

## **Brief History of Organic Farming and the National Organic Program**

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Traditional farming practices used prior to the 20th century are generally regarded as ‘organic.’ Introduction of chemically synthesized farm inputs such as urea and DDT were criticized by scientists, philosophers, and practitioners who questioned whether the widespread adoption of such practices was sustainable. Farmers continued to practice traditional methods rather than adopt ‘progressive’ methods of chemical farming. Despite some economic disadvantages, a number of these traditional farmers remained competitive.

Organic food became established in the public’s mind as a separate identity during the 1960s and 1970s. Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring established public awareness of the ecological problems associated with agricultural chemicals in general and the use of synthetic insecticides in particular. Water pollution related to fertilizer and pesticide use and the two energy crises in the 1970s also provided incentives for farmers to reduce the use of farm chemicals. Awareness of the consequences of modern farm practices led to pesticide regulation and created growing consumer demand for food grown without ecologically destructive and toxic chemicals. Many consumers considered organic food to be one such alternative. As the market for organic foods grew, so did the need for standards, certification, and regulation. The Rodale Press established a set of voluntary standards and a certification program in 1972. Several states passed laws governing organic agriculture in the late 1970’s. Rodale was also responsible for helping to organize the establishment of California Certified Organic Farmers and Oregon-Washington Tilth Organic Producers Association in the early 1970s.

Many of the pioneers and innovators in organic agricultural research came from the Western US. California has long been the largest producing and largest consuming state for organic food. Robert Papendick, a USDA-ARS soil scientist based at Washington State University in Pullman produced the “Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming,” in 1980, regarded by many as the first official recognition by USDA that organic farming was viable and warranted serious research support. Within the University of California system, Robert vandenBosch and others within the Division of Biological Control advanced ecological principles and sought to avoid use of chemical pesticides.

The farm crisis of the 1980’s brought bankruptcy and foreclosure rates not seen since the 1930’s. A few large-scale bankrupt conventional farms were still able to plant and harvest crops without using purchased inputs. At the end of a transition period, they discovered that there were buyers who would pay a premium for their crops that were ‘organic by neglect’ because of the absence of chemical inputs. These farms were possibly the first to go organic for strictly economic reasons and were of considerably larger scale than the organic farms that existed prior to their entry into the organic sector. Their market entry made the organic sector more competitive with conventional agriculture. The ability of these farmers to produce without chemical inputs, their rapid expansion of the organic market, and their obvious profitability gained the attention of other nonorganic farmers who faced financial difficulties.

As the ecological, health, and welfare consequences of conventional farming systems became increasingly apparent, organic agriculture found itself serving a growing consumer base seeking an alternative to food produced by conventional farming techniques. In 1989, Sixty Minutes broadcast a story on Alar. Overnight, the sale of organic commodities increased without any change in practices or availability of organic food. Organic farmers and their customers saw limited supply, overwhelming demand, a patchwork of inconsistent or nonexistent state laws, inadequate enforcement programs, and pervasive fraud all threatening the meaning and value of the organic label. A coalition of organic farming, consumer, animal welfare, and environmental organizations persuaded Congress to pass the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) in the 1990 Farm Bill.

In 1992, the USDA appointed the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) and established the National Organic Program (NOP). Over the next five years, the NOSB and NOP convened numerous public meetings to discuss and develop a uniform set of organic standards for the US. Then, in 1997, the USDA published the first proposed NOP Rule. This first proposal did not adopt the NOSB's recommendations, and was directly counter to the organic industry's existing standards. The USDA received more comments on the first proposed NOP Rule than any other proposed USDA rulemaking up to that date. Practically every comment opposed the USDA adoption of the 1997 proposal as the NOP Rule. The USDA incorporated most of the NOSB's recommendations into a final rule published on December 21, 2000. The OFPA was implemented by the NOP Rule on October 22, 2002.

This article published 2005

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*Organic Farming Compliance Handbook: A Resource Guide for Western Region Agricultural Professionals* was developed with funding from the Western Region USDA SARE program. Online version of the resource guide available at <http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/organic/complianceguide/>