

Report from the Organic Trade Association on First Farm Bill Markups  
May 22, 2007

*This summary of action in the U.S. House Agriculture Committee is excerpted from the Organic Trade Association's "Farm Bill Forum", an OTA member listserv.*

The Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy, and Research considered many, but not all issues before it. Organic gained ground in a number of areas on Day 1.

Credit: Farm Ownership Loans, Sec. 501 Soil and Water Conservation and Protection priority will be given to several groups including: "owners or tenants who use the loans to convert to sustainable or organic agricultural production systems." This language had been supported by OTA and others, and we are pleased that it was included in the bill.

Research: SEC. 7510. ORGANIC RESEARCH.

- Extends the Organic Research and Extension Initiative to examine optimal conservation and environmental outcomes for organically produced agricultural products, and to develop new and improved seed varieties that are particularly suited for organic agriculture.
- Authorizes appropriations of \$25,000,000 for each of fiscal years through 2012 for the Organic Research and Extension Initiative.

This is very important gain for organic in an authorization for appropriations in the future. It is important to note that just yesterday the language called for only \$5,000,000 per year, but OFRF, with support from OTA, worked to raise that number overnight. Representative Cardoza's office was very helpful in this process. Of course authorization is not mandatory funding, but in these tight budget years, this increase in authorized dollars, provided it is in the final bill, will constitute a great opportunity to increase funding for organic research in years to come.

It is also important to note that the bill proposes to change the structure of the research functions at USDA, but the organic language should not be impacted by such a debate about the Department.

Conservation: Section 2101 Conservation Reserve Program: Language is in the bill that "Allows the Secretary to modify a CRP contract to facilitate the transition of CRP land from a retiring owner to a beginning or socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher in order to return some or all of the land to sustainable grazing or crop production. Also allows the beginning or disadvantaged farmer or rancher to make land improvements and to begin the Organic certification process one year before the CRP contract expires."

In addition under EQIP there is a provision: "Conservation Innovation grants shall be funded with \$20,000,000 from EQIP for each of FY 2008-2012. Of this amount, \$5,000,000 each fiscal year shall be used for outreach for organic and specialty crop producers, and \$5,000,000 for each fiscal year shall be available for the comprehensive conservation planning pilot program." OTA has been seeking more recognition for organic farmers to have access to EQIP programs, and this is one element of that access.

"SUBTITLE B - CONSERVATION PROGRAMS UNDER OTHER LAWS.  
SEC. 2201. AGRICULTURAL MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM.

- Adds Virginia as an eligible State.
- Provides for an additional \$20,000,000 in funding should the contingency reserve become available. Otherwise keeps current funding at \$20,000,000.
- 50% of available funds shall be used for construction or improvement of watershed management or irrigation structures, planting trees for windbreaks or improving water quality, and mitigating risk through diversification or various conservation practices; 40% may be used for any activity relating to the previously mentioned activities, including entering ag trade options, futures, or hedging; and 10% shall be used for organic certification cost share assistance.

Most of the other language that was to be considered about changes in EQIP and/or CSP has been deferred to the full committee. Chairman Peterson has expressed a desire to shift funds to EQIP and not to fund new CSP. It is important to remember that Senator Harkin, Chair of the Senate Ag Committee very much favors CSP. The debate about the roles of EQIP and CSP will continue during the entire Farm Bill.