

Organic Builds Momentum at USDA

An Interview with NRCS Chief Dave White



Ted Quaday/OFRF

Ariane Lotti and Mark Lipson discuss organics and conservation with NRCS Chief Dave White.

DAVE WHITE IS THE NEW Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the USDA agency that manages conservation programs under federal farm law. On Monday, July 6, 2009, Organic Farming Research Foundation Senior Policy Analyst Mark Lipson and Policy Associate Ariane Lotti conducted a wide-ranging interview with White in his office at NRCS headquarters in Washington, D.C. While many subjects were addressed in the interview, questions around the NRCS roll-out of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program Organic Initiative and the then-pending launch of the new Conservation Stewardship Program were central to the discussion. Also key was the dialogue around the growing recognition for organic agriculture in the USDA's conservation programs.



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Organic Sees Rocky Beginnings

TRANSCRIPT

We're here with Dave White, Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Dave, thanks for agreeing to do this, we really appreciate it. We're going to put this on the record because we want people, especially in the organic community, organic producers, to know what your thinking is and know more about NRCS. ... How did conservation come to be the focus of your career? How did you choose that path?

I was actually at the University of Missouri, thinking I was going to go into veterinary. I wanted to become a vet. I took some of the agronomy courses, and I actually liked plants better. So, I shifted over to more the agronomy/ag world and became a student--at that time they called them co-op students--where I worked summers. At that time, it was called the Soil Conservation Service, and I stayed with them.

Okay. Was there a point at which you began to see organic farming as potentially part of the conservation programs?

You know, that was fairly recent. I remember, gosh, a couple decades ago at USDA, when to mention the word "organic" was to be crucified. What was the guy's name over here--it was ...

Garth Youngberg? Is that who you are talking about?

Yeah. Who was really just ostracized from USDA. I think that was in the Reagan Administration.

Right, when John Block came in as U.S. Agriculture Secretary.

[Editor's note: White's comment is in reference to the firing of Dr. Garth Youngberg. Youngberg had just completed publication of the results from a USDA Task Force on Organic Farming. He was fired immediately after Reagan took office, and the "USDA Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming" was buried.]

Yeah, there was all this stuff, you know: "Organics will never be able to feed the world. It doesn't produce enough." It was the whole scenario back then, was when I really first heard about it. And, of course, I was just a little staffer. It took a while to work [my way] up. But, when I did get into a position as the NRCS State Director in Montana ... I felt that there was enough flexi-



Dave White

USDA/NRCS



Organic Champions Battle on Hill

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bility in the farm bill programs that we could do stuff to promote organic. That's what we did in Montana. There were some other states that did it as well: Minnesota, Iowa, there were five or six states that kind of got in on the front end of this. ... In the year 2007, I was loaned to Tom Harkin, Senator Harkin, and spent 16 months on the Senate Ag Committee working on the Conservation Title. Mr. Harkin was very pro-organic. Mr. Leahy, of course, was an advocate for organic. Those two senators were really the impetus in getting organic more into the farm bill programs. I knew all that stuff was there [in the farm bill]. Then I was fortunate enough to become Chief of the Agency (NRCS) and worked with Deputy Secretary Merrigan, and we came up with this last little thing of \$50 million just for organic. [Editor's note: White is referring here to a special Organic Initiative in the 2009 Environmental Quality Incentives Program.]

So, it's not a case of whether it's safe or not, or you're breaking a taboo. I think organic is here, it is mainstream, and the law is a recognition of that.

In other words, would you say that Harkin and Leahy, made it safe to push back against that taboo on organic?

I think the taboo is residue from another time. There really isn't that taboo today, and probably hasn't been for a good long time. Certainly the leadership of Mr. Harkin, Mr. Leahy, put it into the main-stream body of the farm bill programs. So, it's not a case of whether it's safe or not, or you're breaking a taboo. I think organic is here, it is mainstream, and the law is a recognition of that. Then, you've got a couple of fierce advocates on the Hill who certainly use their positions to advance this cause.

In your previous postings in Montana or Missouri or elsewhere, were there any particular organic farmers or organic operations that you saw that helped form your thoughts about it?

In Montana, the Mikel Lund Farm ... and Jeff Schahczenski, at NCAT (National Center for Appropriate Technology). Jeff was very much an organic advocate. He was on the NRCS State Technical Advisory committee. ... We also had Margaret Scoles [Editors Note: Scoles is Executive Director of the International Organic Inspectors Association.]. ... We actually entered into a cooperative agreement in Montana for the organic people to promote organic producers to use the farm bill. Jeff Schahczenski ended up administering that and did a great job. If you look at the Montana NRCS website today, there's a link to organic that links to virtually a smorgasbord of different organic groups.



Conservation Emerges as Policy Priority

TRANSCRIPT

In your work on the various farm bills, you've been on detail for a couple of them, what's your perspective on the evolution of the Conservation Title in general? Do you see any trends there that you can encapsulate?

The first time I recall there being a Conservation Title might have been the 1981 Farm Bill. I'd have to check on that. But conservation was [then] Title Fifteen. Today it's Title Two. As you move from Fifteen to Two, you can sense, you can see the rise of importance of conservation. Not just organic or conventional, or anything else, but just the sheer recognition of the importance of conservation in our daily lives. That's reflected by its placement as Title Two of the 2008 Farm Bill.

You mentioned the interests of Senator Harkin and Senator Leahy, in particular in organic, you think they've been the main force in terms of its appearance in the legislation?

Sure. Yes. I was called over to a meeting in Mr. Harkin's office and George Siemon, who is the C-E-I-E-I-O for Organic Valley, was there talking about organic producers and making a very good case for the need for some conservation assistance with organic producers. It was pretty clear when Mr. Harkin looked at me and he said: "That's going to be in the farm bill, right?" And, of course, you say: "Right!" And, it is. You had a lot of very articulate spokespeople for organic. I also think of Ferd Hoefner with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. The organic folks had their act together in the 2008 Farm Bill. They were able to get a lot of items in there.

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The launch of the new EQIP Organic Initiative is a pretty bold step for the agency, both in terms of funds allocated and the time frame with which it got put forward. What was your primary motivation in the approach that was taken?

There were a couple. First, and I should preface this by saying that the Deputy Secretary of Agriculture, Kathleen Merrigan, was very instrumental in this. That type of support at her level is absolutely crucial. ... My primary motivation was carrying out the law. The law in the 2008 Farm Bill says: the Secretary "shall" offer this. It's not a "may," it's not a "maybe," it's not "If you think about it or if you feel like it." It's a "shall." It had not been done prior to the point that I became the Chief, so I decided to, basically, carry out the law. That's not too hard to understand. But, "How?" was the primary question. We were able to get apportionment from the Office of Management and Budget,



NRCS Pushes Organic Initiative

TRANSCRIPT

and we decided to take that late apportionment and take \$50 million of it, which was the bulk, the lion's share. And, take that and designate that for this organic sign-up.

The one thing that I really wanted to do — and that's why we reached out to a lot of the organic groups

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when we had discussions like: What should this look like? What should we offer? How should it be done? — was to try and offer this from Maine to Guam in a fairly consistent manner. People in New York are not going to see something appreciably different than people in Washington or California, or New Mexico or wherever you happen to be in the United States. Working with these outside stakeholders, we were able to construct a fairly, I think, consistent approach on how this would be operated coast-to-coast. Then, we had the core practices which we would offer everywhere. Then, we allowed the states, if they wanted to offer facilitating practices, working with their groups or with their state technical advisory committees, [to add] what would be right in [their] particular state. They had the option to add stuff on. We also had the economists look at the cost. I think this is the first time in our traditional programs we were able to offer a price differential for organic practices that took into account the risk, the income foregone, that an individual would have as they moved from conventional to organic. The other big thing that we're still having a little hard time getting through the heads, some heads out there, is that the law is very clear — this is not only for new people wanting to transition to organic, but it is also for existing organic farmers who want to bring new land, transition new land. That's a big mindset change for NRCS that you take somebody who's already doing it and they have the opportunity to do more. And that is contrary to how we've operated in the past, but that again is statutory. So, we tried to carry out the law. We wanted to make it attractive where organic producers would like it. Make it pertinent to their operations. We wanted consistency across the country, and you would probably be a better gauge than I on what you're hearing from some of the states. Did we blow it in places? Did we do great in places? I'm sure we've got some in both of those categories. This is really a first attempt to get some consistency in a segment of EQIP across the country.



EQIP Initiative A Test Case

TRANSCRIPT

Going through that learning curve for the agency, was that part of your motivation in the short time frame that there was for 2009? Did you feel like it was better to just get through that learning curve now, rather than have the package more figured out a year from now?

Absolutely. I thought that it was extremely important that we offer this in Fiscal Year 09. We're sitting here talking in July. There are only three months left, and there are a whole lot of steps that you have to go through from application to getting a contract. We did make this a separate account. It's a separate funding pool. The organic producers are not going to be competing against conventional or anybody else. It's going to be apples to apples. I thought it was important to kick it off and do it in abbreviated time. Although we did give states the option, if they wanted to extend, and ... many of them extended, based upon input from their stakeholders. That's fine with me as long as we're done by September 30. What we learned this time around, we'll be able to improve what we do next time around. You were a test case on a couple of levels. One, first, organic, and, two, I really wanted to [get] more consistency on how we offer EQIP around the country, and this was a wonderful opportunity to try and do that as well.



Ted Quaday/ORRF

Do you have any initial sense from your seat how it's gone? Is it meeting your expectations do you think?

I'm getting anecdotal reports that in some states, people are just blowing their doors off. I'm not hearing about areas where it's not going well. I'm just hearing about areas like California where there is lots and lots of people. In fact, I would have to ask you a question: What are you hearing?

Well, I'll just say that we're really generally happy with the way it's gone. I think there is a lot of learning curve. There are a few areas where there is still real foundation work to be laid, such as organic technical assistance. But in general, I think the thing has been hugely successful. I mean, the number of sign-ups looks like we have a really good chance of using the \$50 million allocation.

Yes, that brings a point up. We designated \$50 million nationwide, then we used our regular EQIP formula and said: Okay, New York, you get a dollar. Virginia you get \$1.50. Wisconsin, you get \$0.75. There was a fair way to distribute the money. Now, say Missouri doesn't use all of their allocation. What I planned to do was, I reserved the right that if Missouri has \$100 thousand left over, California needs \$100 thousand, I'm going to shift the money and try to effectively use all \$50 million of this.



Grower Comment on Rules Crucial

TRANSCRIPT

What I care about is that these American conservation programs have something in them that a producer — regardless of what they grow or how they grow it — can point to it and say:

You know, I'd like to try that on my place.

What do you think about 2010? Is it going to happen again?

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. The only question is to what extent, how much money we can rustle up for it.

Which depends on appropriations in Congress.

Appropriations. You bet. A lot of it will be based upon what kind of response we got this time. What we're seeing is there was a really good response. I'm going to be honest with you. I really don't care if you're an organic farmer. I don't care if you're a conventional farmer and you sprinkle glyphosate on your cereal in the morning. What I care about is that these American conservation programs have something in them that a producer — regardless of what they grow or how they grow it — can point to it and say: You know, I'd like to try that on my place. When we did not have that for organic farmers, that was wrong. Now, we're going to have offerings for organic producers and natural producers and conventional producers. Any kind of producers. These American programs have to be open to American producers. That would be my goal.

Fairness in opportunity is the key thing for you.

Absolutely. The other part is structural. NRCS, in many cases, does not know a lot about organic. So, we have a couple of items on that. Right now, every one of the NRCS technical standards and specifications is out for public comment. We have specifically asked for feedback on: does this standard address the needs of organic producers? Of course, we're also asking many other things. Can this be used for climate change, mitigation or adaptation? Is energy a component in this? We're asking a variety of questions, and certainly one of them is organic. But, if you've got every NRCS standard and specification out right now for public comment, they're all open, and I hope the organic groups take advantage of this and let us know how we can strengthen these for organic. To tell you the truth, if you want to institutionalize something in a bureaucracy, you put it in

the standards and specifications that 3,000 field officers are going to refer to every time they work with a producer.



Regulations Evolve for Organic Producers

TRANSCRIPT

In your mind, do you think there are any inherent conservation attributes of organic systems? Any aspects of being in the organic regime that necessarily meet certain conservation goals?

Sure, sure. Absolutely.

Can you talk about that a little bit?

Yeah. You tell me if I'm wrong, but isn't one of the requirements of organic is a buffer around the field?

Yes.

Okay. We have a standard called field borders. Right? So, you've got this buffer. Imagine this green picture frame around your field – what a wonderful way to provide habitat for pollinating species! Instead of just using a regular grass species, why can't we have some forbs or some native flowers in that grass species, and we can provide pollinator habitat around every organic field. What a wonderful way to filter off nitrogen and phosphorous if there's a run-off occurring. I think there's a lot about organic that does meet water quality, air quality, wildlife goals that are already existent.



Ted Quaday/OFRF

The 2008 Farm Bill, in the research title, provides more funding for organic research and it specifically mentions a new purpose for that funding in terms of studying the conservation and environmental outcomes of organic agriculture. Do you have a sense of what research questions pertaining to organic systems should be a priority for the agency? What would be a value for the agency to learn about those conservation effects?

Well, there are several. A couple of the big ones would be climate change – not only mitigation but adaptation. How we do need, or what do we need to do to help producers adapt to climate change? That's a huge one. The second one is energy. What can organic farming systems do to help us reduce our reliance on other foreign sources of energy? I think the pollinating aspect, for pollinating species, is going to be huge. I'd like to know how organic stacks up against other farming systems as far as emissions, air emissions. I mean, obviously you are not going to have VOCs going up, Volatile Organic Compounds. What about the methane production? NOx (nitrogen oxide) emis-



Organic Practice Feeds Conservation Ethic

TRANSCRIPT

sions? ... Let's look at the emissions aspects of organic farming systems. Water quality. One of the things I want to do is move this agency towards addressing some of the big water issues. Primarily, or the one that I think of a lot, is the Gulf of Mexico hypoxic area, where we have the oxygen deprivation to the point where life cannot survive caused by the enrichment of nitrogen and phosphorous coming down the Mississippi River. What do we need to do in the Upper Mississippi Basin to have an effect when that water exits to the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana? I'd like to see how organic systems can assist in that. Water quantity. How does organic use water? We've got areas of vast expanses where we have to be very cognizant. The California drought is one. The Ogallala Aquifer, which spreads across several of the Great Plains states [is another]. So, water quality. Water, air, wildlife, soil erosion, sediment. There's a plethora of ways we'd like to know more about how organic fits into this.

I think there's a lot about organic that does meet water quality, air quality, wildlife goals that are already existent.

As we do that research and quantify those things it will hopefully validate the premise of organic philosophy in terms of conservation of natural systems. If so, how do you think that would feed back into the policy level in terms of encouraging more organic farming?

Good feedback in a couple ways. NRCS is applied technology. We are not a research agency. We are going to take what ARS or the land grants or the other university systems give us as research and then try to translate that into a common sense, on-the-ground application. One of the ways we would do that is through our standards and specifications. We would want to use the research findings to inform our field delivery system. Another way would be through the ranking criteria. Every state has ranking criteria upon which you look at EQIP applications, for example. You have "X" dollars in a county and you take the highest ranked applications that meet the identified conservation needs in that county. So, I think that's an area. You know, I forgot to mention one key area, where I would love to have more information ... on organic and that's weed control, particularly when we look at invasive species. Invasive species are decimating the productive areas of this country. Particularly out West. They are taking money right out of the rancher's back pocket.

Star thistle, for example?



Yes. Well, star thistle, leafy spurge, knapweed, there's gobs of them. Cheatgrass, that's a real pain in the rear end too for fire hazards and what not, but we've got to find out how organic can do a really good job of controlling invasives. A lot of us may drive by a field and see a field of blooming purple flowers or yellow flowers and say: gosh, isn't that beautiful? What you're

Separate Organic Pool Will Stick

TRANSCRIPT

really looking at is ecological death. Wildlife won't eat it, birds won't nest in it, cows won't eat it, it's just terrible. Invasive species are just huge on our priority list.

In terms of how the policy level and the program structure can deal with recognizing multiple benefits, one of the things that we've observed in getting into the EQIP Organic Initiative and trying to get organic farmers more familiar with these programs is that the programs seem to have a tendency of sort of separating things out: water quality from soil quality, etc. Is there a way that the programs can evolve to recognize stacked benefits, to borrow a phrase?

Right. I think so. One of the things we did in Montana and one of the things, based upon stakeholder feedback and working with the various NRCS entities is: in some of the states for the ranking criteria you would pick something like water quality. But, you would have a person who has a rangeland and a person who has a



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pasture and a person who has crops all being ranked together. I think it would be much fairer if we took all the range applications, all the pasture, all the crop, if we sequester by land use. So, if you're looking at all crop land, what do all these crop land things do for wildlife, water quality, and air quality; and we make our decision based on land use rather than lumping a crop guy against a range guy, against a forest guy.

I think that's a more sensible approach and would be one of the first steps I would take, because depending on what the priority is, a land use will overpower the others and that land use may change as you move across the country. What we did in Montana was ... we had doz-



ens and dozens of different ranking criteria, but essentially you had range, irrigated land, cropland and forest land. Then, we had a category called “multiple natural resources.” So, if a producer had range and crop and forest, he or she could go in that category. Every county had those five basics. Then, in every county, we asked them to work with their local people and prioritize the critical item in their county. It might be salinity in a county. It might be wildlife. It might be water quality. It might be wind erosion. It varied all over the place. But, we did break it down by land use instead of lumping everybody into one giant pool. Essentially, that’s what I am also talking about for organic. This organic thing was a separate pool just for people interested in that particular offering, and we’re going to have to keep that like that because we offered percentages above our normal cost share because of the costs of transitioning.

Beyond the EQIP Organic Initiative, what do you see as the trajectory of organic agriculture within NRCS as a whole?

Well, I would say it’s an upward trajectory. From what I have read, you know, the organic sector [has had] some setbacks, but it’s still continuing to grow. If NRCS wants to meet the needs of the producers, then we’re going to have to pay increasing attention to this. We’re going to have to train our people on it. We’re going to have to make sure that organic producers know the door is open in every county; that they can walk in there and be served. ... The ship is not going to turn on a dime. It’s going to take us awhile, and we need a little patience as we restructure our organization to better serve all clients.

How about the Conservation Stewardship Program, how is that going to relate to organic?

Well, I would think that organic producers would fare very well in the Conservation Stewardship Program. It is a revamped program. Congress in the 2008 Farm Bill corrected a lot of the problems we had with the old CSP. It’s going to be offered in every county. It’s going to be an acreage-based program. It’s going to be based on environmental performance. We have ... what I think it is a pretty good little Conservation Measurement Tool developed that’s going to inform this process. We hope to have our first sign-up next month. We’ve got to work out some things with the Office of Management and Budget and how we do the rule and funding aspects, but hopefully we will have a sign-up next month. [Editor’s note: the 2009 CSP sign-up was initiated in mid-August, 2009.] The first one I don’t think is going to be perfect. We’re going to learn from the first but then subsequently, we are going to improve. Every program I have had any experience with has gotten better over time as you learn things that don’t work and things that do work. My first one might be a little messy, but we’ll get over that, and we would really want to achieve the vision of the people who created this program. Mr. Harkin of course is the person on the CSP. We would want to do every-

thing we could to achieve that vision, where ... we’re rewarding producers for environmental benefits. And it’s a little bit different. There’s additionality needed in the Conservation Stewardship Program. It’s in the statute. We will carry that out. I believe you’re going to see a program a couple of years from now that’s going to be the flagship.



I think looking at things holistically is a big piece of where we want to go in the future. We want to have science inform that, and the research that is going to be beefed up on organic could certainly help us do that.

Will organic management be recognized directly as an enhancement or a category?

Under that particular name? Organic? I don't think so. ... We're looking at things like conserving crop rotations. What is the environmental benefit of a conserving crop rotation? Now, we know that organic producers, some of them have very long extensive rotations that rebuild soil health and those folks are going to rank out really well. We're not going to call it an organic crop rotation, but it's a resource conserving crop rotation. But, an organic producer would fit well with that. To go back to the previous example of the field border, that producer who has that is going to rank really well on probably run-off, you know, filtering out nutrients. I think that organic producers will rank high just because of the way that they're farming. [Editor's note: NRCS has added organic-specific enhancements to CSP.]

Do you see a sort of trend or a paradigm shift perhaps in conservation practice as a whole moving from arresting the physical movement of soil, kind of the original purposes of the Soil Conservation Service, to encompassing ecological systems and biological functions? Is that fair to say?

Yes. I think one of the key things — if you look at what we have done in the area of range science — the agency is moving towards developing ecological site descriptions, where you'll look at a certain range land site and what our scientists are determining is what would have been the vegetation there prior to us, the settlement of the West. We've got a thing called the Similarity Index where you can go out and assess what a rancher has as far as their plant species makeup and how similar is that to what was there prior. We have this Similarity Index and you can actually monitor and track how your range land changes through management over time, and your goal is to get towards a higher Similarity Index rating where you want it to be more under the natural conditions, where we would actually be sequestering more carbon. You know, it'd be better for wildlife, productivity for the animals as well. I think looking at things holistically is a big piece of where we want to go in the future. We want to have science inform that, and the research that is going to be beefed up on organic could certainly help us do that.



Boots on the Ground is Key

TRANSCRIPT

Climate change keeps coming up. Do you see that as becoming an overriding consideration for the agency?

There's no question that climate change is going to be a huge workload, a huge issue, a huge opportunity for not only NRCS but agriculture. The House has passed their version [of carbon cap-and-trade]. The Senate will take it up. In some way, shape, or fashion, we will be addressing climate change, and I think



Ted Quaday/OFRF

these conservation programs could be a huge impact for our producers, a beneficial impact. But, I will be real honest with you. The problem that we have at NRCS is that for the last several years, we've said that we can do all this extra work without any extra people, and there comes a point in time where the butter can only be spread so thin on the bread until it starts tearing. We're at that point. If we do not get more boots on the ground, if we do not have the capability to enter into cooperative agreements with organic groups and other sustainable groups and farmer groups, there's going to be a limit to our impact. I mean, it's nice to talk about the wonderful opportunities and how great things will be, but I'm going to tell you the secret: Keebler elves do not come out at night and do this work. It takes qualified men and women, working with producers to get this work done. That's where our deficit is right now: it's having the actual qualified people on hand in those field offices to do this work. That's what I'm hoping to address in future budgets.

Is it also a matter of the type of qualifications that they have and the ability to integrate these ecological issues? In terms of an increased capacity, is it just the sheer number of boots on the ground, or is it also the type of boots they're wearing.



Obviously, it would be both. But, my primary consideration right now is the quantity of it. There are a lot of young people, or people of all ages, coming out of colleges right now. This would be a grand opportunity for them. There are a lot of people who are in agriculture, who have these skills that this would be a great opportunity for. We would have to keep a weather-

Soil Data Helpful in Climate Change Analysis

TRANSCRIPT

eye on both of those things, and you're right -- the qualifications are just as important as the quantity and we would have to structure it that way.

Can you talk about the actual funding levels that the administration is proposing, because that seems contrary to what you are saying.

Well, you have to understand that the budget that went forward this year was essentially prepared prior to this administration. The House has already acted on that. I believe the Senate, this is the week of July 6. As we talk, the Senate will be doing what they are going to do this particular week. What I am referring to is future. We have the opportunity now to advance certain initiatives for the preparation of next year's budget. That's essentially what I am talking about, a prospective look.

It's going to be great because a lot of our field people will now be working with an organic producer and seeing things through their eyes.

We talked a little bit about how organic might fit into that vision of addressing climate change. What's your sense of the science relative to carbon sequestration specifically in organic systems?

Well, obviously we need to know more but we do have good soil data. NRCS has a lot. One of the huge assets that NRCS has is its databases, particularly of soils. We have a lot of information, and there's various little acronyms within that I won't bore you with, but we've got to organize around this principal, which we are not at present. One of the things I do plan on doing is creating a climate change entity, at least at this level, that's going to pull multi-disciplines together in one unit, that's going to kind of take the lead -- working with the researchers, with the groups, with whomever -- to inform our processes so we do a better job on this. We have a lot of data, but it's dispersed right now. You know, it's in these different places, and we've got to assemble it and make it useful for any effort in climate change. Right now we are data rich and information poor. We have gobs of data, we've just got to organize it so it informs our process.



White Urges Participation in Process ...

TRANSCRIPT

Do you think there's an opportunity with the cohort of producers that are coming in through this Organic Initiative in EQIP to use that as a field experiment across the states and do those kinds of comparisons?

Oh yeah. Plus there is no question that this first cohort of EQIP people, producers who are interested in this, who will get the contracts. We're going to be looking at them closely as they move through these contracts and learning from them. It's going to be great because a lot of our field people will now be working with an organic producer and seeing things through their eyes. See, our mission is not to tell a producer what to do. Our mission is to help the producer accomplish what the producer wants to do, and hopefully we will move down that pathway in this effort. The other thing is, in the Conservation Stewardship Program, there is a small piece of that reserved for demonstration research farms. We're going to be asking very specifically for people who are interested in areas that we want to learn more about. Of course, one of those will be pollination. The impact of how we can help habitat for pollinating critters. That will be an opportunity as well.

Wrapping up here, what advice do you have for the organic community with respect to building a great long-term relationship with NRCS?

You know, I think at the national level, the door at NRCS is certainly open to the major groups. Certainly you look at the sustainable groups, the organic groups. We've been trying to meet with them, have teleconferences, find out what's on their mind and we would do that with any group. Whether you're forestry groups, ag groups, conservation groups, sustainable groups. Like I said earlier, the mission is to make sure that these American conservation programs offer things of interest to American producers. I think at the state level, some of the key things that could be done would be for individuals or groups to contact the NRCS State Conservationist and say: "Hey, I'm interested in being on the State Technical Advisory Committee." That way, you can have input into the state ranking systems and how we operate the programs at the state level. I think in your own county, there's a thing called a Local Work Group. By regulation, it's chaired by the local Soil and Water Conservation District, and in the 2008 Farm Bill, Congress made that Local Work Group a sub-committee of a State Technical Committee. What that means in practicality is that ... you have an exemption from FACA, from the Federal Advisory Committee Act. What that means is that, you don't have to be a government employee or affiliated with a government agency to offer your opinion. An organic producer in your home county can go to this meeting and say: "Hey, I think we need to do this in EQIP or the wildlife habitat or the farm land protection program." From the local level to the national level, the door is open if people want to walk through it.



But, most of our field people are really decent, honorable people who want to do what's right. Our learning curve has to increase, and I would ask for the gift of time.

So, get involved. That's a good message. ... Beyond that advice, any particular requests you have of the organic community? Any messages you'd like to send?

My big request for the organic community is patience. Large organizations take time to change. We are embarked upon a dramatic change, and if things don't work out in the first hour, hold on a second, the next hour is coming. I would plead for time and understanding. A year from now, two years from now, we should be in a much different position. The goal is to help producers, to work with producers, not to dictate to them but to provide them with alternatives, to look at their land base. We're pretty darn good at that. We need to learn more about organic. But, most of our field people are really decent, honorable people who want to do what's right. Our learning curve has to increase, and I would ask for the gift of time.



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