



Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association

Common Ground Country Fair

Testimony of Russell Libby, Executive Director,
Maine Organic Farmers & Gardeners Association
before the Subcommittee on Nutrition and Horticulture,
Agriculture Committee,
U.S. House of Representatives
May 8, 2012
“Small Changes Make Big Differences on the Ground”

Good morning, Chairwoman Schmidt and Honorable Members of the House Agriculture Committee. I am Russell Libby, Executive Director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, or MOFGA. MOFGA is the largest state level organic organization in the country, with about 6500 member farms, businesses, and households. Formed in 1971, we started the country's first state organic certification program in 1972, an apprenticeship program to match new farmers with experienced teachers in 1975, and hired the first organic 'extension agent' in 1986. We now have 26 employees who work on services to farmers, education, and outreach to the general public.

MOFGA's annual harvest festival, the Common Ground Country Fair, draws 60,000 people each September to Unity, Maine, a town of 2400, making it the country's largest organic food event.

We also run a highly successful new farmer training program. Of the 140 program participants over the past 12 years, 87% are currently farming. Our USDA-accredited organic certification program includes about 5% of the farms in Maine, and about 20% of the dairy farmers.

MOFGA has been in business for 40 years, and in that time, we have witnessed tremendous growth in organic agriculture and in the opportunity for farmers to rebuild local economies through food production. Our farmers have built a robust direct-to-consumer marketing movement in Maine, with close to 150 farmers' markets and several hundred farmers offering Community-Supported Agriculture programs that supply about 2% of the families in Maine with produce, summer and sometimes winter, and an increasing array of products. With a number of small investments and no-cost policy changes, the 2012 Farm Bill can facilitate this growth and opportunity.

We are a member of the National Organic Coalition, and work closely with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, so our Farm Bill priorities reflect theirs in many ways.

Horticulture Title:

294 Crosby Brook Road, P.O. Box 170, Unity, Maine 04988 • **Phone:** (207) 568-4142
Fax: (207) 568-4141 • **E-mail:** mofga@mofga.org • **Web:** www.mofga.org

The Horticulture title of the Farm Bill is critically important for organic farmers. The National Organic Program does an increasingly good job of working through issues that confront organic food producers and processors around the country. The Specialty Crop Grants program is a long-overdue recognition of the needs of fruit and vegetable farmers from around the country.

Our suggestions:

1. Fund national organic certification cost-share at the level included in the Senate farm bill voted out of Committee. Organic agriculture is a strong and growing sector of American agriculture, and organic certification cost-share is an investment in business development for agriculture. Many organic farmers rely on the cost-share program to help them access markets (retailers, specialty food processors). The program also enables farmers to remain in the organic market by offsetting annual certification costs for farmers. Organic producers must meet strict organic standards to be certified, and the costs of certification are going up. As the requirements for the National Organic Program become more strictly defined, the time farmers spend in recordkeeping and compliance increases substantially. Without national organic certification cost-share, farmers here at home will opt not to certify, and organic companies will have to source organic product from overseas instead of from American farmers to meet strong consumer demand.

2. Encourage more organic farmer participation in critical conservation programs. The 2008 Farm Bill included important provisions in **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)** for organic farmers in recognition of the historical lack of participation and conservation benefits of these systems. However, both programs are in need of reform to address the unique needs of organic farming systems. **Issues such as the unfamiliarity of NRCS staff with organic systems, overlapping planning requirements with the National Organic Program, and lack of adequate planning assistance should be addressed in the next Farm Bill.** By the way, one of the places that we've been very successful in the past few years is getting our new young farmers to participate in NRCS programs, which helps to strengthen the base for that agency long into the future.

3. Help the National Organic Program (NOP) to be more effective. The National Organic Program enforces the national organic standards, accredits certifiers, develops equivalency agreements, handles complaints – in essence, NOP ensures the integrity of the organic seal. These are essential functions to the survival and growth of the organic sector. Additionally, the program requires a capital investment in innovative technologies that will position the program to be able to grow with the organic sector, providing domestic and international oversight, and transparency and streamlining of systems, data, and information. **NOP should receive a one-time infusion of \$5 million in mandatory funds for the technology upgrade, and then should be authorized to receive appropriations increasing at a rate of 20 percent annually beginning with \$10 million in FY 2013.**

Nutrition Title:

When things work right, the full range of USDA programs make a significant difference to farmers and the general public. Linking nutrition programs to access at farmers' markets, expanding EBT programs, developing more opportunities for farmers to supply the school lunch program—all of these things make farmers more profitable. The largest programs within the Farm Bill are embedded in the Nutrition Title. If farmers are not able to provide food through programs in the Nutrition Title for the people who need it the most, they are shut out of a major income stream. If the people who are eligible for nutrition assistance do not have access to fresh, local produce, they

may not get the full nutritional benefits from the assistance they receive. Connecting farmers with consumers who participate in nutrition assistance can benefit producers and consumers.

How can you help this to happen?

1. Make it easier for farmers to access EBT programs. The range of marketing options has widened dramatically over the past decade, with farmers' markets, CSAs, farmstands, buying clubs and other options. Please amend Section 7(h) of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 to treat wireless retail food vendors as fixed locations stores are now treated.

2. Increase the ability of school lunch programs to source directly from farmers who meet their standards by:

- a. Allowing flexibility in schools. Rather than requiring produce purchases through the DOD Fresh program, allow schools the option to use their DOD credit to purchase food directly from local farmers. (Requires amending *Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh program in Section 10603(b) of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002*)
- b. Similarly, allow schools to use 15% of their 'commodity' dollars to purchase locally available foods that in turn help to support their communities. This addresses a key tension in many rural communities. Farmers support their schools through property taxes, and in turn would like their schools to be able to support them through purchases.

Other programs important to the whole.

Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program. As interest in direct markets grows, and farmers innovate to supply more. The expanded Farmers Market Promotion Program continues to serve direct marketers, but also includes those farm businesses that are trying to develop farm to institution and food hub opportunities across the country. It deserves more funding: the \$30 million proposed in the Local Foods, Farms and Jobs Act will only scratch the surface of the current interest. Every new market opened or expanded through the program provides more jobs and keeps money circulating in the many participating communities.

Seeds and breeds. I understand that the prevailing worldview is that the solutions for the future revolve around biotechnology, but I want to say a few words in favor of all-purpose, traditional breeding. In the late 1800's, farmers in my part of western Kennebec County, Maine, were deeply engaged in the refinement of the Hereford as a cattle breed suitable for the U.S. The dry bean varieties that work in our humid Northeast climate were selected over long stretches of time by farmers, and then further refined by plant breeders at public universities. Even now farmers in New England benefit from plant breeding done at the University of New Hampshire by Brent Loy, who has developed melons and pumpkins that thrive in the Northeast. In our rush to the cellular approach, I hope we don't lose sight of the value of traditional plant breeding. The Seeds and Breeds provisions of the last Farm Bill were a good starting point, but we need the public plant breeders and the long-term commitment to make those varieties available.

Expanding Economic Opportunities

In conclusion, markets for farmers are changing rapidly. There are thousands of new farmers markets around the country and Community Supported Agriculture programs

(CSAs) are also rising in number. In Maine, the number of farmers markets has grown tenfold in the past 30 years, and CSAs now supply about two percent of Maine families. While this growth in direct producer-to-consumer marketing is exciting, there is a nearly untapped marketing opportunity at the wholesale, retail, and institutional level of sales. Through your actions with the Farm Bill as I have outlined above, you can give this stage of marketing the jumpstart it needs. This larger scale represents the bulk volume of food sales, and it is in this area that the next generation of farmers is working to make inroads. With your help, small changes can truly make big differences on the ground.

Thank you. I would be happy to answer questions.

Russell W. Libby, Executive Director
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
PO Box 170, Unity, Maine 04988

Summary: Russell Libby is Executive Director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, the country's largest state-level organic association with 6500 member farms, families, and businesses. Trained as an economist, he's worked on agricultural and economic policy issues for the past 35 years in a variety of roles, including a decade as research director at the Maine Department of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources.

Education:

M.P.S., Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of Maine, 1986.
B.A., Economics, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, 1978.

Work Experience:

1995-date: Executive Director, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association. Provide day to day leadership for a 6,500 member organization and 26 employees. Represent MOFGA with farmers, the Maine Legislature, and the general public. Work with program staff to develop programming around Agricultural Services, Education, and activities at MOFGA's Common Ground Education Center, which hosts the Common Ground Country Fair, the country's largest organic agriculture event. Current areas of emphasis: food safety and family farmers; building agricultural infrastructure.

1986-1995: Director of Special Projects, Maine Department of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources. Acted as "information" resource for the Department, the agricultural community, and the public. Participated in public policy formulation and the Legislative process. Helped to write and edit biweekly newsletter. Conducted Northeast's only regular survey of organic food prices

1984-1985: Senior Planner, Maine Office of Energy Resources. Responsible for petroleum industry price surveys and monitoring. Wrote part of Maine Energy Plan.

1978-83: Research Associate, National Center for Economic Alternatives, Augusta, Maine. Research on national economic policy issues including inflation, Federal budget priorities, and industrial policy. Conducted background research and documented information for a book on U.S. economic policy. Analysis of economic development issues in Maine, including business ownership, living costs, and taxation.

Agricultural Activities:

1983-date: Co-owner and co-operator of Three Sisters Farm, a diversified organic farm in Mount Vernon. (Due to family health issues, not currently offering products for sale.)

Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), member of Board and Executive Committee, 1983-88, 1990-1995. President, 1993 and 1994. Among many activities: certification committee, 1987-1995, with work on standards and procedures; helped organize Farmer to Farmer Conference each year; part of major rewrite of organization's bylaws; participated in two rounds of long-range plan development.

Local agriculture: Helped to organize Mount Vernon Farmers' Market, and participating vendor, 1993-1996. Helped to organize a small informal coop selling organic produce to Bates College, 1994-96.

National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture: national steering committee and, subsequently, board member, 1997-2005.

National Organic Coalition: Board member, 2007-date.

Agricultural Council of Maine, 1995-date, president (2003-2004), vice-president 2001-2002, secretary 1997-2000, co-chair of committee which produced "A Business Plan for Maine Agriculture"

Eat Local Foods Coalition, organizer and chair, 2002-2007; board member, 2008-date.

Maine Food Policy Council, appointed as public member 2006-2010. Elected chair of the Council, 2009.

Boards and commissions:

University of Maine Board of Agriculture, 1999-date. Advisory committee to the Agriculture School.

Maine Bioplastics Council, 2009-2011.

Maine's Own Organic Milk Company, 2009-date. Board of a start-up milk company marketing organic milk from about 10 Maine farmers.

Maine State Technical Committee, NRCS, 1998-date.

Slow Money Maine Coordinating Committee, 2010-date.

Chancellor's Task Force on Agriculture, 1999. Led to formation of Board of Agriculture.

Maine Legislature's Agricultural Vitality Task Force, 1999-2000.

Governor's Task Force on the Dairy Industry, 2003.

Variety of legislative and Department of Agriculture task forces.

Selected Presentations:

Dozens of presentations and talks each year, along the themes of:

"The 2012 Farm Bill", College of the Atlantic Food Policy Conference, April, 2012

"Putting the Pieces Together: Our Next Food System", Common Ground Country Fair keynote, September, 2011:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=RC6txcFKQCU

TEDXDirigo, "Beyond the 'Roadrunner' Economy", October 2010,

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tS_3XIXNdOg

Panelist, Food Safety, National Food Policy Conference, Washington, D.C., September, 2009

"A Face, A Place, A Taste", College of the Atlantic, April, 2009

"Our Local Food System", Island Institute Sustainability Conference, November, 2008

"Getting Farmers Involved in Public Policy", MOFGA Farmer to Farmer Conference, 2007

"Role of Local Food", introductory keynote, NOFA-Vermont Winter Conference, 2007

"Building Markets for Local Foods", NOFA-Vermont Winter Conference, 2007

"Food with a Face, a Place, a Taste", Northeast SARE keynote, Vermont, 2004

"Building a Local Organic Food System", Canaries Forum, Camden, 2000

"Emerging Biotechnology and the Organic Agriculture Alternative" Rising Tide Cooperative Annual Meeting, Damariscotta, and Good Tern Coop, Rockland, 1999

"Building Local Markets for Organic Foods", keynote talk at NOFA-NY winter meeting, March, 1998

"Impact of Buying Local Foods" Portland Museum of Art, Portland, 1996

"Why Buy Local?", Friends of Morris Farm, Wiscasset, 1995

"Building Community with Agriculture", a keynote talk at the Common Ground Country Fair, 1992
"Thinking About Profitability on Organic Farms", Farmer to Farmer Conference, 1993

Publications and articles:

"A Face, a Place, a Taste", Island Journal Vol 26, 2010, p. 60-63.

"An Abundant Food System", Maine Policy Review Vol.20 (1), Winter/ Spring 2011, p.61-65.

"Food Safety for Small Farmers", Small Farmers' Journal, Winter, 2009.

"Beware Good Agricultural Practices", Summer 2007, via www.mofga.org

Regular op-eds on subjects dealing with agriculture in Maine newspapers

"Food with a Face, a Place, a Taste", in Sustainable Cuisine White Papers, Earth Pledge Foundation, New York, 1999.

"Impact of Buying Local Foods", Maine Times, June, 1996.

Maine Organic Farmer and Gardener, various issues, 1985-date. President's column, 1993-1994 (12 issues); numerous articles summarizing MOFGA activities; book reviews.

Maine Department of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources. Maine Agricultural Statistics, various years, report summarizing status of agriculture in Maine. Maine Dairy Farm Cost of Production, 1993. Summary report analyzing Maine dairy farmers' costs to produce milk. Various commodity and issue studies (sheep farmers, organic farmers, ornamental horticulture) for Dept. of Agriculture. Maine Agricultural Report, numerous columns, regular price reports, 1986-95.

Other Activities and Interests:

Selectman, Town of Mount Vernon, 2007-2011; School Board Member, 2001-2004, including chair of Finance Committee, 2002-2004. Member, Town of Mount Vernon Budget Committee, 2003-2005. Comprehensive Planning Committee, 1988-1991, 2006-2008

Poet. Balance: A Late Pastoral published by Blackberry Press, 2007. Over 100 published poems.

**Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Required Witness Disclosure Form**

House Rules require non-governmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2008.

Name: Russell Libby

Organization represented: Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, Unity, Maine

2. Federal grants & awards received since October 1, 2008, as well as the source and amount of each grant or contact.

USDA - RMA (CFSC)	11-IE-53102-066	\$ 23,016
NIFA - BFRDP (NOFA-NY)	2011-49400-30510	\$ 30,168
NIFA - BFRDP-MOFGA	2011-49400-30575	\$532,045
USDA-NRCS	69-1218-0-26	\$ 35,000
NIFA - BFRDP (NOFA-NY)	2010-49400-21847	\$ 11,800
NE SARE (ENE 10-116)	2010-47001-20819	\$ 15,000
USDA/AMS - FMPP	12-25-G-0941	\$ 68,450
NE SARE (LNE09-283)	2009-38640-19631	\$ 8,700
NE SARE (LNE09-283)	2009-38640-19631	\$158,403
NE SARE (LNE08-270)	2008-36840-18866	\$162,845
NE SARE (ONE08-088)	2008-38640-18866	\$ 9,914
NE SARE (LNE06-242)		\$151,655
NE SARE (LNE05-228)	2005-38640-15424	\$ 24,999
USDA Specialty Crops via Maine Dept of Agriculture		\$ 14,052
USDA Specialty Crops via Maine Dept of Agriculture		\$ 13,391
USDA Specialty Crops via Maine Dept of Agriculture		\$ 60,300
USDA Community Food Security, via Maine Farmland Trust		\$ 30,000

Russell Libby