

Congress hears from organic growers over farm bill

Small farmers seek piece of spending that typically goes to big commodities

Carolyn Lochhead, Chronicle Washington Bureau

Washington -- Organic farming was hailed as a savior of family farms, the environment, the American diet and rural life -- a crunchy David versus the Goliath of industrialized agriculture -- during the first-ever hearing about organics Wednesday before the House Agriculture Committee.

Organic farmers are vying this year to gain a toehold in the vast sprawl of federal farm aid programs as Congress rewrites its mammoth five-year farm bill set to expire later this year. Organic growers, now believed to number more than 10,000 -- and a significant presence in California's fruit and vegetable industry -- are experiencing rapid growth nationwide as interest in healthier food continues to spread from local farmers' markets to major supermarkets across the country.

But growers are not nearly keeping pace with consumer demand for organic products, estimated to be expanding by 20 percent a year. Rep. Dennis Cardoza, a Merced County Democrat who chairs a new agriculture subcommittee on horticulture and organics, hopes to include organic farmers in the farm bill.

Congressional farm bills have been dominated since the Great Depression by a handful of commodity crops such as corn, wheat and cotton, which last year received \$25 billion in crop subsidies and billions more in research and marketing aid.

Over the decades, subsidies have been widely blamed for contributing to the industrialization of U.S. agriculture, concentrated on vast monoculture crops on ever larger and fewer farms, driving up land prices and depopulating rural communities.

Organic growers face an uphill battle against the entrenched commodity groups that get the lion's share of farm spending. Mostly, they asked at Wednesday's hearing not for direct aid, but for an added share of the research and education money, as well as better statistical collection to convince bankers to make loans.

Organic farming is a complex undertaking that relies on crop rotations and other ecological management of insects, weeds and diseases rather than pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Even if the nation's rapidly aging farmers were not

reluctant to adopt such methods, experts said at Wednesday's hearing that federal farm programs make it even more difficult to take the leap.

"A major problem has been supply -- that is really the crux of the matter," said Robert Marqusee, director of a rural development agency in Sioux City, Iowa. "Demand is high, but aging farmers are trapped in the subsidy treadmill. There are few young farmers left in these communities, and most economic development is focused on ethanol plants," which he said "does nothing but put industrial farming on steroids."

The current subsidy system, he said, "simply does not make sense."

Farmers transitioning from conventional crops to organics have had to figure it out mostly by themselves, said Mark Lipson, policy program director at the Organic Farming Research Foundation in Santa Cruz, a nonprofit group dedicated to spreading the organic gospel among farmers.

It's past time, Lipson said, to begin devoting a portion of the vast federal agriculture research

programs -- from farm extension services that provide education and technical assistance to research at such universities as UC Davis. Federal funding of organic research and education only began in 2001, Lipson said, and remains at less than 1 percent of the federal farm research budget.

The gap between demand for organic products and U.S. supply is filled by foreign producers in Canada, Mexico, Central and Latin America, and as far away as China. Many growers express suspicion about the quality standards from such sources. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's organic certification offices are so short-staffed that maintaining the integrity of the agency's brown and green organic certification seal is a challenge, Cardoza said. Growers worry that with organic products in short supply and demand strong, the market creates a greater incentive to skirt the standards.

Getting into organic farming can be daunting, growers told the committee on Wednesday. The decision is often made because of a fascination with health foods or a distaste for chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Scott Lively, president and chief executive of Dakota Beef, in Howard, S.D., now the nation's largest producer of certified organic beef, said he got into the business "cold turkey," mainly

because of his wife's obsession with health foods.

"I knew nothing about the industry, nor did I really care much about it," Lively said. "I was a meat-eating, potato-eating guy from Chicago. Nevertheless, we went out and bought 30 head of cattle in Illinois, processed them locally all at one time, and sold them door to door in Chicago restaurants out of the back of a Volvo.

"I think a lot of people would like to pretend that this industry doesn't exist, or that it's concentrated on that crunchy-granola Whole Foods shopper," he said. "It clearly is not."

Mary-Howell Martens, of Lakeview Organic Grains in Penn Yan, N.Y., said the idea came to her in 1991, when she stood pregnant at her kitchen door and watched her husband, Klaas, "leave the house dressed for battle in his white Tyvek 'zoot suit' and special heavy green plastic gloves ready to attack and subdue the enemy -- weeds."

Growing grain on 600 acres at the time, Martens said, "we were like many conventional farmers, using the chemical fertilizers and pesticides simply because we saw no other alternatives, but very concerned about what it might be doing to us, our family, our land and our environment. We farmed conventionally because we had been told so often that it was the

only way to survive in agriculture today."

Now they are farming 1,400 acres of organic corn, soybeans, spelt, barley, oats, triticale, red kidney beans, cabbage and hay -- each with a strong market, she said. She and her husband also opened a mill for organic animal feed for New York organic dairy farmers. Martens said she can't get enough organic grain to meet demand.

"Organic agriculture is no longer simply an inconsequential nice for the counterculture or extremely affluent," she said.

Marqusee, the rural development director from Sioux City, said farm communities suffer from schizophrenia, imbued on one hand with the red-state ethos of rugged individualism and dependent on huge farm subsidies on the other. A new focus on smaller, market-driven farms, rural communities and the environment, he argued, makes organic agriculture "a true bipartisan issue."

E-mail Carolyn Lochhead at clochhead@sfnchronicle.com.

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