

**Testimony of
Russell Redding, Secretary
Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture
House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee
Informational Meeting
Organic Industry in Pennsylvania
April 11, 2023**

Good afternoon Chairman Pashinski, Chairman Moul, and members of the committee. On behalf of the Department of Agriculture, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to talk about the state of organic production in the Commonwealth.

Pennsylvania's agriculture industry's strength and reach comes from its diversity, with farmers and producers being supported and encouraged regardless of what they are growing, how they are producing, where that production is happening, or who they are.

The diversity of this industry has grown through a long heritage of agriculture in the Commonwealth, which has been built through partnerships, strategic investments, and leveraging our assets and resources.

Being at the Rodale Institute brings part of that history into full focus, as we see what has been built over decades of work advancing science, health, and market development through organic agriculture. Building from the revolutionary work of J.I. Rodale, many dedicated individuals have continued his mission and made Pennsylvania ripe for opportunities in organic agriculture.

Working in partnership with the legislature, the Department already has made investments in organic agriculture through research, technical assistance, and marketing. These efforts, coupled with innovative farmers and processors, committed stakeholders, and soaring consumer demand, have led to substantial growth in the market.

Data from the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 2021 organic survey showed that Pennsylvania farms produced and sold \$1.09 billion in organic commodities in 2021, up 48% from 2019, and the number of certified organic farms increased 7% to 1,125 farms. Pennsylvania currently ranks third in the nation in organic sales and fourth in organic farms, with great potential to continue advancing this sector.

The survey results show the following top commodity groups in organic sales for Pennsylvania in 2021:

- Livestock and poultry - \$730 million, up 63%
- Crops - \$150 million, up 21%
- Mushrooms - \$95.4 million, up 23%

The Commonwealth must continue to give Pennsylvania farmers, producers, and processors support to capture the benefits and opportunities of the organic marketplace, which has grown faster than the ability to meet Pennsylvania consumers' demand. At the same time, that

marketplace continues to get more competitive, and while information is readily available, it can be overwhelming to find trustworthy and reliable sources, and our farmers' time remains incredibly valuable and limited.

Governor Shapiro has proposed the Center for Organic Excellence (Center) in the 2023-24 state budget, which would be a first-of-its kind focused gateway to services and resources that empower and support organic farmers and allow their businesses to thrive.

Establishing a Center means a coordinated, multi-faceted, and strategic effort to invest in and nurture the growth of organic agriculture. It begins with breaking down silos within the Department itself among bureaus that have a stake in the mission, from Food Safety to Plant Industry to Market Development. It adds the ongoing partnerships between the Department and industry partners, like Rodale, Pennsylvania Certified Organic and Extension. The Center is designed to provide outstanding service and resources to farmers, drive innovation and improvement, and serve as a central portal and coordinator to break down geographic and organizational barriers. This Center is a powerful way for multiple farmers, stakeholders, and partners to align around larger strategic initiatives and leverage that shared momentum to meet individual goals.

This Center is modeled after Pennsylvania's other notable Centers of Excellence for Dairy, Poultry and Livestock, and Beef, each of which bring a wealth of knowledge and support to their sectors. These Centers also work in synergy with each other, sharing expertise, resources, and support to strengthen the Commonwealth's agricultural community as a whole.

The goals and resources outlined do not represent the entirety of the Center, because it also requires people, communication, and the ability to be nimble and responsive. To that end, the Department will create an advisory board of farmers, non-profits, scientific partners, and other stakeholders to help guide the programming and resources of the Center and its overall mission.

The Center is a first step in fostering greater creativity and innovation across the organizations by empowering those seeking services, while maintaining central oversight and coordination in areas such as:

Advancing Research

Organic research has been furthered through the Department, USDA, and other sources of funding to partnerships with universities, non-profits, and other stakeholders focused on advancing organic agriculture through research. From Rodale's Vegetable Systems Trial to Penn State's work on controls for Phorid Flies in mushrooms, this work is critical to the future of organic agriculture, farmer profitability, and environmental stewardship.

The Center will work to identify research needs, manage grants, and leverage partnerships and resources to aggressively capture grant opportunities or coordinate grant applications. Additionally, this effort will provide a centralized point to better share information across entities and between the Center and the public.

Increasing Environmental Impacts

Pennsylvania's agricultural community's commitment to environmental stewardship remains a hallmark of the industry, and those in organic agriculture are keenly attuned to this effort. This Center can serve as a conduit to and coordinator with our environmental resource partners, such as Farmland Preservation, State Conservation Commission, and the Departments of Environmental Protection and Community and Economic Development to ensure that organic agriculture is positioned to take advantage of opportunities, information, and resources.

Progressing Business Development

Over the past four years, the Department worked closely with the Rodale Institute to provide technical assistance to producers and processors interested in transitioning to certified organic. The service is free to producers and eliminates a major barrier many farmers face when considering organic for their operation.

Since March 2019, with support from the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, Rodale Institute's Organic Crop Consulting program has achieved the following milestones:

- Currently supporting 4 full-time consultants with pending Certified Crop Adviser (CCA) and IOIA certifications. All team members are agronomists that specialize in a variety of production scopes.
- 136 farmers in Pennsylvania have made a commitment to transition to certified organic production with the help of Rodale Institute Organic Consultants.
- 8,161 acres are currently in-transition to organic, eliminating the use of synthetic fertilizers and herbicides on miles of farmland in the state.
- Farmers that are transitioning to organic run operations on approximately 41,980 acres of land, opening the potential for expanding organic acreage each year.
- Hundreds of direct inquiries have been fielded from farmers and landowners about organic production, increasing public knowledge and awareness of holistic agricultural practices.
- 1,361 acres have been certified organic and 30 farmers have received organic certification as a direct result of our technical assistance program thus far.

In January 2023, the Department competitively awarded two contracts to expand technical support to producers *and* processors. Rodale received one of those contracts, and the second was to Team Ag, in conjunction Kitchen Table Consultants and Pennsylvania Certified Organic (PCO).

Additionally, the Department has partnered with Econsult Solutions to complete an economic impact study on organic agriculture, which will outline opportunities, challenges, and recommendations to accelerate growth in this sector.

This Center can serve as the conduit to these and other business development services, capture needs to better inform future programming, and highlight successes that can be modeled on a larger scale.

Upholding Product Integrity

The proposed Center aims to incorporate the Department's Food Safety laboratory to perform product integrity testing, in partnership with certifiers, farmers, and businesses. Certifiers like PCO randomly have the products they are inspecting tested for pesticides and other residues. Similarly, USDA relies on lab testing of organic foods when responding to complaints from consumers or competitors. Farmers and food processors can utilize this service as a value-added assurance that their products are what they claim they are. Further, the PDA Food Safety Lab can play a role in training additional inspectors that certifying agents will need as the number of organic producers and processors keeps growing. The recently approved USDA National Organic Program Board program changes make significant improvements in product integrity, addressing a multitude of issues. We believe our vision for product testing will complement the National Standards.

Expanding Marketing Opportunities

Pennsylvania's state brand, PA Preferred, is the Commonwealth's statewide branding program for local foods and farms, helping consumers to identify food and products grown and produced by Pennsylvania farmers.

We continue to experience growth in the program through increased membership and increased brand awareness by consumers, as well as increased consumer demand for local and sustainably produced goods.

Long-Term Organic Strategy

An authorized State Organic Program must assume regulatory enforcement responsibility of the USDA organic regulations for all organic farms and businesses operating within its boundaries.

Upon approval by the USDA National Organic Program, State Organic Programs may add more restrictive requirements due to specific environmental conditions or a need for specialized production and handling practices in that State.

Over a dozen states are accredited by the USDA as certifying agents authorized to provide organic certification services to producers and handlers operating in their state. However, there is currently only one State Organic Program: California.

The State of California oversees and enforces the USDA National Organic Program regulations within California in lieu of developing its own state-specific standards. The California State Organic Program provides spot inspections, appeals, sampling and testing, complaint management, investigations and enforcement actions, and civil penalties. All of these would be required of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, too, if we take the formal step of applying to USDA to administer an organic program for the Commonwealth.

The proposed Center for Organic Excellence is an integral step in exploring Pennsylvania's potential and building its capacity to implement a State Organic Program. Given the breadth and scope of work, personnel needs, and regulatory authority required, the implementation of this State Organic Program will take time, consideration, and coordination with external partners like PCO, and other certifiers currently accredited by USDA to be successful.

The investments the Commonwealth makes in organic agriculture are critical to keeping Pennsylvania farmers and businesses competitive in the marketplace, capturing environmental benefits, and growing the vitality of farms. These successes are only possible through partnerships with our farmers, stakeholders, and elected officials.

Thank you to each of you for your investment in agriculture and we look forward to keeping Pennsylvania growing.