

**Testimony  
Of Laura Davis  
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&  
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Barre, MA  
to the  
Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research  
Committee on Agriculture  
U.S. House of Representatives  
at the hearing, on  
The Next Farm Bill: Specialty Crops  
March 9, 2017**

**Introduction**

Good afternoon! I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on a topic area that is important to farmers throughout the Northeast. My name is Laura Davis and like most farmers who are trying to piece together a living, I wear many hats. Foremost, I own and operate Long Life Farm along with my husband Donald Sutherland. Our daughters 12 and 14 are the most important crop we grow. I am the President of the Board of Directors of the Northeast Organic Farming Association/Massachusetts Chapter; this is a volunteer position. On behalf of NOFA/Mass, I earn an hourly wage assisting farmers and food handlers with their organic certification process. In addition, I organize the Hopkinton Farmers Market in my town and I am an Independent Organic Inspector. The sweat and energy that my husband and I have put into building our farm and raising our children, combined with my experience with NOFA/Mass, has provided me with an important and unique perspective on the state of small diversified farms and specialty crop production in Massachusetts but also throughout the rest of the Northeast.

I have walked the path that Beginning Farmers must travel to access land, learn agricultural skills and finance infrastructure. Unlike young farmers starting out, I had a bit of savings that paid my

personal expenses and early capital expenses as I launched my agricultural business. In addition, several important federal programs helped Long Life Farm gain a foothold in our local market.

Long Life Farm is a certified organic diversified vegetable farm growing over 100 varieties of vegetables and fruit on 2 ¼ acres of leased land. We launched our farm in early 2011, and are growing food and selling direct to 85 families and our community at the Hopkinton Farmers Market and the Ashland Farmers markets.

As I mentioned previously I am also the President of the Board of Directors of NOFA/Mass. NOFA/Mass has 1100 members and is part of the NOFA Interstate Council of NOFA organizations from New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Jersey which is made up of about 5000 members. NOFA/Mass enjoys a diversified revenue mix of federal, state and private grants, membership, donations and conducts numerous educational workshops and seminars on organic farming and gardening.

We teach farmers, gardeners, consumers, landscapers, educators and policy makers how to take action on their own to return carbon to the soil and produce nutrient dense food that will resist insect/disease pressure as well as resist extreme weather events.

NOFA/Mass Mission statement reads: Through education and advocacy NOFA/Mass promotes organic agriculture to expand the production and availability of nutritious food from living soil for the health of individuals, communities and the planet.

The NOFAs are proud members of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition as well as the National Organic Coalition.

I want to turn my attention now to the topic at hand, the next farm bill and specialty crops. As a small-diversified organic specialty crop farm relying on direct market channels for selling my produce, marketing and sales is critical to my job. I know from experience and through other farmers, how important marketing and finding a way to connect with customers is for the success of farms like mine throughout the Northeast.

The National Organic Certification Cost-share Assistance Program is an important program that helped us connect and communicate with potential customers and access the strong and growing market for certified organic food. There was no hesitation, when I launched Long Life Farm, that I would pursue organic certification. I have relied on the USDA/Organic seal in purchasing food for my family and it felt like a natural progression to certify the food that we were producing on our farm. It was also important to me to have instant credibility with my new customers as a new farmer. The USDA Organic label enabled me to instill confidence with shareholders up front. Farmers can spend years getting to know customers and familiarizing them with their farming practices. In the case of farmers interested in selling to wholesale markets, many institutional buyers, as well as supermarkets and other groceries now carrying organic produce, require certification.

As the Organic Certification Assistance Coordinator for NOFA/Mass, I often hear objections from farmers to certification due to cost of the program. For small farmers, the Organic Cost Share Program brings the cost in line with affordability. While costs can vary amongst different certifiers, recouping 75% (for a maximum \$750) of the organic certification fee paid to certifiers is a huge benefit for small farms. This means higher margins for farmers who grow commodity crops, when prices are at historic lows. One could argue that more organic farms means more conservation programs too, as organic farmers are doing conservation work through nutrient management, cover cropping, crop rotations and now more so than ever reduced or no-till farming. The Organic Certification Cost Share program is bringing benefits to our farm communities that keep on giving, on multiple fronts.

Another program that I know has been important for developing new marketing opportunities for family farms is the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program. This program also helps farmers tap the existing demand for local produce by developing new markets and increasing consumer demand. One entity who was awarded a FMPP grant in 2016 here in Massachusetts, New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, is launching workshops and training programs to develop a direct marketing plan which will include technical support, branding, websites and marketing strategy for farmers going through their farm business planning course and those farming on their incubator farm.

As everyone here in this room knows, farms of all types are struggling throughout the country. Rock bottom commodity prices and tightening international commodity markets have more and more farmers looking to local, regional and organic markets to diversify their businesses and ensure long-term viability of their farms and the next generation of farmers. In such a state of general uncertainty with more and more producers looking to local, regional and organic markets, it is critical that the next Farm Bill at the very least maintain or increase current investments in those sectors of the agriculture economy – now is not the time to cut important programs serving agriculture and promoting rural jobs and economic opportunity. In light of the state of the rural economy and local and international marketing opportunities, we should really be discussing increasing farm bill investments in developing local and regional food economies and organic agriculture.

USDA/NRCS EQIP grants have been an extremely valuable program to so many Northeast farmers. I have been able to extend my season with the aid of a high tunnel greenhouse, partially paid for by an NRCS high tunnel grant in 2015. This grant also enabled me to pay for additional greenhouse soil testing to insure maximum nutrient management. Not only have I expanded my farm share offerings to include early spring and fall greens, but early and late crops undercover are safer from severe weather events. This would not have been possible without the EQIP grant. This program should continue to benefit farmers throughout the U.S.

My farm markets most of our produce through a CSA program, though we also sell through farmers markets where we have benefited from being able to accept SNAP EBT and double-value SNAP incentives. Only about 5% of the community that I live in receives SNAP benefits, but they are seniors who live in subsidized housing. They used to have a local grocery they could get to within blocks of their home. Now they must travel some ways to do their grocery shopping. We are promoting SNAP at the Hopkinton Farmers Market and hope to gain funding for SNAP matching so that we can bring more benefits to our seniors on a limited income.

We would like to also be able to accept SNAP EBT for CSA shares. Like many others Massachusetts farmers, we thought changes to the last farm bill would make that possible but unfortunately severe limitations in the implementation phase of the farm bill resulted in inadequate changes. For instance, Many Hands Organic Farm in Barre, MA brings out the EBT machine once

per week for one customer, must connect via dial-up to connect, and must be available and present when the customer picks up. They cannot be out in the fields working. All their other shares are picked up by customers without someone there to assist them. Many farms deliver CSA shares to more convenient drop off points for their customers, having to scan the EBT card each week or every other week, instead of once per season, is preventing farmers from accepting SNAP benefits for CSA shares, causing people who need the nutritious food most going without, if they cannot get to the farm. I hope the next Farm Bill can fix some of these logistical challenges and make it possible to truly receive SNAP benefits for a CSA farm share.

In terms of marketing, one of the biggest challenges I face is from food safety regulations. Food safety is important to our operation first and foremost for our customers' health and well-being, but food safety is also about marketing and access to markets, and about government regulations.

While it is not a concern for my farm at the current size, like every small business owner I hope my small farm business will continue to grow and that means I will have to become increasingly focused on compliance with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) produce regulations whether through direct application of those regulations on my farm or the indirect impact of driving increased reliance on third party food safety auditing in the larger local and regional produce markets. Understanding FSMA, and becoming third party food safety audited for FSMA compliance and/or market access are weighing on the back of the minds of many farmers throughout the northeast and indeed the whole country.

Food safety is both a major challenge and an opportunity for which the farm bill could really help. Throughout the Northeast many small and medium size farmers are struggling to figure out how and when they have to or don't have to comply with FSMA rules and regulations. This is one area in which the farm bill should really play a stronger role. There needs to be much more robust outreach and education efforts aimed at helping to educate and train small farmers across this country about FSMA and its associated rules, regulations and thresholds for compliance. Providing additional funding for the Food Safety Outreach Program through the farm bill could help to address these issues. In addition, the Farm Bill should look at cost share programs that would help offset the water testing requirements for surface water for FSMA. While my organic certifier requires me to do water testing annually at a cost of \$70, the FSMA required 20 tests (\$700) to

establish baseline and then 5 water tests (\$175) per year thereafter is not only costly in terms of testing, it is a logistical nightmare. Labs usually require you to use only their sample cups, so if you don't have enough in stock, you must go get them before taking water samples and returning them to the lab. There is also a small window of time when samples can be delivered to the lab, making it difficult for farms that are not within proximity.

A cost-share assistance program focused on food safety would be tremendous, it could mean the difference between survival and failure for many farmers of all types from well-established producers to beginning and veteran farmers. For me and many other farmers it seems only fair. If society through Congress and the FDA has decided that we need to impose certain industrial-type food safety regulations and standards on farmers throughout the country, society should share in that burden rather than place it all on struggling family farmers and rural communities.

Lastly, I would like to talk about a topic that is less focused on current and short-term challenges and opportunities and on the long-term future. That topic is research. My farm and so many others throughout the Northeast have benefited from on-farm research into new practices and approaches to farming, shared through farmer-to-farmer networks and events. Farming is not an exact science and techniques continue to evolve for small organic farms utilizing no-till or minimal till farming. There are only a handful of universities that focus on research that is relevant to organic farming. This primarily due to limited funding to support such research rather than a lack of interest. Research studies can make a big impact to Northeast farmers. For instance, the results<sup>1</sup> from a single recent study from the University of New Hampshire may have saved ¼ acre of fall brassicas that I lost to aphids last year.

I participated in a Specialty Crop Research Initiative grant through NOFA/Mass over the last year, and while results have not been published yet, I do expect to learn about new practices that will make me a more profitable farmer. I will be sharing my efficiencies in using black weed guard mulch in between rows of cucurbits and tomatoes.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://extension.unh.edu/resources/files/Resource006332\\_Rep9072.pdf](https://extension.unh.edu/resources/files/Resource006332_Rep9072.pdf)

We also need to research how our changing climate is impacting agriculture in the Northeast as it pertains to flooding, drought, severe temperature swings and the direct market farmer.

Continued growth in the local and regional and organic sectors of agriculture depend on developing new regionally and locally adapted seeds and techniques, continued investment in organic research and on-farm research and dissemination of that research to farmers and other researchers. As you know certified organic growers are required to use organic seed, however there are limited varieties available if you compare catalogs of conventional seed. As an Independent Organic Inspector, I visited 20 organically certified farms in 2016 to do their annual inspection. A very small handful uses 95-100% organic seed in their farming operations. This all has to do with the limited availability, or lack of vigor and breeding of organic seed. It is important that the next Farm Bill continues to invest in agriculture research and education through programs like the Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI).

Organic farming continues to be one of the fastest growing sectors of agriculture. However, a major challenge facing organic farmers is the lack of sufficient, appropriate, and relevant research, education programs, and extension resources. A strong investment in research underpins growth in any sector, as all farmers – sustainable, organic, conventional, or otherwise – need cutting-edge research that is easily accessible and relevant to their farming systems. OREI helps fill the void of knowledge by supporting research projects that specifically address the most critical challenges that organic farmers face in their fields every day. And most of the research results from OREI can also inform and be applied by more conventional operators as well. The next farm bill should redouble research investments and activities in OREI.

Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon about such an important topic. I am grateful for the subcommittee's interest in learning more about how farm programs and policies are and aren't working for farmers in the Northeast. I encourage the subcommittee members to give careful consideration into how the next farm bill can and should support rural communities and small family farmers by supporting local and regional food economies.