

Montana Organic Agriculture

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

Montana House District 10

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?

Agriculture is the base of our economy and literally our entire lives. It needs to be highly prioritized. In Montana, our legislature is a Citizen Legislature and we need to listen to the experts in the field about what it is they need. I like the policy positions and goals of the Montana Organic Association and would support the development of policies and legislation towards those goals. I also support the policies and goals of Grow Montana. I also believe, more generally, that we must support Montana's interim tax study to clarify ways, even in a crisis, to maintain a steady revenue stream for Montana to maintain supportive agencies and programs, or we cannot have our communities thrive. I also believe strongly that we must take every possible step to prepare for the impacts of climate change on our farmers and farming communities.

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

All of the above. Plus we must recognize that most Federal and state measures have not been as supportive of the smaller, mid-size and organic farmers as they have the larger and corporate farms. Organic farming, diverse farming, and local production is the future we need to build and incentivize in our legislation. Keep up the Double SNAP dollars.

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

Common sense suggests that the Secretary of the Montana Department of Agriculture should have experience in agriculture and experience in Montana. Given the difficulty in locating skilled employees in our small state, I am most interested in someone that can demonstrate competence and a willingness to learn quickly from the experts.

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 support the policies of Grow Montana, which include legislative priorities to expand research, map assets, develop plans to enhance and incentivize Montana's processing capacity and community based food systems, particularly in rural communities. Realistically, we need to pass legislation that will enhance the full range of infrastructure for efficient product distribution, including internet access, train and energy efficient transportation.

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?

I support the policies of Grow Montana, which include funding mechanisms to offset school costs for local and organic products through appropriations, grant programs, and reimbursement structure, funding for a state farm to school, or farm to institution coordinators. These policies should be expanded to include community and 4 year colleges, correctional facilities, and other institutions that are largely supported by direct or indirect state dollars, such as assisted living facilities, group homes, and skilled nursing facilities, food banks.

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?

Well, lets make it happen! The timing is perfect since the pandemic has shown the vulnerability of over-centralization. In 1950, Montana produced 70% of the food consumed in Montana. We can increase the number of state-certified small, medium and mobile processing unit for meat processing and enhance the capacity of storage, packing and processing facilities in rural Montana communities. Since I am not an expert in food processing, we need the local experts to step up and educate the Legislators, help develop reasonable legislation that meet these goals, and elect legislators that will support enough agency support, regulation and revenue to make this happen.

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?

Absolutely a win win win and I would support this. My husband was a journeyman carpenter for many years, and two of my in laws are retired meat cutters. I am endorsed by the Montana AFL-CIO because I support enhancement of trade training in a way that is financially viable for the trainee. I am endorsed by the MFPE because I support community colleges and public education.

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

Well, right now the priority has to be managing the uptick in our Covid 19 cases so we are able to keep our economy functioning as much as possible. We also need to focus on maintaining the Medicaid Expansion that helps keep rural hospitals open and lower income workers healthy. We also need to be able to have a workforce that can travel and work safely, sometimes across borders. Finally, small agricultural businesses and rural communities are often dependent on state and other governmental positions for a large piece of their constellation of jobs. Steady revenue for the state is key to maintain these jobs, which are also part of distributing assistance and development to rural and agricultural businesses and communities.

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.

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

Yes.

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?

This is a crisis waiting to happen of course. First, lets support all of our current training and consultation resources such as our Conservation Districts, Montana Food and Agricultural Development Centers, etc. Let's expand agricultural training presence at all levels of public education (school gardens, curriculum enhancement, etc) Study ways to assist with land purchase financing and incentivizing and maintain decent reimbursement for organic and family farm enhancements per the Farm Bill. There is an individual in Lake County that is building investment opportunities for angel investors to purchase small rural community main street businesses like hardware stores and non-chain grocery stores when the owner "ages out" and looking to maintain the businesses until a new owner can be located and trained. Interesting thought to see if something similar could be put in place for farmers that are aging out.

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?

Research, regulate, legislate, enforce. I was recently at a meeting of a Conservation District board (safely distanced) and a member discussed some exciting coordinated programs among stakeholders in soil conservation and weed mitigation. They also discussed how nice it was to do these cooperative, non-partisan programs that helped avoid distressing Federal intervention and loss of local control through the Endangered Species Act. I asked the group if they thought we would have taken steps to develop these excellent cooperative programs if not for the initial regulation and enforcement of the Act. The answer was, "no". Does anyone like regulation? Mostly no, but Montana is a poster child of environmental contamination due to lack of regulation.

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

Yes, I always support research for data-driven decision making.

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?

I believe that erratic climate conditions are going to increase significantly over the near future. We must support farmers with steps to decrease the risk of climate change. We must support farmers with consultation and financial assistance to adjust their production to rapid change. It does all of us no good if farmers go bankrupt. We must continue to support farmers and ranchers with access to support if their livelihood is endangered by erratic climate conditions, but this assistance should recognize that farmers and producers need to step up to the plate and cooperate with major changes in farming technology, efficient use of energy and non fossil fuel energy sources, and incentivize crop diversity and land use diversity. I am not interested in corporate bailouts, but I am interested in supporting the diverse farming community.

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?

Support net neutrality (my own personal internet access has been impacted by our failures in this area), incentivize infrastructure development in this area, on a crisis basis. Internet access is a job growth and economic issue. Elect legislators that will support these.

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

We need to be willing as a state to pass Bonds for infrastructure development. Net neutrality will help allow smaller companies to approach smaller communities.

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

Yes, but naturally, I want the details of the initiatives.

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



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