



Public Hearing on Oversight of the SFY 2021-2022 State Budget as it Relates to Assisting Small- and Medium-sized Farms Compete in the State, National and International Marketplace

Assembly Standing Committee On Agriculture, Assembly Standing Committee On Small Business, Assembly Task Force On Food, Farm And Nutrition Policy, Assembly Subcommittee On Agricultural Production And Technology, Assembly Subcommittee On Agriculture Economic Development And Farmland Protection, Assembly Subcommittee On Micro Business

Hearing Room C, Legislative Office Building, Albany

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The Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York, NOFA-NY, is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization of farmers, gardeners, and consumers working together to create a sustainable regional food system that is ecologically sound and economically viable. Through demonstration, education, and advocacy, we promote land stewardship, organic certification, organic food production, and local marketing. We bring consumers and farmers together to make high-quality food available to all people.

Since 1983, NOFA-NY has been serving the organic and sustainable food and farming community. A year later, we became the first organic certifier in New York State. With the arrival of federal Organic Standards in 2002, NOFA-NY became a USDA-accredited certifier of organic businesses. Today we are the leading organic certification agency in the state, certifying about 1,100 of the over 1,900 organic farms and businesses.

NOFA-NY also maintains a cohesive strategy to support the organic farming community, including small- and medium-sized farms and related small businesses, through technical assistance and educational programming including conferences, on-farm field days, educational videos, policy advocacy opportunities, and online tools and resources.

NOFA-NY has offices in Binghamton and Syracuse and employs 25 staff. NOFA-NY is one of seven northeastern state organizations that work together under the umbrella of the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) – the oldest grassroots organic farming organization in the country!

DEFINING ORGANIC AGRICULTURE AND THE USDA ORGANIC LABEL

NOFA-NY embraces the definition and principles of organic put forth by the international membership organization, IFOAM Organics International,

“Organic Agriculture is a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems, and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic Agriculture combines tradition, innovation, and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and good quality of life for all involved” (Definition of Organic Agriculture, n.d.).

While any farm can adopt organic practices in the United States, the USDA develops the rules and regulations for the production, handling, labeling, and enforcement of all products that qualify for the USDA organic label. National Organic Program guidelines include criteria for soil quality, animal raising practices, pest and weed control, and the use of approved additives (McEvoy, 2019).

“Organic is a labeling term found on products that have been produced using cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. The National Organic Program – part of USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service – enforces the organic regulations, ensuring the integrity of the USDA Organic Seal” (McEvoy, 2021).

The organic label signifies the shared values of consumers, retailers, and farmers and contributes to vital local economies and food systems across the U.S.

CERTIFIED ORGANIC SALES

Nationally, annual organic sales demonstrate increasing demand. The Organic Trade Association (OTA) calculated a 12% growth rate in sales from 2019 to 2020, outpacing the sales growth rate of non-organic products. OTA’s annual survey states, “organic’s reputation of being better for you and the planet positioned it for dramatic growth. In almost every organic food aisle, demand jumped by near-record levels, propelling U.S. organic food sales in 2020 up a record 12.8 percent to a new high of \$56.4 billion” (McNeil, 2021).

As consumers shifted to preparing meals at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, they also opted to choose high-quality organic products.

ORGANIC IN NEW YORK

New York State is consistently a national leader in certified organic production, ranking 3rd in the nation for the number of organic farms (1,321 farms) and 3rd in the nation in terms of acres of certified farmland (323,081 acres) (*2017 Census of Agriculture*, 2019).

NY also leads in organic dairy production as the state with the greatest number of dairy farms (734 certified organic milk producers according to the USDA Organic Integrity Database) and comes in fourth for the quantity of fluid organic milk produced (Perdue & Hamer, 2020).

A 2019 report from the Office of the New York State Comptroller cites that the number of certified organic farms increased by over 60 percent from 2012 to 2017 (*DiNapoli*, 2019). An earlier, organic-specific report from the office of Comptroller DiNapoli restated USDA's promotion of organic farming as a means to reduce erosion and pollution, and improve soil health (DiNapoli, 2016).

With the growth of organic agriculture in the state, NOFA-NY's education and certification services are in high demand!

Organic is a Fit for the NY Landscape, Climate, and Communities

Organic agriculture plays an essential role in increasing resilience to the disastrous impacts of extreme weather events that are becoming more commonplace. Organic agriculture contributes to healthy ecosystems and resilient local food systems - both fundamental to our fight against the climate crisis.

The organic agriculture community is at the forefront of developing and adopting techniques and practices that build soil health. In fact, USDA organic regulations require the use of practices such as crop rotation and cover cropping (Soil fertility, 2021). Healthy soils help mitigate climate change by sequestering soil carbon, preventing soil erosion, and increasing the ability of crops to withstand extreme weather.

NY is home to some of the nation's most beautiful and pristine lakes, and numerous vital streams and rivers. Organic agriculture protects our ground and surface water from pollution by minimizing toxic inputs that are harmful to aquatic life and human health.

By not using synthetic nitrogen fertilizer, organic agriculture mitigates nitrous oxide emissions, a greenhouse gas that comprises half of agriculture's emissions in the U.S. according to the EPA (US EPA, 2015).

In addition to promoting soil health, protecting waterways, and reduced emissions, organic agriculture contributes to more resilient local food systems. For example, during the pandemic small and medium-scale organic farms were able to serve their local communities swiftly and effectively through direct marketing systems like CSAs and

Farmers Markets. Additionally, local organic food production contributes to the rich diversity of NYS products available throughout the state and helps build local economies by keeping dollars local and boosting agrotourism.

STATE-FUNDED PROJECTS

With the funds NOFA-NY received from the 2021 budget, we are upgrading our online tools to serve our organic farmers, businesses, buyers, and sellers in New York State. We are working with a local software development company to create a custom cloud-based database of all information needed to comply with USDA accreditation and certification requirements to streamline certification processes for producers.

To finalize the upgrade and improve upon these features, NOFA-NY is requesting \$150,000 from the 2022 state budget. The USDA organic certification process involves highly detailed paperwork that farmers must fill out each year to maintain their certification. This product will significantly lessen the time it takes for our producers to become and stay certified. We will further develop a mobile responsive web application that enables farmers to enter their farm data literally from the fields. It will also help our certification staff quickly identify and respond to any issues that arise.

During a pilot phase, we will identify additional opportunities for improving usability and further streamlining processes. We're requesting half of the funds for the development of the web application and the necessary security measures. The second half of the funding will be for providing technical assistance for farmers who utilize the new web-application.

	\$75,000 Development of the Certification Web-Application
	\$35,000 for security additions to enable certification applications via mobile phone
	\$40,000 for staff time and contracted development support
	\$75,000 Farmer Technical Assistance
	\$55,000 in staff time for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:1 support and group training • Developing on-demand tutorials
	\$20,000 for hardware, communication, and outreach
TOTAL: \$150,000	

In addition, NOFA-NY has applied state funds to developing an app that connects users with local, organic certified products available for purchase through our Food and Farm Guide. The app also connects growers and producers with our Organic Price Index and Farmers Market Locator to aid in planning and pricing products. Both the guide and price index features are currently undergoing upgrades.

ONGOING PROJECTS

In addition to these state-funded projects, we have several other projects underway that support NYS farms.

We're conducting a **"Feasibility Study to Assess the Capacity for Growing New York's Mid-tier Value Chain."** This study assesses key areas of investment to improve aggregation, processing, and distribution, enhancing access to markets for sustainable and organic small and mid-size producers. The study is being completed in partnership with Amy's Kitchen, Northeast Grainshed Alliance, the Center for Agricultural Development & Entrepreneurship, Regional Access, Food Bank of Central New York, Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance, GrowNYC, and Syracuse University.

The **Long Island Organic Transition Program** helps farmers adopt organic practices through farmer-to-farmer mentorship, technical assistance, and funding to cover certification costs.

The **Soil Health Program** in partnership with NOFA Connecticut, provides farmers with tools and support for on-farm testing, assessment, and management of soil. The program pairs soil microscopy results with on-farm carbon proxy testing to deepen farmers' understanding of soil health and function, enabling them to adopt appropriate soil health practices.

The **Dairy Grazing Support Program** provides farmers targeted tools to help with grazing management, marketing capability, climate resilience, and soil carbon sequestration. Through direct support, participating organic and sustainable farmers receive guidance on reducing farm expenses, building farm resiliency, and expanding marketing opportunities such as "grass-fed" labels.

The **NOFA-NY Policy Program** includes advocacy to state and federal legislators, engaging farmers in policy-making processes, and participating in coalitions that align with our organizational values and mission. Most recently we've been coordinating with federal, state and regional partners, including a USDA-led task force, to respond to the current organic dairy crisis in the Northeast. We're working to find new buyers and markets for farms that are losing their milk buying contracts. Because the recently publicized Horizon Organic contract cancelations are part of a larger trend of decline in small dairy farms driven by milk pricing and consolidation, we're also working to find longer-term policy

solutions to support a thriving organic dairy industry in the state and region (Joyce-Bulay, 2021).

Thank you for this opportunity to share NOFA-NY's work to support sustainable and organic food and farming. We look forward to the State's continued support for our work.

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