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FarmAid Policy Panel Discussion

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Keeping the Family Farm in Organic Farming

At NOFA-NJ, we have a creation myth about how we came to be: Consumers and farmers sat around a picnic table at the Watershed Farm and had a discussion about how they wanted food to be produced. Together they helped define a new relationship, and built a community around the concept that we all have a stake in our food system.

Consumers wanted food raised without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers, humane treatment of animals, and no genetically modified organisms, antibiotics, sludge or irradiation.

Farmers wanted a fair return for their efforts, and relief from the risks of pesticide use, which fall disproportionately on farmers, farm families and farm communities.

Organic agriculture is one of the great success stories. It is a real demonstration of the power of the marketplace to create a reward system for the benefits organic farms deliver: sustainable farms, healthy food, clean water, enhanced biodiversity and greater energy efficiency. From Pennsylvania's organic dairies to New Jersey's Community Supported Agriculture farms, organic has given family farms new life and beginning farmers incredible opportunities.

1. America wants organic food from family farms, as local as they can get. A decade of double-digit growth has pushed organic out of niche status, yet U.S. policy makers have been slow to recognize the benefits of organic farming for both producers and consumers. That needs to change.

2. Organic farm systems use local methods and materials for fertility, seeds, livestock feeds and more. Their diversity will help keep both the family farmer and the American food system independent. The conventional "get big or get out" approach to agriculture and rural development does not help family farms or local foods systems and needs to change.

3. The domestic organic supply pipeline is not ready to fill the demand. New policies and programs are needed so that the organic opportunity is not outsourced away from America's family farms by Wal-Mart and other outlets.

Growing the supply of domestic organic production from sustainable family farms has to start with research and development of organic methods, education for organic producers, and support for producers willing to make the change. Farm Bill recommendations from the Organic Farming Research Foundation and the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture include:

- Fair share funding for USDA research, education and data collection specific to the organic sector. At 3% of all U.S. retail food sales, organic is now receiving only about .5% of federal expenditures on these programs. Better yet, let's fund organic according to its potential to deliver environmental and health benefits and a living wage for family farmers.
- Organic standards need to be kept high--and enforcement strengthened--so customers continue to support the organic market and farmers continue to receive a premium for organic products.
- Organic certification cost share needs to be funded so it remains available to farmers nationwide. The cost of organic certification shouldn't be a barrier to entering the organic market.
- We need to ease the risk of the three-year transition to organic with a combination of financial assistance, income insurance and other innovative programs until supply and demand are balanced.
- We need focused programs, appropriately funded, for to the transitional and beginning organic farmers who have unique needs that aren't being met. Education and technical assistance should integrate the knowledge of experienced organic producers and use them as mentors. When it comes to organic, at least for now, farmers almost always know best.
- And we can't leave our founding mothers and fathers on their own. They need technical support too, easy access to conservation cost share programs appropriate to their production systems, and help developing local and regional markets for their inputs and outputs.