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# Organics promised more access at USDA

Published on 06/15/2009 01:08pm By Ashley Bentley

**(UPDATED COVERAGE, JUNE 15)** Programs and agencies across the U.S. Department of Agriculture will include organics, promises deputy secretary Kathleen Merrigan.



Merrigan focused on the subject during a prerecorded speech played at the annual Organic Summit June 4 in Stevenson, Wash.

"This is the first time that's really been articulated in this direct way," said Ted Quaday, communications director for the Santa Cruz, Calif.-based Organic Farming Research Foundation.

In her speech, Merrigan said organics should not be exclusive to the National Organic Program.

"Each and every agency at USDA should have some engagement with the organic sector," Merrigan said. "Organic can no longer be stove-piped at USDA."

Being a part of the USDA's broader programs could mean big things for organic producers, said Barbara Haumann, spokesperson for the Organic Trade Association, Greenfield, Mass.

"It means when there are programs, organic producers will benefit as well," Haumann said. "There is a lot of data collection on crops, and basically, organic has been ignored in a lot of programs."

As organic becomes more mainstream, it is important for it to be included in mainstream programs within the USDA, said Loren Queen, marketing and communication manager for Domex Superfresh Growers, Yakima, Wash., a conventional and organic tree fruit grower-shipper.

"This kind of acceptance of and engagement with the organic industry across all sectors of the USDA should help consumers feel more comfortable with organics, which should in turn increase demand and consumption of organics," Queen said. "It is critical to build demand as we continue to ramp up organic supplies in the tree fruit business."

Merrigan also commented on another issue on the minds of organic producers who export to Canada: the likelihood of an equivalency agreement

for the two countries' organic standards.

Canada plans to implement a new organic standard in June, and unless an agreement is made, exporters' products would have to meet both U.S. and Canadian standards. Merrigan said she was confident a first-of-its-kind agreement would be made in the near future.

Merrigan also said an era of stronger enforcement for National Organic Program standards is ahead.

"Standards have been under-enforced, (and) there's been abuse of materials, like liquid fertilizer, to misinterpreting to overall not providing responses to common complaints," said Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation. "It's been a glaring weakness the last few years."

All of these issues and initiatives will be points of emphasis for the new director for



the National Organic Program, a program of the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. The department is searching for that person, closing the application process June 30.

## **Merrigan**

During her speech, Merrigan reminded the audience of the June 17 deadline for the Organic Production Survey, a first-ever for the USDA.

"Those results are going to be really essential for the organic sector," Haumann said. "We're very hopeful these results will bring forward-thinking to the sector. It's vital information that we've never had before."

There were high hopes for Merrigan from the organic industry since her nomination by President Obama in February. She was very involved in the inception of the National Organic Program and in the organic industry as a whole.

"Anytime a company or agency leader says full inclusion, that message goes through the ranks," Scowcroft said. "I think this is just a strong message to the entire agency."

A video recording of the speech is available at [www.theorganicsummit.com](http://www.theorganicsummit.com) and <http://ofrr.org>. Merrigan is scheduled to speak again, this time in person, at the All Things Organic trade show and conference June 16-18 in Chicago.