

National Organic Standards Board
Certification, Accreditation, Compliance Subcommittee (CACS)
Improving Support for Organic Transition
Discussion Document
July 11, 2023

Summary

The CACS has created a work agenda item on improving support for transitioning producers and optimizing use of resources for transition to Organic. More programs to support organic transition are becoming available, and the NOP and NOSB have a shared interest in ensuring that these resources are used effectively and efficiently to expand organic production and markets in the long-term. In addition, there is a need for deeper understanding of how improvements in diversity, equity, and inclusion in the organic sector could expand the relevance of organic – to producers and consumers alike. The purpose of this discussion document is to gather feedback from inside and outside the organic community on effective tools, resources, and alignment strategies to support organic transition and requirements for participation in programs that support organic transition. The NOSB will make recommendations to the NOP based on this gathered feedback.

Background

Organic agriculture offers significant climate, health, and economic benefits, for producers and consumers. Organic market growth has been strong for decades, with domestic organic food sales surpassing \$60 billion in 2022. But still less than 1% of U.S. agricultural land is managed organically and the U.S. remains a net importer of organic products.

Numerous barriers may deter producers from pursuing organic certification, including – but certainly not limited to: certification costs, challenges with the process, and proximity to certification services and inspection capacity; limited access to land and capital; insufficient regionally-relevant technical assistance for organic management systems; lack of regional market opportunities or necessary organic supply chain infrastructure; agricultural training that does not present organic as an option; and inadequate access to organic mentorship and peer networks.

Producers who may be interested in transitioning to organic come from diverse backgrounds and career paths – from farmworkers seeking to become organic farm owners to seasoned producers considering a different approach to farming. This diversity means that the most successful approaches to overcoming barriers may vary significantly. In addition, many beginning producers and producers of color face heightened challenges related to language, cultural competency, and discrimination that must be addressed. Increasing diversity among organic producers and handlers could contribute to a stronger sense of inclusion and opportunities in organic.

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced an unprecedented \$300 million Organic Transition Initiative (OTI), with three main elements designed to address many of these barriers: funding to build a transition support network, with organic certifiers in the lead; an organic practice standard for conservation programs and a crop insurance discount; and market development grants. Each of these elements is currently in process.

While formal public comment processes for OTI have been limited, the NOSB is well-positioned to gather input on stakeholder experiences with organic transition programs generally, and OTI specifically, and make recommendations to USDA to maximize the benefits of public investments in organic transition. In addition, the NOSB seeks to advise USDA on how OTI and other programs can help ensure that organic is relevant to a more diverse population – as an environmental stewardship strategy, a career path, and a source of sustenance.

To these ends, the NOSB seeks input on the following organic transition questions:

- Have you been involved in the USDA Organic Transition Initiative? Describe your experience to date. What is working well? What could be improved? What barriers to organic transition need more attention?
- Have you recently transitioned to organic, or do you help operations transition to organic? What are the most significant remaining barriers to organic transition? What works well to reduce those barriers? What have you tried that didn't work? How do support organizations find farms or ranches interested in transitioning? How do organizations advance racial equity in outreach?
- What impacts do choices and availability of organic-compliant inputs and ingredients have on organic transition? Are there particular materials or ingredients that have an outsized impact on operations' decisions to go organic?
- How do transitioning producers plan for the first few years after achieving certification? How does support for organic transition also support retention?
- What could be done to foster a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organic sector?

Motion to accept the discussion document on Improving Support for Organic Transition

Motion by: Allison Johnson

Seconded by: Kim Huseman

Yes: 6 No: 0 Abstain: 0 Recuse: 0 Absent: 3