

Pasa Sustainable Agriculture April 11, 2023 Organic Program Testimony

Pennsylvania is at a crossroads in the world of organic agriculture. On the one hand, we lead every state in the nation except California and Washington state in sales of organic produce and products. On the other, only 3% of our own PA-based farmers are certified organic. The number of farms that are not officially certified but which adhere to organic practices is higher than this, but the gap remains large all the same. So what can we do about this lost opportunity to capitalize on strong consumer interest for organic products in Pennsylvania and help our own Pennsylvania farmers benefit from this home-grown enthusiasm and demand?

Governor Shapiro's budget for FY 2023-24, unveiled in February, includes several line items that support the continued expansion of organic agriculture in Pennsylvania, a very encouraging sign. One of these is a new Center for Organic Excellence, modeled on the highly successful Center for Dairy Excellence and Center for Poultry and Livestock Excellence. Pulling resources and experts together in a single center can create momentum and focus for advances in organic practices, technical expertise and overall support. Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture's PA Farm Bill already supports the 3-year transition to organic certification through a dedicated program and through grants to growers to help them make this often costly transition.

The center for excellence concept is an important one-stop shop to pull together resources and expertise, including that of long-standing partners like Rodale Institute and PCO. The requested amount for the center in this year's budget is a modest investment in the potential growth of this increasingly important agricultural sector. More organic producers in Pennsylvania will mean more support for farms here, more fresh locally grown farm products, more investment in local communities, and lower transportation and energy costs, meaning fewer trucks on the road and less pollution generated from trucking food in from distant places.

While Pasa is not an "Organic" organization per se, many of our farmer members are longtime certified organic (some from prior to the federal program) and organic farmers are integrated into all aspects of our programs and services. We would love to find ways to leverage existing and future funding to better support these aspects of our work. For example, if an apprentice is looking for a host farm and knows they want eventually to farm organically, we facilitate matches with certified organic farms. This is perhaps the easiest and most effective way to support future organic farmers to ensure they are well-equipped to meet the demands of the organic standards, farming practices, business model, and market opportunities.

Certified organic farmers who are enrolled in our soil health, financial or nutrient density research studies are providing us with important data about organic farms, and what distinguishes them from their conventional counterparts in terms of climate-preparedness, financial viability and consumer health benefits. As these programs expand, we are finding that this mix of conventional and organic farmers are learning from each other and impacting each other's commitment to ecologically sound farming practices.

Perhaps the most poignant aspect of organic agriculture today is its alignment with ecologically sound practices that positively impact our climate change preparedness. Pasa, with a home base in Pennsylvania, is leading a 2,000 farm climate-smart project over 15 states and with 7 tribal nations, spanning from Maine to South Carolina. Many of the farmers we will be working with are certified organic and will be marketing their products as “Climate-Smart”. Organic production is, in and of itself, climate-smart. While there are some improvements to be made with Organic standards with regard to pasture requirements for livestock and soil-based growing requirements for produce, overall Organic means climate-smart and is an important tool in the climate-change mitigation strategy for our growers. The faster we embrace these benefits as a state, the faster our farmers can work to set us up to leverage our existing success and move even further ahead in distinguishing ourselves nationally.

Several new efforts, including House Bill 157 that would create a PA Preferred Organic label at the state level, are part of a growing movement to expand organic agriculture in Pennsylvania and call attention to this important and sustainable set of practices. We applaud the bill’s sponsors specifically for the bill’s language on Page 8, line 24 “(7) Encourage organic production and organic soilbuilding practices that enhance biodiversity, conserve natural resources and contribute to other public and environmental health benefits. And (8) Improve this Commonwealth’s competitiveness in organic agricultural commodities.” And, we encourage the Department of Agriculture to focus their time, energy and resources to this aspect of the bill as it’s highest priority.

Pasa is here to assist in any way we can and we welcome being at the table for these important discussions.