

Organic Farming

by Steve Hallstrom

Vision

Organic farming will provide important social and environmental benefits while its share of agricultural production continues to increase. These benefits have profound impacts on the health and well being of the people and the lands of Washington State. Through the improved nutrition of organic food, humans will be healthier and health care costs will be reduced. The increases in soil fertility and elimination of toxic inputs will benefit the environment, improving water quality, decreasing soil erosion and providing habitat for a diversity of beneficial plants, animals and wildlife.

Organic farming has developed during the past 20 years from small operations to become the fastest growing segment of agriculture. This phenomenal growth makes it difficult to predict the share and impact organics will have in the next 20 years. While demand for organic foods is quantifiable, the benefits to the State of Washington are not. Yet these benefits express themselves through the improved quality of the social well being and the environment, values held high by citizens.

Actions by the Legislature to support organic farming in the future

Organic production is putting nutrition back in food. Studies by WSU and others show organic food can be more nutritious than conventionally grown food. The challenge is how to maximize this benefit, and further research is needed to achieve this across the diverse agriculture in the state. Organic methods are leading to fruit quality benefits in tree fruit production whereby the percentage of marketable fruit from a major company in the state in 2007/2008 is higher for organic apples without any storage fungicides compared to conventional apples with fungicides. Such examples provide tremendous learning opportunities to improve all of agriculture in the state. Increasing funding for research in seed production, organic soil fertility and crop varieties will benefit organic producers and result in healthier food and safer farming.

Much organic produce is direct marketed. Farmers and citizens benefit from the direct marketing at the popular and growing farmers markets, CSA operations and farm stands. These venues provide the citizens an opportunity to know their farmer and allow the farmer to realize a larger portion of the sales price of the product. Sales at Neighborhood Farmers Markets in Seattle grew 10 fold in 10 years, from \$500,000 in 1966 to over \$5,000,000 in 2006. Total farmers markets in the state doubled in the last 10 years. Increasing support for direct sales of healthy safe organic food keeps farms and the consumer in contact and strengthens the social fabric.

The integrity of organic food production is a major factor in public acceptance. Organic agriculture policy needs to be enforced. The growers are monitored by the WSDA Organic Food Program and other NOP accredited agencies. Enforcement of

the use of “Organic” by non-certified businesses is a public good that should be funded through the general fund.

Organic production exists for many commodities. The commodity commissions should serve and promote the organic producers that pay fees for marketing and research and development.

For some products, organic now represents a 5% or more share of the production in the state. Organic apples and pears will represent over 10% of the acreage by 2009.

Organic tree fruit farming has a high profitability right now, but inputs are going up. Revenue will have a downward turn due to the increased supply of organic tree fruit that has transitioned over the last few years. Marketing and research support for organic produce and processing is needed to secure the longevity of organic industry in our state

Recycling of organic materials is vital to ensure we are not dependant on outside resources and inputs for fertility. Organic farming needs to be able to use compost made on the farm. The current Department of Ecology regulations prevent organic farmers from making their own compost on a large scale, even though they have all the resources to make compost and need to build their soil per organic standards.

GMO contamination is a concern for organic farmers and consumers. WSDA needs to be able to track and notify organic farmers of locations of GMO crops and even add compensation requirement if drift contaminates organic crops. There should be mandatory GMO labeling.

Legislative incentives for organic farming and transitioning to organic farming are needed. A cost share program on state level as exists in Minnesota is an example.

There is a need for keeping land in agriculture, in order to secure the viability of farming for the future. The small scale organic producers need local access to the urban centers, but speculative development makes close-in farmland prohibitively expensive.

Opportunities

Equitable funding. Other WSDA programs are funded with a combination of fees and general funds. However, the organic program is solely fee funded. There is a need for equitability of funding for the state organic programs.

Organic research. WSU can provide research into organic production such as soil fertility, plant varieties, pest control, nutritional quality and seed production.

Education. WSU currently offers a B.S. major in Organic Agriculture. Advanced degrees are available through the normal departmental structure, and a recent survey revealed over 20 graduate students with research projects in organic agriculture. More resources are needed to round out key courses for these students and to help them with intern experiences that will make them more employable by the organic sector.

Farmland preservation. Prime farmland near urban centers can be preserved through taxation and promoting the production of food over other uses.

Marketing and research. Organic has grown and become a significant part of agriculture, our state tree fruit industry specifically. Existing commissions need to be modified to support organic farming, or there needs to be the creation of an organic commission to target funds for organic farmers. A commission is established by the legislature and a commission is a way for the industry to help fund the organic sector.

Environmental benefits. Organic farming protects soil and water for future generations, yet it has to fund its own certification. Organic farming needs the same state and federal support as other areas of agriculture. State adaptation and prioritization of USDA programs such as EQIP and CSP to clearly support the environmental benefits of organic farming is needed.

Green Benefits. Organic offers the 'green' alternative that is being sought by consumers. A carbon credit system for organic farming is needed.

Organic registration. Require all organic operations to obtain organic registration to allow improved enforcement and add funds for education.

Buy Local. Need to ensure there is a local preference from buyers and retailers in our state by providing incentives for choosing Washington organic products.

International trade. State funds to develop organic programs to meet emerging foreign market standards will benefit the large organic producers.

Challenges:

GMO contamination. There should be a ban on GMO crops. If not a ban then all GMO production should be tracked and locations made available to organic farmers.

Organic production is not monolithic. There are differences in the challenges between large and small organic producers. There is organic production in most commodities in the state.

State regulators. Organic farmers are coming up against other state regulations. For example: Department of Ecology regulates commercial composting.

Rising cost of inputs. Transportation costs are one concern. Access to local or regional organic inputs –rather than imports and shipping in from overseas, will be a problem in the future.