Montana Organic Agriculture

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Seeking election to which body or office? Please include district number if appropriate.

HD 91

Question 1: Organic Agriculture is an Economic Bright Spot

Nationally, income for organic farmers and ranchers has nearly doubled over the past five years. In Montana, sales of organic products reached $48.9 million in 2015 and have continued to grow. The global organic grain farming market is expected to increase from $22.47 billion in 2019 and to $23.84 billion in 2020 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.11%. The growth is mainly due to the change in perception towards food intake in general and growing health consciousness. The market is then expected to reach $34.54 billion in 2023 at a CAGR of 13.15%.

Clusters of organic businesses, known as organic hotspots, reduce poverty 1.3%, on average, an additional $2000 per household — more than some major anti-poverty programs. A 2019 study in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition found that consumers eating a mostly organic food diet generally enjoyed “strong nutritional and environmental benefits.” For more background, refer to Organic Trade Association (OTA) information based on “US Organic Hotspots and their Benefit to Local Economies, Edward C. Jaenicke, May 2016.” Agriculture is Montana’s top industry. The state has the second-largest amount of agriculturally productive, certified organic land in the nation. However, the identified “hot spots” do not include Montana communities.

Organics is a growing industry. The current Farm Bill provided funding for the Organic Cost Share Program that provides reimbursement for 75% of organic certification costs or $750 maximum for each certification scope (crops, livestock, wild crops, and handling). However on August 10, 2020, the Farm Service Agency unilaterally reduced support for the organic certification cost-share program and reduced the amount of the cost share amount to 50% with a $500 with a maximum reimbursement. In Montana, these funds helped 174 recipients with $132,881.22 in dispersed cost-share funds. Montana has over 300 certified organic operations; this represents about a 51% use rate. Montana’s Department of Agriculture Organic Program encourages all entities to sign up for cost-share funds. The Cost Share Program is administered through the state on a first-come, first-serve basis.

1 - a. What measures do you think should be taken to support agriculture, farmers, and help our Montana communities thrive?

I'm open for any ideas. Please share your thoughts with me. As someone from an agriculture background, I recognize the importance of agriculture and how that keeps all of our communities thriving. It is very sad to me that small producers have been bought out by large corporations, and I feel this is a huge problem in our rural areas. I am grateful that I have been given the opportunity to respond to this questionnaire, and do want to be involved in policy in this arena.

1 - b. What should be done at the state level to increase and sustain the organic market?

I would suppose that we have to be clear on definition of organic and how to market. Again, I'm interested in learning more.

1 - c. What criteria should be considered for appointing the Secretary of the Montana Department of Agriculture?

I was unable to find any statutory criteria for the Secretary of MDA. Obviously, I would concur that background and knowledge of agriculture and the importance of organics would be crucial. I would like to understand your organization's thoughts about this.

Question 2: Transportation and Distribution

Montana farmers, ranchers, and processors frequently name transportation and distribution issues as one of the biggest challenges they face. In particular, Montana farmers, ranchers, millers, meat packers, producers, and processors, is transportation and distribution of their food to city centers. This is particularly difficult in Montana because it is such a large state.

2 - a. What can be done at the state level to help develop efficient food distribution around the state?

I would like to better understand all the issues with distribution, and it seems like having a network at the state level would help facilitate this.

2 - b. How can the state support small family farmers by helping get their products into Farm to Institution (schools, hospitals, nursing homes, etc), local, and regional markets?

Specific programs such as Montana Harvest can provide incentives to encourage local products being used by institutions. Programs like this should be encouraged and continued.

Question 3: Meat Processing in Montana

The current COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a fragile food processing and distribution system in the US. Food processing operations have slowed because of social distancing and absenteeism. Slaughterhouses and processing plants have had coronavirus outbreaks resulting in closed facilities. Producers encountered feedlots and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) that had nowhere to keep their animals because of disrupted processing. Because producers cannot feed and house all the animals in the pipeline, millions of animals were euthanized (https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/29/millions-of-farm-animals-culled-as-us-food-supply-chain-chokes-up-coronavirus).

Consumers and retailers have encountered shortages of beef, pork, and poultry, resulting in higher prices and rationing by retailers. At the same time, small producers, including those like B-Bar Ranch near Big Timber and Aspen Island Ranch near Lavina, have seen increased sales and unprecedented demand for their humanely raised and processed meat.

3 - a. How do you respond to the need for mobile, more flexible, and more local meat and poultry processing?

I recognize this need and would support changes in statute to safely and efficiently process meat and poultry in communities across the state.

3 - b. One of the biggest challenges for meat processing in Montana is finding qualified labor. Miles Community College is developing a program that would put journeyman meat cutters on the meat processing floors and augment training with distance-learning coursework. This program seems like a win-win-win; how can you support this and similar initiatives?

I understand the need. I would support this. What needs to be done?

3 - c. What's your plan for supporting and developing jobs for small agricultural businesses and rural communities?

I do not have a specific plan, but am interested in working on this moving forward.

Question 4: Soil and Carbon

A groundbreaking study by Northeastern University scientists and The Organic Center found organic soils have 26% more long-term carbon storage, curbing carbon's transfer to the atmosphere (Advances in Agronomy, Vol. 146, 2017). Sustainable farming methods are recognized to mitigate climate change by increasing crop diversity, improving soil health, and reducing greenhouse gasses produced by the production of nitrogen fertilizers. These methods also reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by sequestering it in increasing amounts of organic matter added to the soil. Healthy organic soil not only increases carbon sequestration, but it also increases the soil's water holding capacity and reduces pesticide and nutrient runoff into waterways. Additionally, healthy organic soils are better able to withstand extreme and volatile weather events. Chemical farming kills the microbial life in the soil, thus destroying soil's healthful benefits and destroying its potential to mitigate climate change.

4 - a. Should sustainable farmers and ranchers be compensated for their efforts to build healthy soil, protect clean water, and to mitigate the economic effects of more unpredictable and erratic weather events?

Yes! "Healthy soils provide every advantage to farmers and their communities: higher yields, better water storage, drought resistance, less erosion, healthier food, and carbon storage." https://northernplains.org/issues/soil/

4 - b. Do you foresee opportunities for Montana's farmers and ranchers participating in carbon markets?

Yes! Increasing soil organic carbon has the potential to offset greenhouse gas emissions.

4 - c. Should state legislation be enacted that would research and promote healthy soil and provide cost-share for land-stewards who use soil health practices?

Yes!

4 - d. Do you support state funds to establish a state-based soils task force to promote healthy soils?

Yes!

Question 5: Aging Farmers - Beginning Farmers

According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, the average age of farmers in Montana is 58.2, an increase from 57.0 in 2012. In Montana, the average age of a farmer or rancher in organic agriculture is 51.6. Nationally, 27% of farmers were categorized as new and beginning producers, with ten years or less of experience in agriculture.

5 - a. What measures should be taken to support beginning farmers and ranchers?

Programs like the Young Farmers loan assistance program that passed in 2019 and a bond program that MDA has help first-time producers acquire property at lower interest rates are helpful to encourage entrepreneurs in agriculture. The state offers up to $50,000 in tax deductions associated with the sale of land to a beginning farmer or rancher. Young farmers and ranchers have also leaned on the USDA's Farm Service Agency for help with loans. Continuing these programs and developing more support can help with the challenges of entering the field. Emphasis on sustainable methods should be requirements of access to the assistance.

Question 6: Pesticides in the Environment

Montana-grown certified organic wheat, durum, and pulses from Montana have tested positive for glyphosate, the active ingredient in Round-Up. The residue has resulted in canceled shipments to European and other export customers. The European Union and other trading partners have banned the use of Round-Up for most applications. Non-organic farmers are encountering herbicide-resistant weeds and acid spots in their fields due to the continued use of Round-Up.

6 - a. What can be done at the state level to mitigate environmental glyphosate contamination?

I would appreciate understanding what the options are to mitigate this contamination at the state level.

6 - b. Do you support allocating state funds to study environmental pesticides to understand the problem better?

Yes.

Question 7: Resilient Farming and Extreme Weather Events

Among the production risks that farmers face are those related to adverse weather conditions, such as drought, freezes, excessive rainfall, hail, and even smoke at inopportune times during the farm cycle. These conditions can reduce crop yield and quality as well as damage to structures and equipment. Sustainable farming methods have been recognized as a means to mitigate the effects of unpredictable and extreme weather by increasing crop diversity and improving soil health. Other sustainable farming methods have been identified as reducing greenhouse gasses produced by the production of nitrogen fertilizers and reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by sequestering it in increasing amounts of soil organic matter.

7 - a. What ways should farmers and ranchers be supported as they live with the realities of erratic climate conditions and the “Act of God” economic risks producers assume?

This is a difficult question, and I agree that those in agriculture need to be supported through these erratic climate conditions. We first have to recognize that climate change is real and immediately work towards limiting emissions. I would be glad to support any reasonable initiatives that your group is proposing.

Question 8: Internet Access

Montana ranks dead last (50th) in the US for internet service, which includes broadband, DSL, Dial-Up, Cable modem, satellite, and others. Of the over 26,000 farms in Montana, only 21,000 of them have any internet access. Our rural communities still lack reliable broadband internet service and enough cell phone coverage for both household and business needs. Many government, marketing, and education communications and resources rely on the internet, but it is tough for rural Montanans to participate if they have inadequate service. With the COVID-19 pandemic, more business and education activities have moved online and require reliable, fast internet.

8 - a. What should be done to increase reliable broadband internet access in Montana that meets business and household needs?

Everything possible! First, we can to develop a state broadband plan. We don't really have one and most other states do. These plans can create task forces, can develop policy ideas, and can create direction for the legislature. It is a good first step. Second, we can look into policies like "dig once" (I am not sure if Montana has this already but it would make it so when we do big infrastructure projects conduits for fiber are put in the ground for future use by ISPs). We can also look into accurate mapping because right now the mapping is NOT good (despite what ISPs say). This will help us know what areas we really need to work on. We could also use some transparency where federal money grants go (see below). Right now we get some grants but it isn't clear where the money is being used and how it is helping.

8 - b. How should projects be funded to bring enough internet service to Montanans?

First, there are many federal grant programs to increase rural internet and we need to make sure we are applying for all of them, or telling private ISPs about them so they can apply (they may be grants for govt infrastructure or private businesses). Second, we can consider our own state grant programs which would require state funds. I am not sure the best way to raise those funds, but it is something worthy of looking into because high speed internet is totally necessary for modern business. Third, there are bills to reduce property taxes to incentivize fiber development. Not everyone likes these but this is a concept that can be developed and worth consideration.

8 - c. Do you support initiatives that would bring better internet service to Montanans?

Yes.

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with MOA!

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