

Montana Organic Association 2020



Questions Responses 12

12 responses

Accepting responses ☒

Summary

Question

Individual

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Responses cannot be edited

Montana Organic Agriculture

The Montana Organic Association believes believes that the organic movement is one of the best hopes for keeping small family farms viable while providing clean, nutritious, and safe food to the community; helping secure our food system by supporting farm diversity, and contributing to a healthier environment which helps protect our precious wildlife and natural resources.

We appreciate your time to share your positions, thoughts, and ideas about organic agriculture and issues important to Montana's rural communities. Your answers will help those vested in Montana's organic community determine how to decide their votes this November. MOA does not endorse candidates, but will instead provide guidance to Montana's organic community about the candidates positions on organic agriculture.

Consider the following as you answer the questions below:

- Agriculture is Montana's top industry generating revenues of over \$3.5 billion.
- Of Montana's 27,000 farms, just over 300 of these farms are certified organic.
- Of the 59 million acres in agriculture production in Montana, 351,335 acres are in certified organic production or less than 1%.
- With over 350,000 certified organic acres, Montana is second in the number of organic acres in production in the US, just behind California with more than 768,089 acres in organic production.
- Montana is the number one organic wheat producing state in the US and is in the top three organic pulse producing states.
- Montana produces a wide variety of organic agricultural products from field crops like wheat, lentils, corn, and safflower, to beef, poultry and eggs, hogs, sheep, to direct-to-market vegetables like sweet corn, lettuce, carrots, kale, potatoes, and squash, to fruits like apples, cherries, and grapes. For nearly all farm products grown in Montana, there is an organic option.

- The number of US organic farms increased by 39% over the past five years. In Montana, the number of certified organic operations increased by more than 34% from 2011 (99 operations) to 2020 (347 operations).
- Nationally, organic farms remain a small percentage overall, but they continue to increase from 14,326 in 2012 to more than 18,000 in 2017. The number of farmers seeking organic certification increased by almost 40 percent in these five years, and the average value of sales per farm increased 84 percent.
- In 2016, there were 2.3 million acres of certified organic rangeland and 46,014 organically-certified beef cows in the US. The price of natural/organic beef averaged \$7.97 in the first quarter of 2017, which represented a premium of 67 percent over conventional. Such premiums are the result of consumer demand as well as the additional costs of producing organic beef. According to the sales data in the USDA NASS 2016 Certified Organic Survey, there was 7,827 head of beef sold as certified organic in the US, generating \$10,531,380 in sales or an average of \$1,345 per head. Of this total, 169 head of Montana beef sold for a total of \$268,182 in sales or \$1,586 per head. This average sales value represents a 14% premium over the national average for natural or organic beef.

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Name:

Margie MacDonald

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

Montana Senate District 26

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 support incentivizing water and soil conservation in agriculture, branding the high quality of Montana products - especially our organic crops and livestock, and looking at the bottom line in terms of net earnings for producers. Montanans should be looking for ways to provide capital for generational transfer of lands into productive and further incentivize those whose farming and husbandry conserve soil and water, including carbon sequestration and organic production.

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

I have consistently both carried bills and supported bills that encourage the creation of local food systems and the ability of producers to market without unreasonably prohibitive industrial scale regulatory standards. I worked with Sen. Tester in 2011 to provide a small farms exemption in the Food Safety Modernization Act while serving as ag and food regional organizer for the Western Organization of Resource Councils.

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

It's critical that individual be knowledgeable in the emerging models of successful food and ag operations that are building infrastructure and markets in local food systems.

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'd love to see the state go "all-in" on processing local meats: beef, pork, poultry, etc. I also support carefully crafted raw milk bills that permit direct sales of raw milk dairy products.

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 work of Montana advocacy organizations on their strategies to encourage and support schools, colleges, long term care and other congregate living/feeding institutions in transitioning to more local producers'. This is a potent tool for rural economic develop. As an example, the craft breweries and distilleries illustrate how this kind of transition can result in thousands of jobs across the state and small, locally owned businesses.

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 am 100% in support of mobile, more flexible local meat and poultry processing.

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 am 100% in support of this program and others like it.

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

I am 100% in support of developing jobs for small agricultural businesses and rural communities. I carried the first "cottage food" bill in 2013, which then Rep. Kathleen Williams pursued during the interim and brought back a stakeholder supported bill that generated hundreds of small businesses. This is key to Montana's economy at both the city and rural settings, but especially critical to rural 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. I support this 100%.

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

This is a huge opportunity given clear national policy prioritizing carbon reduction and carbon friendly agricultural practices.

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?

I am 100% in support of further research to promote healthy soil, and cost-share for land-stewards who use soil health practices.

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

I would be 100% in support of a state-based soils task force to promote health soils.

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?

I like the idea of using our investment assets to invest in training and transitioning a new generation of farmers and ranchers onto the land.

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 have long supported the ban of GMO wheat in Montana. This contamination is my primary reason for opposition. It cannot be controlled and spoils our international markets.

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

Yes, I would vote for that.

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?

Consciously incentivizing and supporting research in resilient farming/ranching practices makes a lot of sense in light of the growing impact of climate change and extreme climate events and erratic weather conditions.

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?

I support sound strategies to remedy the lack of reliable broadband internet access in Montana.

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

I like incentivizing and supporting the cooperative model for local communities and rural regions to do this collectively. The federal government will need to be there with substantial assistance as well - they waste money on weapons systems that do little for the economy. We can afford this.

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

Yes.

Thank you for your interest in Montana Organic Agriculture!



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