

Marking how far we've come, and where we're headed

This year, the organic industry celebrates the 25th anniversary of the Organic Trade Association (OTA), the 20th anniversary of the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) of 1990, and the tenth anniversary of the final National Organic Program rule.

Throughout this span, OTA has played a vital role in calling for and shaping national organic standards. In 1986, for instance, OTA, then known as the Organic Food Production Association of North America (OFPANA), created the first "Guidelines for the Organic Food Industry," which were used as a basis for OFPA adopted by Congress as part of the 1990 Farm Bill. These guidelines were updated to become the *American Organic Standards* released by OTA in 1999. The latter were used as a foundation for the final rule adopted by USDA in December 2000.

OTA continues to work to uphold and strengthen the U.S.



OTA's three Executive Directors—Caren Wilcox (second), Christine Bushway (current), and Katherine DiMatteo (first)—display OTA's 25th Anniversary logo.

national organic standards, which it sees as essential to safeguarding the integrity of the organic label and value to the products consumers can choose in the marketplace. Now with its own office in Washington, D.C., OTA has stepped up its

advocacy efforts to advance organic agriculture and trade.

To help put these milestones in perspective, *The Organic Report* asked the following respondents two questions:

RESPONDENTS

John Clough—Owner, Shiloh Farms and Garden Spot Distributors

Lynn Coody—Principal Consultant, Organic Agsystems Consulting

Marty Mesh—Executive Director, Florida Certified Organic Growers and Consumers, Inc., Quality Certification Services

Julia Sabin—Vice President & General Manager, Smucker Natural Foods, Inc.

Bob Scowcroft—Executive Director, Organic Farming Research Foundation

Zea Sonnabend—Policy Specialist, California Certified Organic Farmers

Dave Vetter—President, Grain Place Foods, Inc.

What is the greatest achievement for organic thus far?

Thirty years ago, it looked like our entire food system would be taken over by inferior products that would destroy the health of everyone. Even though a lot of that has come to pass, the organic movement stemmed the tide and made sure there is an alternative for people like me. Because of organic products, consumers still have a choice and can find healthy, balanced food. We have the privilege of opting out of choices we believe harm our bodies or the environment. When USDA came on the scene, it legitimized the organic industry and expanded its reach beyond us hard-core health food types. We are now firmly entrenched in the food industry.

—*John Clough*

One of our central achievements was uniting the U.S. organic community under one set of production standards. I see this accomplishment as a continuum of endeavors beginning with the initial development of standards by farmer groups. Then came efforts to establish state and regional standards, to draft and work for passage of OFPA, to refocus the standards on organic principles through development of OTA's *American Organic Standards*, and finally, to accept and implement the revised version of the NOP regulations. While steeply rising sales curves are usually used to document the organic industry's successes, what often goes unrecognized is that the growth of the organic market not only relies on the business acumen and entrepreneurial spirit so prevalent in the organic

trade, but also on the willingness of so many in the organic community to provide an impressive range of support services. Organic proponents have instituted organizational structures needed to evaluate materials, certify organic operations, accredit certifiers, conduct analysis, research new solutions, develop policies, and provide education. This is the other achievement—that so many individuals and organizations have been willing to dedicate long hours and hard-won resources to largely unsung support work; and that they have done so with an enduring spirit of optimism, public service, and a strong dedication to the organic principles.

—*Lynn Coody*

I believe the greatest achievement is the fairly rapid global growth in both demand and practice, despite little to no support from institutions or government (actually outright resistance). Now, many who had been excluded from even entering the main buildings are invited in for serious conversations with policymakers and researchers on all levels who are now recognizing the importance, promise and multi-functional benefits that organic agriculture holds. Organic practices are sprouting everywhere, even the White House and USDA Peoples' Garden. The main benefit for the environment may be the many organic practices now being recognized and utilized on millions of acres of still conventional acres.

—*Marty Mesh*

The greatest achievement is that the organic industry has continued to grow and persevere during tough economic times. Growth during this most significant recession shows a commitment by our core consumers to the organic category. It also means that as the organic industry continues to move forward and as organic consumers continue to be passionate about providing organic products for their families during challenging times, when things get better with our economy, the best is yet to come!

—*Julia Sabin*

Many of us have dedicated 25 to 30 years and sometimes more to moving organic agriculture from vision and passion to full statutory recognition in law and through rules and regulations. It took time for the organic movement to achieve transparency in how our food is grown and processed. Now embedded in the nation's consciousness, organic is an integral part of our overall food economy. It is a viable and

economically sound alternative to the industrial food production system, and our family farmers and ranchers are reaping a brighter future through organic production.

—*Bob Scowcroft*

The greatest achievement has got to be the creation and implementation of the Federal Rule. While we made great strides forward in defining organic standards on our own as a movement, we didn't gain full credibility or get enough impact on the mainstream food chain until there were a clear set of rules that everyone has access to and a mechanism through accrediting certifiers and empowering state enforcement efforts for the standards to be implemented and upheld.

—*Zea Sonnabend*

The greatest achievement is finally getting a more unified message out to the public. The adoption and implementation of the NOP rule was a critical step in making that happen.

—*Dave Vetter*

What's left to be done?

Education. Education and expansion. Consumers are becoming more concerned with what's in their food and where it comes from. As their demand for better quality increases, producers have to react. You can see it today as organic continues to take a larger piece of the pie. And we should welcome the "eat local" movement even if it isn't all certified. It is still part of the movement for more natural, healthy, earth-friendly food. And when consumers start thinking like that, it's good for organic products. We just need to make sure organic certification retains its credibility with producers and consumers. If we lose standard uniform regulations, we could see years of accomplishments slip away.

—*John Clough*

One of the goals of the Organic Food Production Act was to base regulation of the organic industry on a public-private partnership. The organic community must continue to take responsibility for the "private" side of this equation by providing constructive comments to NOSB and NOP. We must not only assist in finding practical and equitable solutions for specific challenges, but also in holding NOP accountable for implementation of regulatory systems that are rigorous, fair, and transparent. Our biggest challenge at this stage of the organic community's evolution is to remain true to the core principles of organic production. We must continue to use these principles as the primary touchstone for each of our decisions, being mindful that the value of the organic label ultimately rests upon organic values.

—*Lynn Coody*

Continuing to change the policies and markets to encourage those acres using organic practices but still billed as conventional to complete the transition, as well as those even yet to begin. To document the true cost of cheap food and help quantify what a bargain organic agriculture and products can be when all the facts are on the table. To integrate organic through every facet where possible in policy, education, health, and markets in the U.S. and globally. To reintegrate social justice concepts back into organic from farm to retail shelf, so that organic products are made possible by fair relationships throughout the entire supply chain.

—*Marty Mesh*

The organic community needs to work together more than ever to support the industry and its efforts to get the positive messages about organic out to our consumers. We need strong marketing programs so we can help more consumers come to understand the wonderful benefits of organic. If we do this well, organic will continue to grow and prosper, which will strengthen the whole industry from farm to fork, thus allowing more organic choices for consumers.

—*Julia Sabin*

We must continue adding to the producer's tool box, expanding and intensifying research into production and marketing methods so farmers and ranchers can be assured a fair return for their hard work. It is essential that we continue pressing USDA and other governmental agencies for a fair share of resources for organic production research. Equally crucial is the need to ensure that the organic label meets the expectations of all. That means the rules and regulations guiding organic production and processing must be clearly stated and fairly enforced.

—*Bob Scowcroft*

So much left to do! As long as there are toxic chemicals being used on our food and fiber anywhere in the world, our work is not over. Briefly, I see three main goals left:

- World harmonization of organic standards
- Enough outreach to both consumers and growers so that the U.S. and world become 98% organic instead of 2%.
- Eliminate the use of genetic engineering in agriculture. It should truly become an "excluded method" for all farming and ranching.

—*Zea Sonnabend*

The task ahead will be even greater. The rule needs to be 'finished'—that is, we need to make sure it is always a work in progress. Then we need to make sure the rule serves organic and that organic products are not forced to serve the rule. Organic agriculture is an amazing dynamic and we must not permit the rule to inhibit that process. Conversion to organic is a never-ending lesson in working with our local ecosystems.

—*Dave Vetter*