

National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board

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March 5, 2008

The Honorable Edward Schafer
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Jamie L. Whitten Building, Room 200-A
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Schafer,

The National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board (the Board) recognizes that organic agriculture is creating growing, value added markets for our industry. In order to better assist the Department's research, extension, education initiatives in this arena, the Board held a focus session on this topic during its October, 2007 meeting.

Briefings to the Board on extramural grant and extension programs and intramural research as they relate to organic agriculture were given by National Program leaders from the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) and the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) respectively. Additionally, representatives from the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) reported how each of these agencies integrated organic agriculture into several of their ongoing economic and statistically analysis. Other federal agencies discussed research needs related to food safety and nutrition. Finally, the Board heard from stakeholders about their ideas for research and other needs.

It is with pleasure that I provide you the Board's summary report and recommendations from this focus session. As always, I remain available to discuss our findings with you at any time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M. A. Massengale". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping 'M' and 'A'.

Martin A. Massengale
Chair

Enclosure:

cc: Chuck Conner, Deputy Secretary, USDA
Gale Buchanan, Under Secretary for REE, USDA
House and Senate Agriculture and Appropriations committee/subcommittees

**National Agricultural Research, Extension,
Education and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board**

**Report and Recommendations from a Focus Session on Organic Agriculture Conducted at
the Advisory Board Meeting held in Washington, D.C. on October 29-31, 2007**

Executive Summary

The National Agriculture Research, Extension, Education and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board commends the leadership of the United States department of Agriculture's (USDA) Research, Education and Economics Mission Area (REE) and its constituent agencies for increasing research, education and extension support for organic agriculture. Specifically, we support the addition of a national program leader in organic agriculture within the Cooperative States Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES). Furthermore, with all of the activity in organic agriculture within REE agencies, we strongly urge the leadership to develop a roadmap of research, education and extension needs for organic agriculture. In addition, a periodic report on "Progress in Organic Agriculture" should be produced so that focus remains on the most important needs. Within higher education, consideration should be given to having a National Needs Fellowship program for organic agriculture. Finally, we enthusiastically support the initiatives of the National Agriculture Library to develop the "Organic Agriculture Clearing House" and the "Organic Roots Database."

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**Report and Recommendations from a Focus Session on Organic Agriculture Conducted at
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I. Report

The National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board has been acutely aware that organic agriculture is a growing market with consumers. As a consequence, the Board asked that it be briefed at the October 29-31, 2007 meeting on the programs within the REE agencies directed at organic agriculture. Intramural and extramural programs in the Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service (CSREES) were covered by Dr. Thomas Bewick, CSREES National Program Leader for Horticulture. Within CSREES, organic agriculture is supported through the Integrated Organic Agriculture Program (at constant funding of \$4.7million since 2004), the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Extension (SARE) Centers, the National Research Initiative (NRI) Managed Ecosystems competitive grants program, and collaboratively through other funded programs in the agency. In addition, Dr. Bewick shared with the Working Group a report prepared in July 2007 by Dawn Thilmany, Interim Program Leader in CSREES for Organics, which examined the investment made by CSREES in research and education for organic agriculture. Dr. Bewick briefly reviewed the plan to add a program leader for organic agriculture, a development as a result of the Thilmany report and strongly supported by stakeholders.

Dr. Jeffery Steiner, the National Program Leader coordinator for organic agriculture research in the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), reviewed the ARS organic agriculture research portfolio and pointed out that there has been a 91% growth in ARS funding of research in organic agriculture since 2002. Topical areas for research include perennial and annual specialty crops, agronomic crops, livestock, pest management, limits to crop productivity, product quality, animal health and food safety.

Dr. David Klurfeld, ARS National Program Leader for Human Nutrition, reviewed the controversy surrounding the comparison between organic and conventionally produced food crops. He concluded that the evidence is still not conclusive that one system is markedly better than another. In addition, the National Agriculture Library, nurtured within ARS, has developed the "Alternative Farming Systems Information Center." Catherine Greene, Senior Agricultural Economist of the Economic Research Service (ERS) pointed out that, where appropriate, ERS has now integrated organic agriculture into all of its programs. For example, in the Food Economics Division, modeling consumer demand for organic food is included; in the Market and Trade Economics Division, research on organic food markets and distribution is covered and; in the Resource and Rural Economics Division, the adoption of organic farming systems is being examined. Ginger Harris, staff member of the USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS), reviewed the inclusion of organic agriculture in the Census of Agriculture. The 2002 Census of Agriculture contained two questions on organic agriculture. The 2007 census has been greatly expanded and includes a section devoted entirely to organic agriculture.

The Board also heard from Mark Lipson, Policy Program Director for the Organic Farming Research Foundation. He complimented the agencies for increasing their support of programs in organic agriculture but urged that funding be increased to support U.S. producers in responding to

market demand and to maximize the environmental, economic and dietary outcomes of U.S. organic production. Finally, Dr. Robert Brackett, Director of the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Federal Food and Drug Administration, HHS, briefly reviewed the food safety issues surrounding organic agriculture. He emphasized that FDA and the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition have not made a distinction between food safety applied to organic and conventionally-produced food products since food safety issues apply to both.

From these presentations and the subsequent discussions, it is evident that organic agriculture resonates with a segment of farmers, distributors and retailers and the consuming public. It is also evident that in the last half decade the Department of Agriculture, particularly through the REE agencies, has begun to address the research, education and extension issues in organic agriculture. The REE agencies have developed awareness of these issues and initiated thoughtful objectives for addressing them. Although there is much more that needs to be addressed on organic agriculture systems, these efforts are greatly appreciated by the stakeholders. The Board commends the REE agencies for taking the initiative to address this emerging and increasingly important segment of the food supply chain and encourages further development of its programs relative to organic agriculture, as well as sustainable agriculture. The following are some additional recommendations for consideration by the REE agencies as they continue to contribute research, education, extension and economic analysis for the future of organic agriculture.

II. Recommendations

A. Scientific and Programmatic Leadership

- 1.** We note the CSREES white paper on the needs of organic agriculture and especially encourage the agency to proceed with haste to fill the recommended position for a national program leader in organic agriculture. This is an essential step forward to address the needs detailed in the white paper. We think that such a position will also strengthen the agency's focus on sustainable agriculture systems (for example, water utilization, carbon footprint, etc.) and will help to link other research activities both in CSREES and in ARS in agriculture production systems and to NASS and ERS on the impact and extent of organic and sustainable agriculture.
- 2.** The Board recommends that the REE agencies cooperatively develop a roadmap for investments to address the issues facing organic agriculture and present this roadmap to the Board at its October 2008 meeting. This roadmap should include broad program objectives, assignment of responsibilities, and time frames for achievement. Such a roadmap seems relevant given the increased attention that organic agriculture is receiving in both the public and the private sector. The roadmap would require that the REE agencies collectively assemble and publish an analytical, integrated, knowledge-growth compendium of "Progress in Organic Agriculture." The first such roadmap should be produced within this calendar year to provide timely guidance for increased investments in research and education for organic agriculture. The analysis should rely on the existing knowledge and data to synthesize trends, understandings, and insights. Such an analysis should take into account stakeholder opinions and recommendations, summarize the current state of knowledge, and suggest future research and education needs. A model for such an undertaking is currently being done in the area of nanotechnology. A National Nanotechnology Initiative (NNI) has been formed across federal agencies to keep the pulse of the federal investment and the state of the science in nanotechnology. It periodically collects, analyzes and publishes data on the

state of the science as a communication vehicle for university researchers, government research and private sector research. We understand that the National Academy of Sciences is revisiting its 1989 report on Alternative Agriculture. The REE agencies, in undertaking this recommendation, should offer to provide information to the NAS study committee and should build upon its findings.

B. Higher Education

3. We recommend that CSREES examine each of its programs in higher education for the opportunity to support organic agriculture. For example, a national needs fellowship in organic agriculture would be appropriate so that there are scientists trained in the subject to fill the needs of the academy, government agencies, and industry. The agency should consider what it might offer to higher education to support the continued development of undergraduate and graduate programs oriented to organic agriculture and sustainable agriculture. This examination should result in specific action items and timeframes for these activities.

C. Information Management

4. We enthusiastically support the efforts of the NAL to further develop the “Organic Agriculture Clearing House,” a national resource for all information pertaining to organic agriculture that will be particularly useful to personnel in Extension (through eXtension) and to organic agriculture producers and researchers. We encourage the NAL to devote resources to the effort so that a full time librarian can be assigned to this task.

5. We encourage the National Agriculture Library (NAL) to continue its unique development of the “Organic Roots Database,” in which full texts of technical reports and bulletins of the USDA published prior to 1942 are digitized and made fully available to the public. Research on agricultural production practices completed prior to 1942 are largely “inherently organic” in nature because the research was completed prior to large scale adoption of chemically-assisted commercial production agriculture. The database can be mined by current scientists investigating organic agriculture so they can take advantage of those data and build upon past research investments.

Work group for Organic Agriculture

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