

The Emergence of Organic Agriculture in Washington State

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Written for Whatcom Watch (www.whatcomwatch.org)

In 2006, over 60,000 acres of farmland were certified organic in the state of Washington, a 40% increase from the previous year, which generated farm gate sales in excess of \$100 million. Sixty-two percent of the 554 organic farms were in eastern Washington, leaving 38% west of the Cascades. Farm numbers are expected to top 700 in 2007 (based on WSDA records to date). While organic still represents less than 1% of the farmland in the state, the growth of this sector has been dramatic. Where did this come from? Where might it be headed? We will explore these questions in the article below.

Organic farming as a named concept was coined by J.I. Rodale in Pennsylvania in the 1940s. In part this was in response to the early industrialization of agriculture in this country, with increased mechanization and the introduction of synthetic fertilizers. Interestingly, similar responses were occurring at the same time in Europe with the biodynamic system and Japan with nature farming. In 1947, Rodale founded the Rodale Institute with the key message that “Healthy soil = healthy food = healthy people.” The popular magazine *Organic Farming and Gardening* became the primary vehicle for this message and drew an increasing following across the country, especially from gardeners and small-scale farmers. Rodale’s message was amplified by the emergence of the environmental movement in the 1960s, particularly with Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* that implicated the insecticide DDT in declines in wildlife populations. This helped create the on-going association between organic farming and the abstention from use of synthetic pesticides.

With the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s, many ex-urbanites on farms gravitated towards organic farming. This was particularly true in the Northeast and West Coast states, with California and Maine early hot spots for organic producers. Washington state had its own organic pioneers, such as Woody Deryckx, Gene Kahn, Mark Musick, David Skinner, Michael Pilarski, Bill Weiss, Esther Stefaniw, Billy Allstot, Tony Maskal, Steve Walser, and Piper Williams.

The landmark Northwest Conference on Alternative Agriculture, held in Ellensburg in November, 1974, launched the organic movement in our state. The conference was inspired by a meeting in Spokane earlier that summer with Kentucky farmer and writer Wendell Berry, and was attended by over 800 people from across the region. Several WSU faculty and students participated in the conference, including David Holland, A.R. Halvorson, David Scott, Chris Feise, Michael Wise, Munk Bergen, and Mel Weythman. The conference sparked the formation of local Tilth organizations around the region dedicated to urban ecology and organic farming.

Consumer awareness was not widespread about organic farming and foods. Some of the early food cooperatives in the state, notably Puget Consumers Coop (founded in 1953), began to source organic products where possible and to provide information to their customers about these products. There were no formal certification or verification

mechanisms in place then; the Rodale Institute was trying to coordinate standards across the country, but this proved unworkable. Growers formed the Northwest Organic Food Producers Association in the early 1970s to pursue certification, and eventually that group evolved into Tilth Producers' Cooperative (TPC). TPC developed its own certification standards, with grower members trying to do the certification themselves.

In 1983, State Representative Ken Jacobsen from Seattle (now a state senator) broached the idea of creating a state law defining organic foods with TPC. This resulted in the passage of the Organic Food Products legislation in 1985 (chapter 15.86 RCW). The Organic Food Products Act was amended in 1987 to provide the Washington State Dept. of Agriculture the authority to run an organic certification program (the first state program in the country*). The program began in 1988 with the hiring of Miles McEvoy as the sole (half-time) staff person. Miles brought tremendous integrity and commitment to working with organic farmers, creating a program that serves the growers and consumers of organic food and products. Many TPC members were directly involved in developing the original standards and some served on the first Organic Advisory Board (OAB). Sixty-three growers signed up in the inaugural year. Miles continues today as Program Manager, with a staff of 20 people that inspect and verify organic claims in the organic sector.

In 1988, Senator Wyche Fowler (D. - Georgia) introduced legislation that would have created an organically grown certification program. His bill prompted organic interest groups from around the country to work with Congress to write the Organic Food Production Act. These groups wanted national organic standards to help overcome the differences among certifiers in hopes of stimulating organic trade and leveling the playing field. They did not want outside interest groups to write the organic legislation. The Organic Food Production Act was part of the 1990 Farm Bill passed by Congress, representing an historic step, but one not without controversy (<http://www.ams.usda.gov/NOP/indexIE.htm>). It took the USDA 12 years to come out with a final rule for the National Organic Program (NOP) that was acceptable to the industry. An earlier proposed rule received over 250,000 public comments, by far the greatest number for any USDA action, and virtually all were negative. Washington state participated in this process, with Gene Kahn and Margaret Clark as initial members of the National Organic Standards Board, and many other Washington people spending countless hours contributing ideas and critiques of the developing rules.

Once the National Organic Program was established in 2002, existing certification organizations such as the WSDA Organic Food Program needed to apply to USDA for accreditation in order to continue their work. WSDA did so, was approved, and then worked to amend the state rule to adopt the NOP standards. While some minor variation is allowed from state to state, Washington's standards are essentially the same as all other certifiers in the country, and also must be followed by certifiers outside the country who work with products being shipped here and labeled organic. Over 95% of the organic growers in the state are certified by WSDA (<http://agr.wa.gov/FoodAnimal/Organic/default.htm>), and the Organic Food Program

enjoys a well-earned stellar reputation here, across the country, and abroad. However, a grower or processor in our state can use any accredited certifier for their operation.

As the demand for organic products grew in the 1990s, more growers became interested and began looking for information sources and support. Early organic conferences were organized by Phil Unterschuetz of Integrated Fertility Management. Miles McEvoy initiated the Washington Tilth Journal to help provide needed information. Over time, Tilth Producers picked up these activities and now sponsors an annual grower-oriented conference, and publishes the quarterly journal and annual directory (www.tilthproducers.org). Private companies such as Small Planet Foods (which absorbed Cascadian Farms, one of the early organic food marketers) hired staff to work with growers interested in entering organic production. Originally, WSDA Organic Food Program staff could provide advice to growers on production questions, but this was disallowed under the NOP.

WSU's Involvement with Organic Farming

Washington State University (WSU), the public institution for agricultural research and education, began slowly participating in the organic sector. Several faculty worked quietly in this area in the late 1970s and 1980s, conducting studies on the energy use in organic grain farming, markets for organic products, and soil changes over time from organic systems. Dr. Bob Papendick, with the USDA-Agricultural Research Service based at WSU in Pullman, led a study team commissioned by then Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland to examine organic farming across the country and make recommendations as to the USDA's role. Their "Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming," (<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/USDAOrgFarmRpt.pdf>) released in July 1980, represented the first official scientific foray into what was often considered folklore. Unfortunately, it coincided with the election of Ronald Reagan, whose administration quickly curtailed the USDA efforts in this area, thus setting back scientific and educational support for organic agriculture at least a decade.

Yet activities continued at WSU, with several graduate students completing research projects on organic farming and Dr. Dave Bezdicsek, WSU soil microbiologist, helping to organize the first symposium on organic agriculture at the American Society of Agronomy annual meetings in 1981. The papers from this symposium were published as a special publication "Organic Farming: Current Technology and Its Role in a Sustainable Agriculture," one of the first peer-reviewed scientific society publications on organic agriculture in the US.

In 1987, Dr. John Reganold and colleagues at WSU published an article comparing soil quality on an organic and adjacent conventional wheat farm in Spokane County, showing the organic farm to have retained 6 inches more topsoil over 40 years than the neighbor. Published in *Nature* magazine, one of the most prestigious scientific journals in the world, the paper sent an important message that organic agriculture was a valid topic for scientific inquiry and researchers who pursued it could gain recognition in the academic world. Since then, Reganold and co-authors have had papers in *Science*, *Scientific*

American, *New Scientist*, and again *Nature*, helping establish a reputation for WSU for organic agriculture research.

Interest and support for organic agriculture at WSU have grown along with the whole sector. A 2002 survey found over 50 faculty and staff recently or actively engaged in projects with an organic component or focus. The WSU Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources (CSANR) and other faculty offered a number of educational events on organic agriculture, including training on the NOP, organic research symposia, organic seed production, organic fruit production, organic grain production, and organic vegetable production. The Dept. of Crop and Soil Sciences proposed an undergraduate organic agriculture major which was officially launched in 2007 as part of the new Agriculture and Food Systems degree program. By 2005, there were 17 graduate students identified who were doing their research on organic systems.

In, 2003, the Washington Sustainable Food and Farming Network, in collaboration with Tilth and other groups, helped secure federal funding for the Organic Crop Research for the Northwest proposal drafted by CSANR. This has totaled nearly \$1 million to date, focusing on seeds, tree fruit, pest control, product efficacy, and statistics. An organic farm for teaching was established on the Pullman campus in 2004, and WSU had dedicated organic research land at four of its research locations. State funding for the CSANR BIOAg (Biologically Intensive Agriculture and Organic Farming) program in 2006 and 2007 provided further resources in support of organic agriculture. Information on organic farming efforts at WSU can be found at <http://organicfarming.wsu.edu>. WSU actively partners with Tilth Producers and other groups to host workshops, farm walks, and other educational activities for organic agriculture.

Looking Ahead

The future is bright for the organic sector. Organic dairies are rapidly expanding in the state to meet the demand for milk. More processors and handlers are entering the organic market, and mainstream supermarkets sell over half the organic foods in the country. The Hartman Group in Bellevue, WA, is a leading consumer research firm specializing in organics and natural foods (<http://www.hartman-group.com/>). Major fruit companies in the state are making significant commitments to organic production, with some setting goals of 20% organic in the next few years. More companies are providing organic products and services for growers to meet production challenges and information needs.

In some crops such as apples, the difference between conventional and organic is continually shrinking. How that will affect the market for organic apples in the future is a question worth considering. Once “everything is organic,” will organic become a commodity that no longer commands a premium price? Recently, *Time* magazine carried a cover story about ‘local’ challenging ‘organic’ as a top consumer consideration, but there is no reason the two cannot combine forces, along with other emerging identities such as carbon footprint and nutrient quality.

WSU is already involved in several research projects on the effect of organic farming on food quality, and the Climate Friendly Farming™ project is looking at the greenhouse

gas implications of our agricultural systems. Organic growers will have to deal with diminishing fossil energy supplies just like all others. They need to protect soil and water resources; thus research is starting to blend organic and no-till, systems that have long been considered mutually exclusive. The organic wheat breeding program at WSU is a good example of growers and researchers working together to find biological solutions to production problems and to improve the nutritional value of the food.

Organic food sales accounted for nearly 3% of all retail US food sales in 2005. Some European countries are between 5 and 10%. Will the growth level off, or will the adoption rate accelerate? If price premiums shrink, will this induce more consumer purchases? How will consumers begin to discriminate among organic products – local, family farm, nutrient density? Many consumers choose organic foods because they associate them with a healthier, safer choice. Will research substantiate the nutritional or health benefits of organic foods? Can organic farms quantify any environmental benefits they provide and get paid for them? These and other questions will resolve over time. But there is no question that organic food and the farms that produce it are here to stay for a long while.

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* Texas and Washington State started organic certification programs in 1988. Washington's program was promulgated in rule a few months prior to the start of the Texas program. To be fair both programs started the same year.