

The Natural Farmer

Organic Agriculture in the 2002 Farm Bill - Summer 2002

By Elizabeth Henderson

With the toothache of the Organic Farm Production Act (OFPA) to deal with, the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture Organic Committee has been very cautious about further involvement with USDA. For the 2002 Farm Bill, our committee developed a list of 8 Programmatic Recommendations: seven out of the eight actually passed through the legislative gauntlet and emerged in recognizable form.

Here is a quick summary. The Farm Bill:

1. Provides \$5 million in funding starting in 2002 and available until expended for a national organic certification cost-share program to assist producers and handlers of agricultural products in obtaining certification under the National Organic Program. (We had asked for \$3.5 million a year.)
2. Expands the organic agriculture research and extension initiative to include on-farm research and development for working organic farms, determination of desirable traits for organic commodities, and identification of marketing and policy constraints on the expansion of organic agriculture. \$15 million is provided to fund these organic farming research initiatives, \$3 million per year for 2003-2007. (We had asked for \$45 million, but \$15 is a good start.)
3. Requires the Secretary of Agriculture to ensure that segregated data on the production and marketing of organic agricultural products is included in the ongoing baseline of data collection regarding agricultural production and marketing, and to facilitate access to organic research conducted outside of the United States. (We had asked that USDA specifically track the impact of the National Organic Program on small farms.)
4. Exempts farmers who produce and market 100% organic products from paying an assessment under commodity promotion laws. (The Organic Trade Association had pushed for an organic promotion and marketing check-off program. None of the organic farming associations agreed with the OTA on the need for this. Perhaps Leahy listened to NOFA-VT instead of OTA.)
5. Establishes the Conservation Security Program. See the other article on the Farm Bill for more detail on this one. We will have to watchdog the Rule-making to be sure that organic farms are included and that the farm plan written for organic certification can also serve as a conservation whole farm plan, giving organic farms access to tier three funding, the highest level.
6. Acknowledges the importance of the preservation of genetic resources and public plant breeding. (We had also asked for increased funding for public breeders.)

We asked that all USDA personnel receive training in organic agriculture. Outside the Farm Bill process, the NRCS recently signed a memo of agreement with the OTA to train its staff in organic agriculture.

Our request for mandatory seed testing and labeling of GMOs, and the accreditation of GMO testing labs, did not go anywhere in the Farm Bill. This is a big loss for us, especially since the bill includes \$15 million a year to "enhance foreign acceptance of agricultural biotechnology and US agricultural products developed through biotechnology."

The Farm Bill also contains report language related to organic transition and the issue of the availability of organic feed: "The Managers urge the Secretary to assist producers, processors and firms interested in shifting production into organic products in making this transition and, to the extent possible, work to eliminate unnecessary, over burdensome and any other barriers to this process. As soon as practicable, the Secretary is urged to undertake a study to ascertain the availability of key inputs into organic production, including the availability of organically produced feedstuffs for the organic production of livestock and poultry." (This final point may actually be a victory in disguise. A big chicken producer in Georgia has been pressuring USDA to allow the production of organic chickens with less than 100% organic feed. Field Dale Farms in Georgia is already marketing 300,000 organic chickens a week. Its certifier, the Georgia Crop Improvement Association, a new outfit, allows an exemption from the 100% feed requirement.)

And another little victory: the Farm Bill contains no language related to organic fish. There has been an on-going effort by Senator Stevens of Alaska to have wild ocean fish declared organic.

The NCSA Organic Committee, which I co-chair with Michael Sligh of the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFIUSA), has been meeting intensively since the first version of the Federal organic rule outraged us all back in 1997. We consult by conference call every few weeks and meet face to face three or four times a year, usually in conjunction with a meeting of the NOSB. The Organic Committee includes over 40 members, representatives of organic farming associations, certification programs, consumer and environmental groups from all over the country. A steering committee of 8 oversees the work of the larger group. Besides Michael and me, the members are Mark Lipson of the Organic Farm Research Foundation, Margaret Mellon of the Union of Concerned Scientists, Melanie Adcock, a vet and for many years on the staff of the Humane Society of the US, Joe Mendelson, a lawyer with the International Center for Technology Development, Roger Blobaum of Organic Watch and a member of the IFOAM accreditation committee, and Nancy Taylor, a farmer from Idaho. Marty Mesh of Florida Organic Growers and chair of the OTA Organic Certifiers Council, Jim Riddle, vice chair of the NOSB and founding member of the Independent Organic Inspectors Association, and Lynn Coody, presently a private consultant after many years as a technical advisor to organic farmers with Oregon Tilth, often join us. Liana Hoodes, until recently Associate Director of NCSA, staffs the committee, setting up calls, helping with agendas, arranging for meetings, communicating with other NCSA initiatives, and generally enabling us to work effectively.