About OEFFA

The Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) cultivates a future in which sustainable and organic farmers thrive, local food nourishes our communities, and agricultural practices protect and enhance our environment. Learn more about OEFFA at www.oeffa.org and contact us with questions at (614) 421-2022 or amalie@oeffa.org.

Ohio Agriculture in the National Context

In 2019, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provided updated information on the U.S. agricultural landscape. The 2017 Census of Agriculture reveals an almost 7 percent increase in producers, with 3.4 million farmers and ranchers. However, the number of farms decreased by 3.2 percent since the last census (to 2.04 million farms), and farm acreage dropped by 1.6 percent (to more than 900,000,000 acres). Nationally, the average age of all farmers increased from 56.3 in 2012 to 57.5 in 2017, with primary farmers averaging 59.4 years of age.

While the average age of farmers in Ohio is slightly lower, it is also on the rise: from 54.6 in 2012 to 55.8 in 2017. While farmers are aging, next generation farmers are stepping up. Ohio ranks in the top 10 states in number of beginning farmers. With 13,965,295 acres, Ohio farmland has increased by almost 4,700 acres. While that is a relatively small number compared to overall acreage, Ohio did not lose farmland, and productive farmland increased for the first time since 2002. Ohio is home to more than 77,000 farms, the highest number of farms since 1997. After decades of farm loss, the number of farms is on the rise.

The value of food sold directly to consumers increased dramatically between 2012 and 2017 as sales went from approximately $46 million to almost $80 million. This occurred despite a decades-long challenge of limited processing and distribution infrastructure at the local and regional level. In particular, the number of custom meat processors in Ohio has declined for years and is critically limited.

Nationally, organic farms remain a small percentage overall, but they continued to increase from 14,326 in 2012 to more than 18,000 in 2017. The number of farmers seeking organic certification increased by almost 40 percent in this five-year period and the average value of sales per farm increased 84 percent.

Ohio is sixth in the nation in the number of certified organic farms and second in the nation in the number of acres being transitioned to organic production.
2020 Sustainable Agriculture Policy Goals at a Glance

1) Support Agricultural Practices that Pay Ecosystem Dividends
   a) Provide state resources for farmers interested in transitioning to organic
   b) Invest in research, education, and Extension services for organic production at Ohio land
      grant universities
   c) Coordinate state inter-agency information sharing and cooperation to better serve organic pro-
      ducers
   d) Create Ohio legislation to incentivize adoption of soil health practices
   e) Federal support to farmers adapting to and mitigating climate disruption.

2) Maintain the Integrity of Certified Organic Products
   a) Finalize federal rule-making on origin of livestock and fraud prevention
   b) Federal support for farmers transitioning to organic management systems

3) Facilitate Agriculture for the Next Generation
   a) Provide tax incentives for landowners who transition land and agricultural resources to be-
      ginning farmers through passage of the Family Farm ReGeneration Act
   b) Increase resources for farm succession planning
2020 Sustainable Agriculture Policy Goals

**Support Agricultural Practices that Pay Ecosystem Dividends**

Ohio experienced one of the wettest springs on record in 2019 followed by a summer drought. Climate experts indicate that this extreme weather could be “the new normal.” If so, we must provide comprehensive tools and resources for farmers seeking to improve the resilience of their operations. One way to do that is to help farmers adopt systems-based organic agricultural practices.

Despite tremendous growth in the industry, there is a dearth of support for these farmers. To help address this gap, OEFFA has identified five areas where state and federal investment would help support organic farmers and adoption of soil health practices:

*a*) **Provide state resources for farmers interested in transitioning to organic**

Organic agriculture is growing exponentially in Ohio and the state Department of Agriculture can and should be a resource for the farmers that provide farm products and ecosystem services. That work can begin by listing organic agriculture on the Department’s website, in printed materials, and through representation on state agricultural advisory boards. Organizations and resources available to certified producers as well as those interested in transitioning to organic management systems can also be promoted.

*b*) **Invest in research, education, and Extension services for organic production at Ohio land grant universities**

Members of the Ohio legislature, recognizing Ohio’s leadership in the expanding organic industry, must designate resources to Ohio’s land grant universities and to organizations that serve these farmers to ensure that they have staff trained and available to provide the Extension support organic and transitioning producers need.

*c*) **Coordinate inter-agency information sharing and cooperation to better serve organic producers**

Drawing from the example of other states that invest in sustainable agriculture, Ohio should create a formal organic team to inform agricultural organizations, agencies, and key decision-makers and offer recommendations for promoting the industry and supporting farmers.

*d*) **Create Ohio legislation to incentivize adoption of soil health practices**

Recognizing the multifunctional benefits of building soil health, many states have passed soil health legislation. Regenerating healthy soil through practices that restore the balance of beneficial bacteria, fungi, and soil organic matter helps the soil hold substantially more water. This has benefits for water quality as well as for farm resilience in a changing climate. Healthy soil requires fewer chemical nutrients and pesticides and provides more consistent yields.

*e*) **Support farmer efforts at the federal level to address the climate crisis**

As farmers, local communities, and states are increasingly interested in taking concrete action on climate issues, Ohio’s Congressional delegation can support action through the creation of federal legislation to get out in front of the impending climate crisis and facilitates action at all levels. We are facing an existential crisis for the planet and a threat to the lives of future generations, which requires bold action. Farmers are on the front line of this crisis as their livelihoods are weather dependent. They want to be part of the solution by implementing best management practices and will require assistance to do so. Whether through incentivizing transition to organic management systems or the adoption of cover crop rotations, or assisting livestock producers in implementing management-intensive rotational grazing, farmers will need support to sequester carbon and limit the emission of nitrous oxide and methane.
Maintain the Integrity of Certified Organic Products

Organic products are one of few segments in the agricultural marketplace that continue to see strong growth. People from all walks of life are turning to organic food for health reasons and increasingly, the environmental benefits from organic farming practices. As this segment of the food and agriculture economy grows, more businesses are interested in capturing profit potential. Unfortunately, not all of the businesses involved have the strong commitment to organic principles that were envisioned by the early advocates for organic certification.

Several years ago imported conventional grain began to flood into the United States to be sold as organic. The Washington Post reported on this as well as the issue of corporate organic dairies using loopholes in the law to gain an economic advantage over family-scale farmers. Against this backdrop, we advocate the following proposals to ensure that people who buy organic products are getting what they expect and that farmers who play by the rules are benefitting from the organic marketplace.

a) Finalize federal rulemaking on origin of livestock and fraud prevention

For far too long, there has been a loophole in the National Organic Program (NOP) regulations. When originally established, there was a provision allowing producers to transition a conventional dairy herd to organic one time and one time only. This provision allows conventional producers to transition to organic management systems without the expense of purchasing a whole new herd. Yet, some businesses have used that provision to continuously transition animals in and out of organic management, and enforcement by certifiers has been uneven.

This tilts the playing field, as those who do not bear the cost of purchasing, raising, or feeding organic animals have a lower cost of production, without meeting consumer expectations or the letter of the law.

The NOP released an “Origin of Livestock” in April 2015. Despite overwhelming support, the rule has not been put into law. In 2019, Congress directed the NOP to finalize the rule which was reopened for comment. The NOP should act to finalize this rule early in 2020 to protect the integrity of the organic dairy market and the viability of producers playing by the rules.

Fraud, both domestic and foreign, is also an issue. For years, large amounts of organic imports poured into the U.S. from the Black Sea region, undercutting domestic organic grain farmers. After strong advocacy by national organizations and OEFFA grain producers, the NOP has taken action. The 2018 Farm Bill provided new authority for the NOP to work with Customs and Border Protection and the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service in cracking down on import fraud. Additionally, the 2019 budget also provided supplemental allocation to the NOP to hire staff working in this area.
A proposed rule on “Strengthening Organic Enforcement” (SOE) is expected early in 2020. This rule would require the certification of brokers. While these brokers may never take physical possession of organic products, certification of brokers will allow greater oversight throughout the chain of custody of organic products and make it easier to detect fraud. The rule will also require new, electronic import certificates that will improve traceability. The NOP should issue the proposed SOE rule and finalize it in 2020.

b) Support farmers at the federal level who are transitioning to organic management systems

Increasingly, conventional farmers are recognizing the economic and environmental benefits of organic management systems and transitioning their operations to organic. Making the three-year transition is not without challenges. Moving from a system reliant upon synthetic inputs for fertility, weed, pest, and disease management to one that relies on a healthy and resilient ecosystem takes time, unique expertise, and a whole new management system.

Farmers who transition can achieve better water holding and infiltration capacity on their land, leading to long-term resilience to weather extremes, while reaching higher value markets. Everyone benefits by not having to pay for the clean-up of harmful algal blooms and the health problems associated with synthetic agricultural chemicals.

In essence, we can pay now or pay later. Investments to provide mentoring and technical assistance to farmers, as well as organic cost-share assistance, will benefit us all for decades to come.

Facilitate Agriculture for the Next Generation

Next generation farmers face barriers that are harder to overcome each year given the growing consolidation of land and markets. Yet, having diversified farmers across the landscape provides strong economic and social benefits to local communities, while protecting our food security.

a) Provide tax incentives for landowners who transition land and agricultural resources to beginning farmers through passage of the Family Farm ReGeneration Act

House Bill 183 unanimously passed out of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee in 2019. It is time for Ohio to follow other states in providing help to beginning farmers outcompeted by developers, land speculators, and better resourced farmers. The Ohio legislature should enact this bill in the 133rd legislative session.
b) Increase resources for farm succession planning

Farm landowners struggle with how to transfer the farm to the next generation, especially to a non-family member. Some attorneys, accountants, and organizations can provide expertise in these situations, but there are too few to meet the demand, and farmers may not know how to access these resources.

Ohio should invest in the future of farming by providing resources to Extension staff and non-profit organizations to ramp up services to meet this critical need.

Conclusion

Ohio agriculture faces challenges and opportunities in the years ahead, and as one of the state’s leading industries it would be prudent to ensure that we are doing all we can to achieve a bright food and farming future. We can and should realize the multiple benefits of an ecological agriculture that protects drinking water, limits pollution, and builds the healthy soils that mitigate climate extremes.

Realizing this vision will require an engaged citizenry motivating the political will to enact new laws, better enforce existing ones, retool some current programs, and invest in health and resiliency. All of the recommendations in this brief are realistic and actionable in a short time frame. To learn more about how you can contribute to this vision, contact OEFFA today.

For more than 40 years, OEFFA has used education, advocacy, and grassroots organizing to promote local and organic food systems, helping farmers and consumers reconnect and together build a sustainable food system, one meal at a time. OEFFA is also one of the largest and oldest USDA accredited organic certification agencies certifying farmers in 12 states. We host the largest sustainable agriculture conference in the state, offer an annual farm tour and workshop series, educate beginning farmers, and work on state and national policy.