

Testimony of John M. Teixeira

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My name is John Teixeira. I live at 11356 Road 5 1/2 in Firebaugh, California. My town is one hour northwest of Fresno, an agricultural community of 6,000 population, next to the San Joaquin River. I produce certified organic small grains, wheat and alfalfa hay, tree fruit, herbs, greenhouse transplants, heirloom seeds, row crops, chickens, pigs, and dairy goats. I am also a partner with two brothers and father in family farm of 5,000 acres producing processing tomatoes, fresh market tomatoes, cantaloupes, alfalfa, wheat hay, cotton, livestock, greenhouse transplant production and composting 6,000 tons a year. I've been farming for 40 years , 20 years organic. I serve as California Certified Organic Farmers' Fresno-Madera Chapter Certification Standards Chairman, and Board member of the Organic Farming Research Foundation. I am also a board member of SlowFood Madera Chapter, and board member of the Sustainable Cotton Project.

Thank you Chairman Peterson and Committee members for the invitation to speak on developing the next Farm Bill. We here in California appreciate you coming to the Central Valley to hear our thoughts on federal policies for food and agriculture.

Building on the 2008 Farm Bill

The '08 Farm Bill established a number of new provisions concerning organic agriculture. These provisions covered research, conservation, crop insurance, and support for the USDA organic standards and certification system among other things. USDA is still in the early phases of implementing some of these provisions. I think we can all draw some general conclusions but the Committee will need to sort out some details over the next year in order to fine-tune the details. Overall the initial results show promise.

We must nurture these seedlings for good results in the future. It's like growing a crop: starting out with a good seed source and preparing the soil making a good seed bed to get a good germination with the right temperature and moisture. We want the seed to pop out of the earth and continue to grow strong. The Farm Bill policies for organic agriculture will be the same: they are getting off to a good start but need careful attention and adjustment so that we have a good harvest in years to come.

Congress has recognized that organic farming has multiple public benefits in addition to sustaining high levels of food and fiber production. These benefits range from conservation of pollinator species to the provision of good jobs in production and processing. In California the organic market is a strong economic force and one of the brighter spots in our agricultural economy. The next Farm Bill should begin to really leverage these benefits and amplify them by getting more coordination between agencies and programs. The benefits of organic research and organic conservation systems can

have positive “spillovers” for improving the environmental performance of all farming systems, but the agencies need to approach it that way and have a coordinated strategy for this effect. If it receives a fair share of research and development resources, organic will lead the way towards a much lighter impact on the nation’s soil, waters and wildlife while providing the productivity that we need.

Research, Education and Extension

Increased funding for organic research and education in the 2008 Farm Bill was historic. Many projects from the first round of funding look promising. The dedicated organic research funds are also helping to build baseline capacity in organic systems research.

But there is still only a relative trickle of science and technology for organic systems coming from the agencies and universities. Research and education for organic systems is still only about 2% of USDA’s research budget. That’s only about half of the overall market share that organic products have at the retail level. If you look at the scale of problems that organic systems could make an outsized contribution (such as pollinator declines and greenhouse-gas emissions), and compare that to the relative resources available, you see that the potential contribution is being hobbled.

The overall effort on science and technology for sustainable organic systems has to be scaled up. That is still a primary limiting factor in the long-term success of existing organic farms, and for effective transition.

I am particularly concerned about seed breeding. We have a critical need for varieties that are adapted to organic systems and we need adequate seed supplies for increased organic production. We need organic plant (and animal) breeding for increased resilience in the face of climate change and reduced water supplies. Policy passed by Congress must continue to aggressively rebuild our national capacity for developing and releasing high quality public cultivars. Organic can use all the advanced tools except for transgenic modification, but the science is moving beyond that anyway and it is not needed. Marker-assisted selection, environmental genetic analysis, and other tools need to be applied along side classical breeding tools, to produce varieties in the public domain that respond best to the ecological fertility and pest management strategies that are built into organic systems.

Economic research and regional marketing infrastructure development are crucial to the success of our growing organic production sector. Rewards for organic's environmental services are important but we still need to have a basically successful economic model in the marketplace. Here again, 2008 made a start and the results of those investments should inform the next stage of scaling up.

Advanced organic soil management systems can simultaneously improve performance in soil health and biodiversity; water retention and drought tolerance, energy conservation, pollinator health, and more. Extension programs and applied technology development are needed to put all these parts together in regionally- and site-specific packages.

The conservation effects of organic agriculture were singled by Congress in 2008 as an important purpose of the Organic Research and Extension Initiative. This area of study is going to be incredibly important and will deserve continued special attention by Congress.

Conservation Programs

As directed in the 2008 Farm Bill, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service has made great strides in trying to integrate organic and transitional production systems into the EQIP and Conservation Stewardship programs. In some places this seems to have worked very well. In other places it does not appear to be working so well. There is a great need for NRCS field personnel to be trained in the principles and requirements of organic production. In some places there is still a need for NRCS personnel to just be open to it at all. As the 2010 sign-ups and contracts for the NRCS conservation programs are completed and analyzed, we'll have a better picture of how to improve Congress' goal of integrating organic and transitional growers into the programs, and get the resulting conservation benefits that organic systems provide. I have enjoyed working with our local office signing up for EQIP program and the high-tunnel project. I pass the word to other growers on the benefits of signing up to learn more about conservation practices. NRCS needs to be able to do better outreach and Get The Word Out. They also need to be able to be better prepared when organic growers and small farmers do come in.

Crop Insurance, Credit and Disaster Payments

Again, we still have only a very incomplete picture of how well the 2008 organic provisions for crop insurance are working. There does seem to be some focused activity but we don't have results to see yet. Likewise, the related data collection and analysis that could help remedy the problems for organic growers with farm credit and disaster payments, is not yet sufficient. We hope that the efforts started under the 2008 bill will yield enough information to shape further constructive policy changes in the next round of legislation.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, there is still a ways to go to get organic agriculture on an equal footing within USDA's agencies and programs but we are making great progress. The outcomes are good not only for organic farmers and their customers, but for all of agriculture.

I thank you for listening and ask that I may be able to submit revised written remarks for the record.