

Montana Organic Agriculture

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

Representative Hd 47

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?

The state through the Department of Agriculture should educate the general public about organic farming and its benefits to health. Since it takes at least three years for farmers to switch from traditional farming to organic farming, the state should provide information and incentives for growing organic produce. Rural communities can thrive if they are connected to food hubs. Food hubs are critical for promotion and growth of local farm-to-table programs. With food hubs, producers, ranchers and farmers can connect to distribution channels and buyers within a region, thus creating a larger population of customers and more revenue for the producers.

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

The state can increase and sustain organic markets in a number of ways:

- Provide expertise in keeping pace with the growth of the organic industry, plan for growth in organic acreage, and help growers meet the demands of consumers. Second,
- Incorporate organic agriculture into marketing promotional efforts for Montana's products.
- Disseminate updates from National Organic Program (NOP) on organic certification and labeling.
- Link growers to nonprofits, commodity boards, trade associations, extension personnel and other groups outside government that may have more flexibility to make things work at the local level.
- Assist growers transition from federal cost-share.
- Support research and data collection.

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

Ben Thomas, the current Director of the Montana Department of Agriculture has an impressive resume. He has experience with agricultural policy at the federal level and is an attorney specializing in agricultural law. And perhaps more importantly, he was raised on a working family farm. A director of DOA needs a wide ranging knowledge of agriculture that would include the traditional products and the fast-growing new organic produce. A director who has connections to the federal Department of Agriculture and/or USDA would be helpful in promoting Montana's products.

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?

Because of the pandemic, we have learned that out-of-state supply chains can break down, leaving Montana without the foods we need. In the 1950s Montana farmers, ranchers, and food businesses supplied over 70% of the food consumed in Montana. By 2007 that number was down to less than 10%. Even though we are an agricultural state, money leaves the state every day when we feed our families. The state can help local communities to rebuild our regional food infrastructure in the following ways:

- Expand Montana producers' local markets;
- Develop regional food hubs to serve Montana first;
- Keep more of our food dollars in-state;
- Create new food-related jobs in local communities;
- Promote the increase in the amount of fresh, local food being served in our institutions

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?

In 2015 Team Nutrition, Montana State University-Bozeman and the Office of Public Instruction published a guide for how to get local foods on the menus in public schools. Several school districts adopted these guidelines and are successful in providing local foods. To spread this idea requires that local community leaders like school trustees and parent organizations need to advocate for local fresh foods to be used in their school cafeterias. The guidelines for how to do it are available and there are communities that can pass on what they did to be successful in using local foods.

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?

Go small is my suggestion. Food Hubs are a way to provide local meat and poultry to customers in a particular region. A food hub is a business that actively manages the processing, distributing and marketing of locally grown meat. Billings, for example, has a food hub that serves customers in the city and surrounding smaller communities. Most of the product at this point is beef, lamb and poultry, but other products are being developed. Customers can pick up their purchases at one location or pay extra to have purchases delivered.

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?

Community colleges and tribal colleges are good venues for providing practical training in food processing. Miles Community College was able to engage the community and develop partnerships with Montana Farm Bureau Federation (MFBF) and Montana Meat Processors Association. Having supporters is necessary in order to bring together all the resources necessary to put together a degree or certificate. Salaries for faculty members are very low in Montana when compared to other states, so there have to be incentives to convince a trained teacher to take a job. Also having partners sets up opportunities for students to practice their skills in real-life situations.

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

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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?

The multiple benefits provided by healthy soils – improved water quality, reduced soil erosion, financial and productivity gains for farmers, storage of carbon in the soil – justify the development of state-based strategies to promote healthy soils. Our governor or a state agency could initiate the development of a state strategy. A proposal to develop a soil health strategy could provide an opportunity to educate policy-makers and the public about the benefits of healthy soils, and to raise the profile of the issues.

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

Montana's farmers and ranchers could make income by participating in carbon markets. To reduce emissions, producers could:

- Decrease fertilization
- Alter manure management
- Reduce fuel consumption
- Change feeding practices
- Switch to alternative fuels, such as from coal to natural gas or bioenergy
- Produce biofuels feedstock
- Implement rotational grazing programs

Agriculturists can also capture and store emissions through a process called sequestration. One type of sequestration is biological sequestration, which uses the characteristics of plants to capture emissions. Agricultural forms of biological sequestration include:

- Changes in tillage practices
- Crop rotations
- Conversion of acreage to grasslands
- Afforestation, which is the planting of trees or seeds to change open land into forest or woodland.

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?

Developing a cost-share plan to be used to assist farmers with implementing strategies to improve soil quality is a good idea. California and Iowa have such programs that are administered at the local level. For Montana to be able to initiate a cost-share plan, the state would have to seek federal funding in order to make the project possible on a state-wide basis.

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

Realistically, Montana's state budget could not provide enough dollars for a state-based soil improvement program, but I would support attempting to get a federal grant that requires some kind of match from the state. That avenue is probably more likely to be successful. The USDA has announced grants to help state and Tribal governments build soil health programs. A state or Tribe with a funded soil health program could seek an annual grant from the U.S.

Department of Agriculture (USDA) to be used for:

- Technical assistance
- Financial assistance
- On-farm research and demonstration
- Education, outreach, and training
- Monitoring and evaluation

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?

The federal Beginning Farmer & Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) suggests that the following measures are successful in supporting farmers and ranchers:

- Starting Small. Successful projects focus on farmers in their first five years of farming, with a significant focus on those farmers starting out at a small scale.
- Farmer-to-Farmer Interactions. Mentors and peers provide valuable practical information to get new farmers started.
- One-on-One Services. Technical assistance works best one-on-one instead in a classrooms setting.
- Networking. Helping beginning farmers develop support networks and partnerships with local businesses and farming organizations creates stability as the new farmer starts out.
- General Education Methods Principles. Training for beginning farmers is more successful if taught using adult education strategies and hands on instruction.
- Examples of Success. New farmers benefit from learning about local examples of a beginning farmer growing a successful business.

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?

Glyphosate (Roundup) is an active ingredient in most herbicides utilized for the purpose of weed control for cereal and other grain crops. Glyphosate residues in these products are causing public health concerns regarding its exposure. Although known to degrade relatively quickly in the soil following application, glyphosate can possibly persist in soil, water, and plant tissues in certain conditions. Research suggests that glyphosate may reach groundwater, surface water, and several other non-target sites through processes such as leaching and surface runoff. The extensive use of glyphosate and the environmental risks associated with it warrant awareness among its users about its judicious utilization and necessitate further intense investigations to mitigate, avoid, or remove the problems resulting from its use. This type of research could be done at our land grant university.

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

Montana's Department of Agriculture has an Analytical Lab that is equipped to test--

- Feed
- Fertilizer
- Pesticide residues in soil/vegetation/water
- Water (Livestock)
- Forage

Montana State University-Bozeman currently has a grant to study the effects of pesticides on bees. MSU-Bozeman has the capacity to do other kinds of pesticide studies, but the cost of that research would have to come from grants. Studying the effects of pesticides is a good idea that should be pursued, perhaps with a combination of state and federal dollars.

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?

There are federal programs like Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC) that assist farmers and ranchers with payments due to unforeseen events. But erratic climate conditions should also be mitigated by embracing agricultural practices that help to remedy erratic weather patterns. Those steps should include:

- Efficient irrigation management
- Generation and use renewable energy
- Organic growing practices
- Increasing soil health
- Keeping agriculture green (reforesting)
- Reducing livestock methane emissions
- Pasture-based livestock management
- Protecting farmland
- Supporting farmers markets, food hubs and use of locally-grown foods

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?

The problem, basically, boils down to money and economics: Fiber-optic cable networks are expensive to build, and so are cell-phone towers, which also need to be hooked up to some type of network in the ground, usually fiber-optic. Providers of these services cannot make a profit in rural areas unless they charge customers exorbitant prices to cover the cost, so they are not likely to provide it without some form of government subsidy or assistance. The state budget could provide a match for federal and/or private grants. The state alone is not probably not going to be enough.

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

The places in Montana where access to broadband is limited are nearly all in rural communities. Providing broadband is very expensive in rural environments. The most realistic way to acquire money for rural broadband is to pursue grants. Montana has been the beneficiary of a variety of federal grants aimed at improving the State's broadband infrastructure. From 2010-2014, the Montana Department of Commerce was awarded \$6,084,826 to help form Montana Broadband Program with a focus on supporting expanded internet access, especially in rural and tribal areas of the State. Other programs, such as the Broadband for Montana Schools Program and Broadband Technologies Opportunities Program have helped schools and public libraries gain access to better internet with the objective of enriching education and employment opportunities.

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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