

TN Organic Production Network (TN OPN)

Holeman Building, Ellington Agriculture Center, 440 Hogan Road, Nashville, TN 37204
2:00-4:00 pm Central Time, December 3, 2008

Meeting Summary

I. Attendees:

Dana Saywell, UT Organic Specialist
Annette Wszelaki, UT Vegetable Specialist
Margarita Velandia, UT Ag Economics
Kim Stearman, TN Tech
Dharma Pitchay, TSU
John Rissler, USDA NRCS, Assistant State Conservationist
Pat Turman, USDA NRCS, State Agronomist
Greg Brann, USDA NRCS Grazing Specialist
Regan Sullivan, USDA FSA
Anthony Flaccavento, Appalachian Sustainable Development
Tana Comer, Eaton's Creek Organics
Vanessa Mercer, Crabtree Farms
Cassi Johnson, Food Security Partners
Tom Bible, TN Farmers Coop
Joe Pearson, TFBF
Stefan Maupin, TFBF
Tiffany Mullins, TFBF
Ken Givens, TDA Agricultural Commissioner
Joe Gaines, TDA Assistant Agricultural Commissioner
Dan Strasser, TDA
Jon Frady, TDA
Stratton Bone, TN House of Representatives
Michael Schulz, Field Rep for Senator Alexander's Office

For a complete listing of people interested in the TN Organic Production Network, including those who were unable to attend the December 3rd meeting, please see the TN OPN Roster.

I. Introduction & Presentation: Overview of Organics in TN Dana Saywell

Focus of Meeting: Introduce the TN Organic Production Network initiative, establish the communication network, discuss ideas and prioritize needs.

II. Producers and Industry Roundtable discussions:

A. Supply vs. Demand

I. Throughout the state there is much more demand for organic produce than there is supply.

2. Whole system issue—need supply in order to develop markets, need secure markets to recruit organic producers, need increased organic production to develop infrastructure to support organics (i.e. access into inputs, processing facilities, etc.)

B. Need More Growers

1. Is difficult to find enough growers to supply organic produce.
2. Growers need support to successfully transition to organic production—need training, one-on-one instruction for the first year, and farmer-to-farmer mentoring.
3. Local and regional stories highlighting successes would help ease producer concerns about the perceived risk of transitioning to organic production. Might help compel more producers to consider organics.
4. Need more farmers in food production. Very little of the farmland in Tennessee is being used to produce edible crops.
5. Access to land and labor are other factors that limit organic production

C. Organic Certification

1. Producers need support with the organic certification process. The paperwork is challenging and help is needed to make the paperwork process easier.
2. Producers need organic certification if they want access to larger scale and wholesale markets. Due to high demand for locally grown produce, small scale producers using direct marketing methods often do not need organic certification to access markets.
3. The UT Organic Extension program offers organic certification consultations.
4. TDA administers a cost-share program that reimburses eligible producers 75% of their organic certification expenses up to \$750.

D. Wholesale Distribution Networks

1. Need a wholesale distribution network—there is a real opportunity for mid-size farmers to get connected with large wholesale markets through a distribution network.
2. Need infrastructure to support produce movement through the production and supply chain—refrigerated trucks, packing facilities for washing, grading and labeling products, etc.
3. Access to a distribution network and wholesale accounts could provide catalyst for developing farmer networks. Market access is key for getting groups of growers together.

E. Access to Inputs for Organic Production

1. Significant barrier to organic production in TN—cost of inputs is astronomical due to shipping and transportation costs
2. Opportunity to work with the TN Farm Co-op systems to improve access to inputs for producers?

3. What inputs do producers need access to?
4. Are there a few co-ops that can stock these inputs and then make them available to other growers through the co-op's distribution/ transportation network?
5. Certified organic seedlings are another need of organic producers—most producers grow their own. Availability of organic seedlings is needed to support expanded organic production in TN.

III. ***Policy and Legislative Issues***

A. Organic Standards

Organic Standards need to be enforced and maintained. This is an USDA National Organic Program (NOP) issue, but speaks to the need for increased consumer and producer awareness in TN about USDA NOP.

B. Policy Development

1. It is important to have a policy process that develops strong, succinct points. Collaborate with commodity groups. Cannot fragment the agriculture industry—need one voice.
2. The legislative process is slow, it is best to have any policy worked out at least 4 months before legislature goes into session.
3. Keeping in contact and communicating with legislators at both the state and national level goes a long way. More contact allows for more opportunities for legislative folks to see how they can help. Include legislators and aids/field reps in newsletters, events and beyond. If there's an issue affecting growers, call and talk about it.
4. Explore opportunities to work with city and county governments to develop policies and programs that support organic production and developing local food systems. ex. Nashville's Mayor's Green Ribbon Committee; Woodbury County, Iowa
5. Need for land transition programs in TN, like the Farm Link programs in other states, that support the transition of farmland from retiring farmers to new farmers.

C. Farm Bill

1. Many discretionary programs come after the Farm Bill passed—keep the legislature engaged.
2. Need representation to get money for TN from the Farm Bill appropriations process.
3. What Farm Bill programs are available to support organic production?

D. What can we learn from other states?

1. Is there any state that has a magic bullet for policy for organic production? Or states we can learn from—Vermont? Maine?

2. What are FSA and NRCS counterparts doing in other states? What programs, resources, model programs/policies are they aware of that support and advance organic production?

IV. **Department of Agriculture Programs**

A. USDA NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

1. This program is implemented through conservation practices/BMPs developed by the State Technical Committee. Currently there is not any organic representation on this committee but there is the opportunity to get involved. In the past, organic producers have not come forward to ask for EQIP money. NRCS is willing to work with organic producers but need landowners to identify needs.
2. Farm Bill, Section 2 (p.142): for payments related to organic production/transition to organic production, there is a \$20,000/year limit or \$80,000/6 year limit. If a producer is pursuing organic certification, they must be in compliance with USDA NOP to receive payments. Funding supports the increased costs, such as inputs and labor, up to 75-90%.
3. Several other practice standards related to: pest management (such as row covers, handpicking, beneficial planting, etc.), fertility (soil tests, input tests, cover crops, mulching), irrigation (water conservation, water catchment), and composting (such as bins and pads) all potentially fit under the EQIP program. These various practices could potentially be packaged into a system that could benefit organic producers.
4. Program standards are revised every 5 years, but can be adjusted if needed.

B. TN Dept of Ag

1. Tennessee Agriculture Enhancement Program (TAEP)—cost share for specialized equipment expenses, irrigation, greenhouses, marketing materials, etc.
2. TN Natural Beef—a marketing program under development to encourage producers to finish and sell beef in-state. Label will require no antibiotics, no hormones, and no mammalian by-products. TDA will conduct an on-farm audit to ensure producers in the program meet these criteria.

V. **Organic Research Priorities**

A. Research Needs

1. There are lots of needs—need to have a separate, more in-depth conversation.

2. High tunnels and how to use them more effectively and efficiently is one area where research is needed.
3. Economic research—what is the demand for organic in TN?
4. Learn from production solutions from previous generations?

B. Opportunities for Collaboration

1. Potential research collaborations could include cover crops, managed ecosystems and high tunnels.
2. Universities need producer support to be competitive when applying for grants.

VI. **Next Steps**

A. Continuing the Conversation

1. Explore interest for meeting regionally throughout state and/or in disciplinary areas—work in more focused subgroups to get things done.
2. Consider once or twice a year having a large statewide event to network, connect and highlight/tour innovative programs in TN. This type of event could give statewide credibility to the TN Organic Production Network. ex. the regional farm tour events in North Carolina
3. Develop success stories. Agriculture is fluctuating right now, with drought, increased fertilizer prices, etc. and producers are more willing to try to something new.
4. The TN Production Network can serve as an umbrella organization for bringing together groups and projects working on different aspects of organic production issues, binding/knitting things together and bringing everyone together occasionally.

B. Follow-Up Items

1. Connect with counterparts in other states to learn about programs, standards and policies to support organic production—*USDA FSA and NRCS*
2. Contact John Rissler at NRCS to provide input for developing standards to support organic producers— *UT Extension, Producers*
3. Conversation with TN Farm Co-op about Organic Inputs—*UT Extension, TN Co-op and others who are interested*
4. If folks come across examples/models for initiatives and programs to develop for TN, send information to Dana to compile—*Everyone*