



HAVE YOU HEARD THE NEWS?

USDA SEEKS COMMENTS ON NATIONAL ORGANIC CHECK-OFF



The U.S. Department of Agriculture on Jan. 17 announced it is seeking public comments to a proposal for a nationwide research and promotion check-off program for organic.

The Organic Trade Association has led the drive for this check-off because the organic industry is at a critical point. This organic check-off will provide research and key tools to encourage more farmers to go organic and help all organic farmers be more successful. It will educate consumers in a positive way about what that organic seal really means. For the benefit of all of us, this proactive program will further the success of organic agriculture for the long term.

Published in the Federal Register, the proposal estimates the organic check-off, referred to as GRO Organic (Generic Research and Promotion Order for Organic), could raise over \$30 million a year to spend on research to make farmers successful, technical services to accelerate the adoption of organic practices, and consumer education and promotion of the organic brand.

OTA submitted an application to USDA in May 2015 to consider the program after gathering information over three years throughout the country in town hall meetings, panel discussions, surveys and phone calls. OTA submitted a revised application a year later to reflect alternatives presented to USDA from organic certificate holders. To date, nearly 1,400 organic stakeholders publicly support the GRO Organic check-off, with 75 percent of those organic certificate holders being farmers and ranchers.



“The time is right for a research and promotion check-off program designed for the organic sector. It’s time for organic stakeholders to invest back in our movement—to fund research to help

organic farmers, to create and initiate projects to nurture new organic farmers. An organic check-off will allow us to speak to the American consumer in a strong and unified voice.” Melissa Hughes, President of OTA’s Board of Directors and Director of Government Affairs for Organic Valley, the nation’s oldest organic dairy cooperative.



“An organic check-off will provide a stable, reliable source of funding to support research into organic production methods and dissemination of new and existing

research information to farmers. Check-off funds can support development of support systems necessary to enable expansion and success of organic farmers,” Doug Crabtree, OTA Board member and Farmers Advisory Council member, and Owner of Vilicus Farms, a 5,000 acre farm in Montana.

WHAT'S NEXT IN THE PROCESS?

USDA established a 60-day public comment period for interested parties to weigh in on the proposal. The initial comment period ends March 20. The final step will be an industry referendum.



Calling all organic farmers and food makers, NOW is the time!

After many years of dialog, there is a proposed research and promotion check-off program designed just for organic. All that's needed now is YOUR comment to USDA supporting this game-changing initiative.

The future of organic depends on it. We can either leave consumers guessing about what organic is, or we can come together to educate the public about what the organic seal really means. We can be solely dependent on others for research dollars to help solve industry challenges, or we can generate a pool of funds to help ourselves. We can struggle to meet the growing demand for organic, or we can work together to grow domestic acres and encourage more farmers to transition.

It's time for organic stakeholders to invest back in our movement. It's time to fund programs that support organic farmers- of all sizes. It's time to initiate projects that boost organic businesses- of all types. It's time to support this progressive proposal to advance organic.

THE PROPOSED ORGANIC CHECK-OFF WOULD BE PROGRESSIVE AND REFORM-BASED:

- ✓ The Check-off Board would be made up of 50 percent producers and 50 percent handlers.
- ✓ Producers will select their regional representatives through direct balloting.
- ✓ Every single certificate holder subject to an assessment will have a direct vote – there is no bloc voting.
- ✓ Assessments would be made throughout the value chain: producers, handlers, processors, retailers.
- ✓ Farmers and handlers with gross organic revenue below \$250,000 will choose whether or not to pay into the program.
- ✓ At least 50 to 75 percent of the funds would be earmarked specifically for research, or for activities that work hand-in-hand with research, like technical assistance and widespread dissemination of research findings.
- ✓ Twenty-five percent of the assessment from producers would be required to be used for local and regional research.
- ✓ All of the research, inventions and innovations resulting from organic check-off programing would remain in the public domain.
- ✓ A referendum is required every seven years to decide whether or not to continue the program.

**YOUR VOTE
MATTERS!**

Submit a commit to USDA on GROorganic.net with one-click or at Regulations.gov with docket AMS-SC-16-0112