



Resource List
Helping Farmers Thrive
Workshop, June 24, 2009
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Greensboro, NC

Moderator: *Joel Morton*, Farm Aid, joel@farmaid.org & www.farmaid.org

Speakers:

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In the midst the current economic downturn and credit/mortgage crisis, Southern farmers considering or already committed to sustainable transition face steep challenges in financing, disaster risk, technical and marketing support, environmental stewardship, and labor issues. This workshop addresses these issues directly, with Farm Aid hosting presentations by two of its major Southern grantees, the Rural Advancement Foundation International-USA and the Florida Organic Growers, and by North Carolina organic farmer John Vollmer, who has worked closely with RAFI-USA. This session will offer concrete, issue-specific examples of the current work of Farm Aid grantees in the South, and reserve time for a wider discussion of direct-service initiatives and related grant-making to help farmers thrive. Below we offer a series of bullet points we will address along with citations and websites for those who would like to learn more.

“Organic products represent value to consumers, who have shown continued resilience in seeking out these products,” Christine Bushway, Executive Director, Organic Trade Association (OTA). See <http://www.ota.com/>

Family farms that are certified organic farms have a double economic benefit: they are profitable and they farm in harmony with their surrounding environment. See <http://www.ofrf.org/>

While results may vary among crops, most research has shown that biodiversity is enhanced on organic compared to conventional farms. See: Bengtsson J, Ahnstrom J, Weibull A. *The effects of organic agriculture on biodiversity and abundance: a meta-analysis.* *J. Appl Ecol.* 2005;42:261-269\

Social accountability is needed for everyone involved in the organic food chain. See the website for the Ag Justice Project: <http://www.agriculturaljusticeproject.org>

The economic slow down has affected the sales of organic and specialty products, but not disproportionately. Growth has slowed, but sales remain strong.
See: http://www.organicnewsroom.com/2009/06/ota_offers_groundbreaking_repo.html

A one-size-fits-all food safety program may not address the needs and challenges of organic farming systems. We believe that a decentralized food system is also inherently safer in terms of food safety because there is not the opportunity to spread diseases over large amounts of product, and natural systems are less likely to support pathogens. See: http://www.organicconsumers.org/articles/article_17451.cfm

Crop production that uses natural systems, soil health, diversified production, and a systems approach is inherently safer because natural systems buffer the types of wide fluctuations and pest outbreaks that plague large-scale monocropping. See: Hendrickson, J.R., Hanson, D., Tanaka, D.L. and Gretchen Sassenrath, G. 2008. Principles of integrated agricultural systems: Introduction to processes and definition. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems:* 23(4); 265–271

However, our current risk management system, because of the diversity of natural systems, treats organic and sustainable production as though it is more risky, and risk management is more expensive if available at all. This treatment makes growth more difficult for sustainable producers because of difficulties in access to credit, and puts them at greater risk in a disaster or economic downturn. See: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12555892>

The economic crisis is reaching agriculture, and affecting farmers' ability to access credit for ownership and operating funds. See: http://online.wsj.com/article_email/SB124268924963032355-1MyQjAxMDI5NDEyODYxODg5Wj.html

While markets for organic and specialty products remain strong, the economic slowdown has a disproportionate effect on the ability of sustainable / food systems farmers to access credit. Access to credit is tied to access to federal disaster programs and crop insurance that provide the farmer with assured income. See Farmer and Lender Project: Strategies to Sustain Agriculture and Enhance Rural Development in North Carolina at <http://www.rafiusa.org/pubs/puboverview.html>

These programs under-serve farmers who sell for prices above wholesale conventional and who produce a range of specialty crops and livestock. The same gaps in federal programs leave sustainable producers at greater risk in a natural disaster. See: <http://www.rafiusa.org/docs/disasterMemo.html>

While pioneers in local / organic / sustainable agriculture were very small farms who sold direct, these markets have grown past where these farmers can fill them. As local / sustainable foods move into institutions, grocery store chains and a wider variety of restaurants, markets will demand larger farmers to produce these products. Mid-scale farms have very different needs in terms of access to credit and crop insurance than do their direct market cousins. See: http://www.agofthemiddle.org/archives/2005/08/why_worry_about.html

In an economic recovery, the transition to organic and sustainable products will play an important part, and the transition will accelerate recovery from natural disasters. In hard economic times, farmers who have incurred the costs of disaster recovery or market drops need the greater per acre return of higher-value markets to survive.

In order for these markets to grow, the economic infrastructure must be shifted to provide a safety net beyond wholesale conventional. The key component is the recognition of the farmer's price in crop insurance and disaster programs.

While USDA is programming for organic producers for the first time, these programs are still geared toward large-scale conventional production and are often implemented in ways that undercut the effectiveness of the program. For instance, the recent Organic Initiative funded through the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program had an 18-day sign up period that took place during planting when farmers are at their busiest.

Policy recommendations:

- National Organic Coalition Transition Recommendations: <http://www.nationalorganiccoalition.org/Policy%20Comments%20Front%20Page.htm>
- RAFI-USA Farm Sustainability Transition Recommendations on credit and disaster assistance: <http://www.rafiusa.org/programs/farmsustainability.html>
- Credit and Disaster Program Implementation Recommendations from the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition: <http://sustainableagriculture.net/publications/>