic provisions and more details on the ones mentioned here can be found at www.offr.org.)

Organic priorities

Even after these gains in 2008, the list of goals for achieving more and better organic provisions in the 2012 Farm Bill is long. In January 2010, the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI—USA) and partners published a National Organic Action Plan, titled “From the Margins to the Mainstream: Advancing Organic Agriculture in the U.S.” The National Organic Action Plan (NOAP) represents five years' worth of meetings that brought together diverse stakeholders to envision the future of organic. The report details a comprehensive organic policy agenda that reflects the broad social, environmental, and health values of the organic community.

The goal of NOAP is clear: “to establish ▶

New Support for Urban Cooperative Development

CooperationWorks! (CW) and the National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA) announced on Oct. 15, 2010, a new initiative for urban cooperative development. Congressman Chaka Fattah (D-Pa.), chairman of the Congressional Urban Caucus, will lead a new proposal to support urban cooperative business development throughout the U.S. Fattah, an eight-term representative from Philadelphia, will partner with NCBA, the Washington-based federation of cooperatives from all sectors of the economy, and CW, a national trade association of cooperative development centers and individuals.

Rep. Fattah, Pennsylvania's senior member of the House Appropriations Committee, said, “Cooperatives provide an excellent means for economic development and community enrichment. This new initiative is catching on in our cities and urban areas. The cooperative movement is a perfect fit with the agenda of the bipartisan Congressional Urban Caucus, and I am pleased to provide this effort with a strong voice in Congress,” Fattah said. “These cooperatives will create jobs and wealth by helping new local businesses that are owned and controlled by their members.”

Cindy Bass, senior policy advisor for Rep. Fattah, said, “Our office has a record of working with the successful and well-established cooperatives in

Northwest Philadelphia, such as Weavers Way food co-op. I will be assisting the Congressman as we help to advance urban cooperatives and boost our national economy.”

The new initiative, as outlined by representatives of NCBA and CW, will include seeking authorization of funds for technical assistance for urban cooperatives across the United States, an effort to change Small Business Administration policies that currently prohibit participation by cooperatives in federal small business loan-guarantee programs, financial assistance for cooperative business start-ups, and pilot programs in Philadelphia and other cities.

Lisa Stolarski, CW urban circle chair, said, “A successful authorization of an urban cooperative development program could pass Congress in 2011 and could potentially be appropriated as early as 2012, the year declared by the United Nations as the International Year of Cooperatives.”

Adam Schwartz, NCBA vice president of public affairs and member services, said, “The NCBA looks forward to working with Congressman Fattah and the co-op community in developing an urban cooperative development program.”

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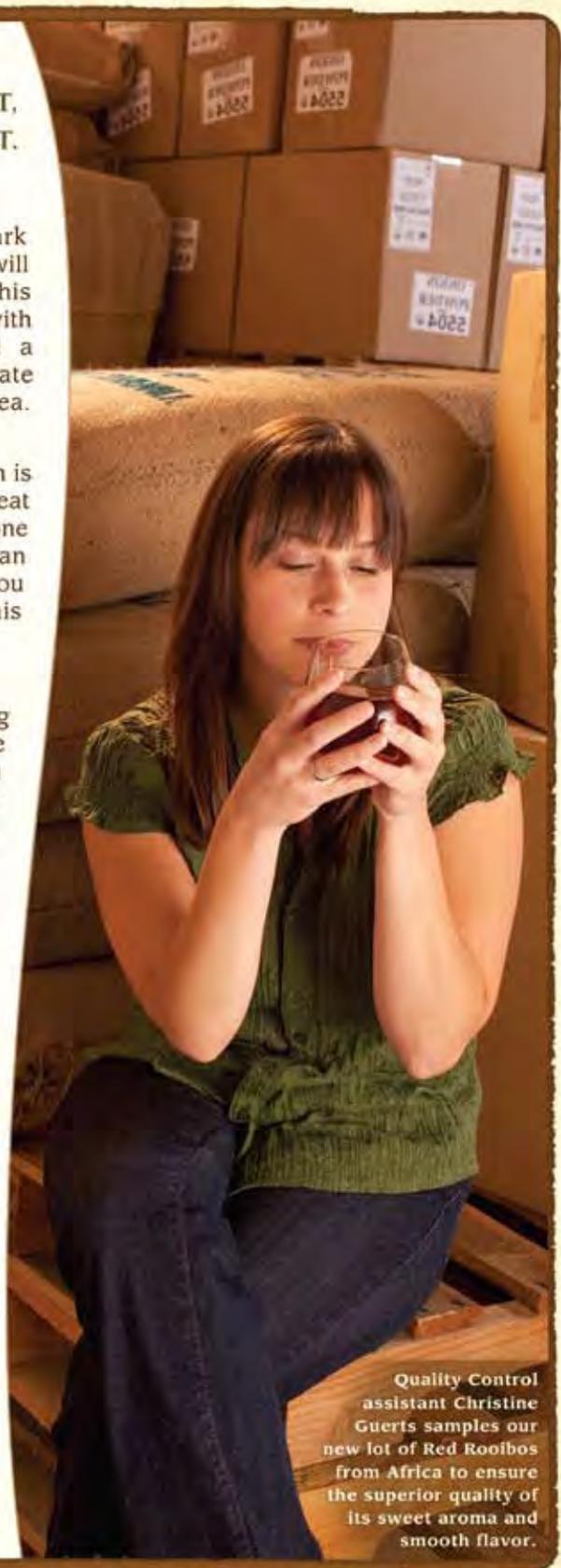


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◀ organic as the foundation for food and agricultural production systems across the United States.” Many of the organic policy priorities for the 2012 Farm Bill maintain and build upon current provisions. These include:

Increase mandatory funding for the organic certification cost-share program. This funding continues to be crucial for encouraging and supporting farmers, especially smaller-scale farmers and processors, who want to transition to organic.

Continue the organic initiative within the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and maintain mandatory funding. The last Farm Bill made headway in supporting new organic farmers. New policy priorities include funding within EQIP for training and technical assistance for farmers transitioning to organic.

Reauthorize and update the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI). OREI continues to provide important organic research grants. This policy priority includes mandatory funding and added research priorities, such as “rural development” and “food safety,” among other legislative changes.

Provide mandatory funding for the organic data initiative. This ensures segregated organic production and marketing data (e.g., prices) is included in baseline agriculture production data, which is important for handling matters such as crop insurance.

Improve the crop insurance program for organic. A provision in the 2008 Farm Bill was supposed to address barriers in crop insurance for organic producers, but it has proven ineffective. The priority here is to mandate that organic farmers be reimbursed at the price the organic product would have received, and that organic farmers should not shoulder an existing 5 percent additional surcharge fee.

Other priorities that have not been addressed in the Farm Bill to date, but that the NOAP identifies as priorities, include:

Farmer Protection Act: Organic farmers and food businesses currently shoulder the costs of testing and eradicating genetically engineered (GE) seed, crops and food. Because shipments may be rejected when unwanted GE material is found, patent holders on GE traits should be held liable for financial losses resulting from contamination. State initiatives to pass GE crop liability laws have been unsuccessful. This Farmer Protection Act would establish a liability regimen at the federal level so that farmers suffering economic and other losses from contamination can recoup losses from GE seed manufacturers. It would include other farmer protections, disclosure of risks to purchasers of GE seed, and measures to avoid contamination.

Competitive Markets in Organic Agriculture: This provision seeks to amend the Agricultural Fair Practices Act of 1967 to require good faith bargaining with producer associations and remove loopholes that make enforcement difficult. All agricultural markets, including organic, rely on competition and fairness to be successful.

Institute for Seeds and Breeds for the 21st Century: Our national public plant- and animal-breeding programs are hurting. Choice in public varieties of seed, for example, has been crushed as the private seed industry consolidates and privatizes public research through utility patents. This program will focus on reinvigorating public plant and animal breeding to meet regional needs by coordinating public resources and grants to develop new cultivars and breeds, conserve plant germ plasm, and improve public access and use.

How you can get involved now

Creating more space for organic agriculture within the Farm Bill—capturing needed funds to support organic farmers and bring fairness to the marketplace—will require a coordinated effort by the organic community, including retailers and processors, farmers and farm workers, researchers and breeders. It will also entail bringing together overlapping interests: advocates of farmland preservation, social justice, wildlife conservation, and others.

There are various ways to be involved. For starters, get connected with organic advocacy groups that will be involved in 2012 Farm Bill work. Sign up for their newsletters now to receive updates on upcoming Farm Bill activities.

Some of these groups include the Organic Seed Alliance, Organic Farming Research Foundation, National Organic Coalition, and National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. And remember to download your own copy of the National Organic Action Plan, described above, at www.nationalorganiccoalition.org.

An excellent way to learn how to leverage your voice (including your business and customer base) is to attend the Organicology Farm Bill Policy Intensive on Feb. 10, 2011, in Portland, Ore. Organicology is an interactive educational format created by four organic trade organizations; it is designed to meet the diverse needs of our rapidly expanding trade. The intensive will be led by a group of leaders with experience in shaping agricultural and food policy. Participants will discuss how to meet these goals in the next Farm Bill; how to create effective messaging for media and policymakers; and how best to engage people in the organic community (especially food industry stakeholders) in moving these organic policies forward.

The organic community is a growing body of producers, processors, retailers, consumers, and activists with the capacity to increase our impact on the 2012 Farm Bill. But we need a unified voice—yours included—if we are to establish a sustainable food future.

For more information on the Organicology Policy Intensive, contact Kristina Hubbard with Organic Seed Alliance at kristina@seedalliance.org or 406/493-6965. Or visit www.organicology.org.

Organic Seed Alliance (OSA) is a national organization supporting the ethical development and stewardship of seed. OSA believes that organic food integrity begins with organic seed integrity. As such, OSA's advocacy program works to confront the threats to organic seed, including seed industry consolidation, contamination by genetically engineered crops, and restrictive intellectual property rights, while creating and promoting decentralized, regional seed systems through research and education. Visit us at www.seedalliance.org. ■

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