



# ORGANIC FARMING RESEARCH FOUNDATION

## Making the Case for Funding the Organic Production and Marketing Data Collection Initiative: Stories from Farmers

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In the last Farm Bill, Congress provided \$5 million in one-time, mandatory funding for the Organic Production and Marketing Data Collection Initiative. This money will provide badly needed funding to jumpstart efforts at USDA to collect agronomic, economic, and statistical data on the US organic industry. OFRF is urging Congress to continue to prioritize USDA organic industry data collection efforts through appropriations requests and targeted work with USDA agencies. Below are anecdotes from organic farmers who have been directly impacted due to a lack of organic industry data, or who have benefited from existing data about the organic industry.

### Iowa

From Angela Jackson  
PrairieSun Organic Farm – organic grassfed beef and vegetables  
Sioux City, IA

Angela's endeavor to get started in organic farming was a nightmare. The USDA FSA office had no data or information on organic farming. She had to educate the loan officer on everything. The USDA NRCS officer who did her farm plan had very little knowledge of organic farming practices and had never worked with an organic farmer before. Her local banker thought organic meant "natural" and had no idea what organic was. From the beginning, it took her over 9 months of collecting her own data from various resources to turn over to these individuals in order to get a beginning farmer loan to start organic farming in Sioux City, IA. She felt like she had to do their job for them and teach them what they should have already known. But it was not their fault, they had no idea where to turn for current, valid information on organic production and market data. Ultimately she got her loan and land, but it was a very arduous process that should have not been that difficult. It clearly shows that the USDA and agriculture loan lending institutions still do not know what organic markets consist of.

### Minnesota

From Atina Diffley  
Organic FarmingWorks, LLC – organic farming consulting  
Founder, Gardens of Eagan – organic vegetables  
Farmington, MN

Information about the organic industry was helpful to Atina when she successfully fought condemnation by a crude oil pipeline across her organic

vegetable operation. She used it to show the growth and demand in the industry, to substantiate why the loss of an organic farm would be greater than the loss of a conventional fungible commodity crop farm.

### **Idaho**

From Krista Lucero  
Morning Star Organic Farm – organic dairy  
Richfield, ID

Krista and her husband Ed applied for credit so that they could transition to organic. They had been using organic practices prior to that, but needed to use organic feed in order to be able to certify. The bank denied them credit because they said there was no data to support the existence of an organic market or claims that organic milk had a higher price than conventional milk. Had it not been for private funding, they would not have been able to transition.

After they were certified, they wanted to get their farm appraised, and the appraiser would not recognize their farm as having more value because it was certified organic, as opposed to neighboring conventional farms. The appraiser cited a lack of data about the organic industry and lack of information about the value of organic products as the reason.

### **California**

From Wendy Larson  
Big Tree Organic Farms – organic almond growers cooperative  
Turlock, CA

The biggest challenge currently for organic almond growers is that they don't get the same support as conventional almond growers do. Almonds are well tracked, well supported, and there is lots of good data from the Almond Board. But they don't keep specific data on organics, specifically how much is being grown organically in California by weight, and the amount of organic almonds by weight being imported. Also, the bill of lading accompanying imported almonds does not indicate if the almonds are organic or not. Currently, the dollar amount of almonds being grown domestically vs. imported is tracked, but since there is a huge disparity in prices between organic imported almonds and organic domestically grown almonds, that information is limited in its usefulness.

The need for these numbers became apparent when several food manufacturers recently blamed a lack of domestic organic almonds as the reason for their purchase of imported organic almonds. This was not, in fact, the case – organic almond growers in California did not run out of supply, but the food manufacturers chose to buy the imported almonds because there was a price differential. However, due to a lack of data about the domestic supply of organic almonds, growers could not demonstrate that the claims of the food manufacturers were wrong.

Data about production (pounds not dollars) can also help grow the industry. Without good data about the availability of domestic organic almonds, food manufacturers are hesitant to develop

new organic products with organic almonds. This is likely true across the board because sourcing organic ingredients can be challenging.

This issue was specifically a problem when a manufacturer from the UK was considering opening an operation here, and wanted to buy local, California organic almonds – she wanted the statistics on production, but the CA Almond Board doesn't track organics, so they vastly underrepresented organic almond production because they had no clue. This lack of information can be very harmful to organic producers.

From Jose Guerra

California Coastal Rural Development Corporation – financial development corporation providing loans and other financial services to farmers on CA Central Coast  
Salinas, CA

Farm lenders who process loan applications from beginning farmers or small scale farmers often have to rely on price data from either the County Cooperative Extension office, or to crop based commissions, or use industry or federal data in order to make future income projections that will determine the ability of the loan applicants to pay back the money they borrowed. Beginning farmers have no history of farming and thus no records to refer to. Small scale farmers will usually have records for total farm sales but won't have records for individual crops.

With organic crops, price data is not consistently tracked and can be difficult to determine. County Cooperative Extension offices does not have price info for all organic crops, and organic crops tend to be more specialized by variety, with certain varieties of the same crop claiming a much higher price than other varieties. This situation is less common for conventional crops. This situation is similar for other sources of data. If there is no organic price data available, lenders will try to base their income projections on other clients, but if they can't do this, they have to base their income projections on the conventional price data.

Overall it is more difficult to get organic price data than it is to get conventional price data. Smaller farmers, who tend to be organic, have a harder time accessing credit as a result. Lenders do try to work with farmers, but they also need to make good lending decisions and don't want to get the farmer into a situation where they can't repay a loan.

## **Hawaii**

From Al Santoro

President, Hawaii Cooperative of Organic Farmers  
Poamoho Organic Produce – organic tropical fruit  
Waialua, HI

In Hawaii, no one knows what or how to size the components of the organic industry: numbers, size, acreage, crops, volumes, prices, locations, etc. This problem exists for several reasons: 1) there are about 6 USDA certifiers operating in the state; all consider organic data to be proprietary; 2) the Hawaii Department of Agriculture (HdoA) considers itself to be a “regulatory” agency, not an “advocacy” agency and does not use its resources to collect data or

identify problems or solutions. All organic farmers must report both “inputs” and “outputs” for their annual certification, yet this output/production” data remains unshared and unavailable for public analysis/use. On the upside and only through personal intervention, USDA will be conducting a survey of organic farms in Hawaii in May ‘09. This is a great opportunity but Hawaii grower groups are still not sure what the data points will be or how the data will be either shared, updated, or maintained in the future.

### **North Carolina**

From Beverly Hall

American Indian Mothers, Inc – advocacy group working with Native American women farmers in North Carolina

Three Sisters Farm – organic farm

Shannon, NC

Three Sisters Farm has been using organic practices since they started, but it took Beverly 10 years to become certified. She tried to get certified through numerous state and university organizations, but at each one, she was given incorrect information about organic, discouraged from seeking organic certification or even using organic practices, and otherwise met with very little help and dismissive attitudes. One official told her that if he kept telling her she couldn’t or shouldn’t become certified, she would eventually stop coming back. Her county Cooperative Extension Agent actively discouraged organic farming practices and was very unsupportive of organic. Others told her that organic “wouldn’t work” for her. Beverly eventually met Cynthia Hayes, who runs the Southeast African American Farmers Organic Network. With Cynthia’s help, she was able to find out how to become certified, and became the first Native American woman organic farmer in North Carolina.

If Beverly had had access to empirical data compiled by the US Department of Agriculture about the organic industry, including yields, crop loss risk, existence of an organic market in North Carolina, consumer demand for organic in the state of North Carolina, she would have been far more equipped to make her case to the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and the other agencies with whom she dealt in North Carolina. As it is, Beverly is immediately at a disadvantage in her dealings with these agencies because of the prejudices against her due to her gender and race. Individuals such as Beverly need to have this information available to them to be able to hold public agencies accountable and to correct erroneous information about organic agriculture that she was provided. Beverly wasn’t asking for a loan, or crop insurance, or any other government support. She merely wanted to participate in the USDA’s own organic certification program so that she could access the organic market, take advantage of organic price premiums, and help bring a greater measure of prosperity to her community.

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