

Organic food industry leaders tell Congress to boost funding

Lack of research, education in organic agriculture inhibits growth, says expert

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Lawmakers are giving organic farmers more respect these days. Manuel Vieira hopes that translates into more tangible help, as well.

Vieira grows yams and sweet potatoes organically near the town of Livingston, Calif. in Merced County. He speaks English with the accent of his native Azores Islands. He wants Congress to seriously step up its organic investments.

"I would like to see more (attention) from the Congress, from the government, paid to the people like myself who are trying to have better food, and a better life," Vieira said Wednesday.

And then he made history.

Vieira joined other farmers in what was billed as the first-ever House hearing solely devoted to the subject of organic agriculture. For the first time, a congressional subcommittee has the words "organic agriculture" in its name, and lawmakers are recognizing that the \$14.5 billion-a-year industry is not simply a fringe player.

To read the testimonies of all 12 organic industry members, click [here](#).

"This broad acceptance and perception of quality is a far cry from where organic food was 20 years ago," said Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced. "It once was the domain of ugly broccoli, dried-up apples and wormy tomatoes."

Cardoza chairs the House subcommittee on horticulture and organic agriculture. That gives him a potentially big say in writing this year's farm bill. Still, a multibillion-dollar, 121-page specialty crop bill Cardoza introduced along with 86 co-sponsors in March only included only one, minor reference to organic farming.

On Wednesday, Cardoza called for sufficient staffing to ensure the "continued integrity" of federal organic standards. He cited concerns about impure foreign imports and said organic food programs should "better integrated" within the Agriculture Department.

With organic foods now claiming about 2.5 percent of total U.S. food sales, industry leaders are calling for even more specific boosts. Some proposals won't be cheap, and some pose potential political challenges for the nation's 10,000 certified organic farmers.

"The lack of research and education in organic agriculture is inhibiting growth," contended Mark Lipson, policy program director of the Santa Cruz-based Organic Farming Research Foundation.

The federal government currently spends less than \$20 million a year on organic farming research. Organic farming advocates want this increased in the new farm bill to \$120 million annually. Within this big number, individual farmers have their own priorities.

"There is a tremendous need for organic research with sweet potato varieties," Vieira testified, citing some ongoing work at the University of California at Davis.

Cardoza's specialty crop bill calls for additional research spending but does not specify that some of the increase must go to

organic farming. Even some House Agriculture Committee members, moreover, question how much more the deficit-spending federal government can afford.

Texas Republican Randy Neugebauer, a self-described budget hawk, suggested Wednesday that agricultural trade associations might be best suited to increasing research investments. Vieira, whose firm A.V. Thomas Produce grows yams and sweet potatoes on about 1,500 acres, indicated that the California Sweet Potato Council currently funds crop researchers.

Organic farmers urged Wednesday that they be freed from the 5 percent penalty they must currently pay on crop insurance premiums. Until relatively recently, many organic growers lacked access to insurance for their presumably more-vulnerable crops.

Changing insurance premiums, though, could start pitting farmers against the insurance industry.

Farmers say they also want help during the three years that it normally takes for a traditionally cultivated field to become certified.

The House Agriculture Committee chairman, Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., suggested Wednesday that the new farm bill could allow federal conservation payments to assist farmers in making this transition.

"Demand is high," said Robert Marqusee, a rural economic development director from Iowa, "but our aging farmers are caught in the subsidy treadmill."

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