NOFA-NY Testimony for Senate Standing Committee on Environmental Conservation Hearing

To evaluate the efficacy of the state's monitoring and management of harmful algal blooms (HABs) and to examine potential legislative solutions.

May 21, 2025

Thank you for this opportunity to share the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York's (NOFA-NY) perspective on opportunities to address harmful algal blooms.

Founded in 1983, NOFA-NY is the leading organization driving the growth of organic regenerative agriculture across New York State. We offer farmer-to-farmer education and technical support to farmers statewide, help connect consumers with local, organic products, and advocate for just and resilient food and farm systems. As a USDA-accredited organic certification body, NOFA-NY proudly certifies about 1,000 of New York's nearly 2,000 organic farms and businesses.

Our state's robust agricultural industry has an essential role to play in not only providing fresh, nutritious food to millions of New Yorkers but also in protecting NY's pristine water bodies and ecologically significant ecosystems.

NY is home to over 30 thousand farms on nearly 7 million acres of farmland. Without appropriate management practices, agriculture can threaten watersheds and pollute drinking water, including causing harmful algal blooms.

However, a significant and growing segment of production in NY is under organic management with over 980,000 organic certified acres currently.[1] **Organic production systems mitigate negative impacts on water bodies by increasing water infiltration of soils, reducing runoff and erosion, and preventing contamination of ground and surface water from synthetic inputs.**

[1] USDA Organic Integrity Database (accessed 5/15/2025): https://organic.ams.usda.gov/integrity/

As climate change brings increasingly frequent and intense precipitation to the northeast, the risk of contamination of our water bodies is also increasing.[2] Heavy rain carries nutrients from fertilizers (mostly nitrogen and phosphorus), toxic pesticides, and herbicides into waterways, contaminating source water and enabling the growth of harmful algae blooms.[3] As we face these increasing pressures, organic farming practices are necessary for farm resilience and protecting water from contamination.

Why Organic Practices

Organic agriculture has led innovations in farming for decades, particularly in the development of climate-friendly, soil-building techniques and non-synthetic farm inputs. Organic soil management systems incorporate practices including maintaining living plants for as much of the year as possible, reducing soil disturbance from tillage or chemicals, integrating cover crops,[4] improved pasture and manure management, and using buffer plantings to reduce runoff and erosion. It is these practices that result in organic farms having more organic matter in the soil, more soil organic carbon, soil-nitrogen, macro, and micronutrients, biological activity, as well as lower compaction and bulk density. These measures of healthy soil indicate that organically managed soil has a greater capacity to absorb water, preventing flooding and runoff of nutrients. When runoff does occur on organically managed land, there is less risk of waterway contamination because it is largely synthetic pesticide and herbicide free and is less likely than chemically farmed land to release nitrogen. Studies have also shown that organically managed soils are less likely to leach nutrients like nitrogen into groundwater.[5]

As leaders in farming practices that are specifically designed to protect and enhance ecosystems, organic farmers hold the solutions to avoiding contamination of our water bodies.

Supporting Organic in New York

Not only does organic farming help protect water quality and build climate change resilience for our food system and the communities that rely on it, organic is also a rapidly growing sector. According to the Organic Trade Association, nationwide organic sales reached $71.6 billion in 2024, marking a 5.2%

[2] US Climate Resilience Toolkit: Northeast https://toolkit.climate.gov/region/northeast
[3] Rodale Institute, “Water Pollution.” https://rodaleinstitute.org/why-organic/issues-and-priorities/water-pollution/
[4] A 2020 study in Northern NY found that a rye cover crop is useful in mitigating runoff and nutrient loss: Griffith, K.E., Young, E.O., Klaiber, L.B. et al. Winter Rye Cover Crop Impacts on Runoff Water Quality in a Northern New York (USA) Tile-Drained Maize Agroecosystem. Water Air Soil Pollut 231, 84 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11270-020-4443-z
[5] Rodale Institute, “Impacts of Conventional & Organic Management Practice on Soil Health and Water Quality: https://rodaleinstitute.org/science/articles/impacts-of-conventional-organic-management-practices-on-soil-health-and-water-quality/

increase from the previous year, double the growth rate of the total food marketplace.[6] The last USDA Organic Census identified NY as 2nd in total certified organic acreage, 6th for organic farm gate sales.[7]

New York can incentivize environmentally resilient farming and help ensure that NY farmers have access to the growing organic marketplace by:

- **Supporting the transition of farmland to organic production.** For example, California's 2022 Climate Scoping Plan sets a goal to expand organic agriculture to 20% of the state's cultivated acres by 2045.[8] NY could use Cap and Invest proceeds to support the transition of farmland to organic.
- **Incentivizing manure management practices that mitigate runoff and build soil health,** including rotational grazing and composting manure.
- **Incorporating organic fully into state and local marketing and food procurement initiatives.** Research has shown that there can be a significant return on investment for state departments of agriculture that invest in outreach and technical assistance in an organized strategy to promote the growth of the organic industry in their state.[9]
- **Adopting a NYS organic advisory committee** and opportunities for organic farmers to participate in NYS Agriculture and Markets advisory roles. Their insights can help drive sustainability and climate resilience industry-wide as well as help identify barriers to growth in the organic sector.
- **Hiring dedicated organic support**: Having knowledgeable, responsive state staff dedicated to organic farming in the Department of Agriculture and Markets could support wider engagement of organic farmers in state programming and support the sector's growth.

At a time when federal support for farming – especially the mid-sized and smaller scale farms that we have in the northeast – is being revoked, New York has an opportunity to step up and support NY farm viability by prioritizing efforts that help farms stay resilient, profitable, and positively contribute to NY's treasured ecosystems.

[6] Organic Trade Association, "2025 Market Report." https://ota.com/OrganicMarketReport
[7] USDA NASS, "2021 Certified Organic survey"
https://www.nass.usda.gov/Surveys/Guide_to_NASS_Surveys/Organic_Production/
[8] NRDC, "CA's New Scoping Plan Affirms Organic Ag as Climate Solution"
https://www.nrdc.org/bio/lena-brook/cas-new-scoping-plan-affirms-organic-ag-climate-solution
[9] Berkeley Food Institute, "Growing Organic, State by State"
https://food.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2017-09-Growing-Organic.pdf