



# California State Organic Program

— July 2016 —

Recommendations from the  
Organic Stakeholder Work Group



CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF  
FOOD & AGRICULTURE





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## SOP Organic Stakeholder Work Group Meeting Participants

*Thanks to our participants for their time, effort and expertise.*

<b>Attendee</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Blake Alexandre	Alexandre EcoDairy Farms
Laura Batcha	Organic Trade Association
Carmela Beck	Driscoll's
Katherine Borchard	Agricultural Services Certified Organic
Tom Chapman	Clif Bar
Lars Crail	National Organic Program
Noelle Cremers	California Farm Bureau Federation
Kelly Damewood	California Certified Organic Farmers
Mayze Fowler-Riggs	California Department of Food and Agriculture
Mindee Jeffery	Good Earth Natural Foods
Rick Jensen	California Department of Food and Agriculture
Patrick Kennelly	California Department of Public Health
Natalie Krout-Greenberg	CDFA Inspection Services Division
Danny Lee	California Department of Food and Agriculture Organic Program
Jenny Lester Moffitt	California Department of Food and Agriculture
Jake Lewin	California Certified Organic Farmers
Mark Lipson	Molino Creek Farm
Miles McEvoy	National Organic Program
Melody Meyer	United Natural Foods, Inc.
Tim Pelican	San Joaquin County Agricultural Commissioner
Silvia Popescu	California Department of Food and Agriculture
Judith Redmond	Full Belly Farms
Scott Renteria	California Department of Food and Agriculture Organic Program
Taylor Roschen	California Department of Food and Agriculture Executive Office
Chris Van Hook	Global Culture
Gail Young	Agricultural Services Certified Organic



# Executive Summary



## I. Executive Summary

California leads the nation in organic farms, land in organic production, and organic sales. According to the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service, organic acreage has grown 46 percent from 2008 to 2014. California alone produced over \$2.2 billion in organic agriculture in 2014, accounting for more than 40 percent of the nation's organic production. Consequently, organic agriculture plays a key role in California's economy.

The California Organic Foods Act of 1990 created the State Organic Program (SOP) at the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA). That same year the National Organic Program (NOP) was created within USDA and regulations to implement the NOP were completed in 2002. State legislation in 2003 aligned the state and national programs, and chartered CDFA with enforcement of the federal and state regulations. The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) enforces laws pertaining to processed products marketed as organic.

The SOP is also an information resource for industry stakeholders. It provides training for county biologists, proactively conducts spot inspections, and, conducts marketplace surveillance and pesticide residue testing. The SOP is funded entirely by industry registration fees and verifies compliance from production to point of sale, ensuring organic integrity in California.

CDFA is committed to continued improvement of its service to the California organic community. In recognition of this, CDFA Secretary Karen Ross convened the Organic Stakeholder Working Group (Working Group) in the spring of 2016 to review the existing SOP and provide recommendations to the Secretary on how to maximize program efficiency and responsiveness.

The Working Group is comprised of a diverse group of 23 representatives from several sectors including growers, distributors, producers, certifiers, trade associations, a County Agricultural Commissioner, and state and federal agencies. The process was designed to ensure equitable representation of statewide interests and was facilitated by the Center for Collaborative Policy at the California State University, Sacramento. The Working Group set goals to:

- Define the current benefits and challenges of the existing SOP;
- Discuss future projects for CDFA's consideration; and
- Prepare recommendations for the Secretary and the California Organic Products Advisory Committee (COPAC).

This report is the result of the Working Group's efforts.

Through a series of four meetings held regionally throughout the state, the Working Group developed a series of recommendations. These recommendations identified six key topic areas with the intent to maximize the efficiency and responsiveness of the SOP. These include:

- A. Streamline the CDFA Registration Process, Enhance Data Collection and Maximize Data Utilization
- B. Improve Enforcement Activities and Enhance Training
- C. Expand Outreach and Communication to Stakeholders
- D. Empower and Energize the California Organic Products Advisory Committee (COPAC)
- E. Integrate Organic Throughout CDFA and Other State Agencies
- F. Leverage California's SOP and California Organic Producers on a National Scale

This report covers the Working Group's processes, meeting outcomes, and final recommendations. The consolidated recommendations will go to the CDFA Secretary and COPAC to be used as a guidance document for future decision-making.

*CDFA extends its gratitude to the working group members and very much appreciates their expertise, insight and commitment to organic agriculture production and looks forward to the continued collaboration.*

# SOP Organic Stakeholder Working Group Process





## II. SOP Organic Stakeholder Working Group Process

Between March and May of 2016 the Working Group met four times: twice in Sacramento and one time each in Monterey and Watsonville. The effort was supported by CDFA staff as well as Sue Woods (Lead Facilitator) and Emily Adams (Assistant Facilitator) from the Center for Collaborative Policy (CCP) at the California State University, Sacramento. The Working Group was charged to identify areas for program improvement and build consensus towards final recommendations in key focus areas.

Each meeting began with a short informational presentation on the day's key discussion topics. This approach allowed the group to learn about each topic and to build mutual understanding. Topics included registration and data collection, CDFA's outreach and communication efforts, inspections and enforcement, training and assessment, and budget distribution. Presenters from the COPAC, the NOP, San Joaquin County Agricultural Commissioners' Office, and the CDPH provided supplemental information to the group regarding coordination with the SOP. After each presentation the group discussed and refined their ideas for program improvements. Through a combination of small and large group discussions, brainstorming sessions, and prioritization exercises, the group arrived at a final list of recommendations.<sup>1</sup>

Meeting agendas and other materials were sent out prior to each meeting. CCP took notes at each meeting and distributed them as well as subsequent actions (identified throughout this report) to the group after each session.

<sup>1</sup> An overview of the meetings can be found at: [https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/is/i\\_&\\_c/organic\\_publications.html](https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/is/i_&_c/organic_publications.html).





# Recommendations of the Organic Stakeholder Working Group



### III. Recommendations of the Organic Stakeholder Working Group

#### A. Streamline the CDFA Registration Process, Enhance Data Collection and Maximize Data Utilization

CDFA and the CDPH work cooperatively with the USDA NOP to enforce organic regulations within California. CDPH oversees processors and handlers of organic food, pet food, and cosmetics and CDFA oversees organic agricultural production, milk and dairy food processing, meat and poultry processing, and retail organic production activities.

To ensure the integrity of certified organic products in California, each and every person in the state who engages in production or handling of raw agricultural products sold as organic must register with the state prior to the first sale of the product. Retailers that engage in the processing of products sold as organic are also required to register, as well as any certification organization that certifies product sold as organic in California. Within this registration data, growers, handlers, and certifiers submit information including, but is not limited to: gross sales, acreage, and crop type. In order to enforce these activities, it is essential that all data be collected efficiently and effectively across each agency.

CDFA and CDPH utilize this data to identify organic production sites, aid in pest control, and support enforcement. Examples of data collected includes: (1) registration data (2) crop/site information, (3) gross sales, (4) site and commodity information, and (5) dollar value by crop type.

The Working Group identified a series of actions with a goal of reducing the burden for growers in providing this information by collecting it as few times as possible and using the information collected as broadly as possible. The Working Group also developed recommendations to reduce duplication of data collection and to maximize efficiency and usage of high-value information in the process.

In an effort to simplify the registration process, improve ease of use for registrants, and streamline data collection, the Working Group arrived at the following actions:

##### I. Streamline the Registration Process

Modify the existing CDFA registration process in the following ways:

- a) Collect site/commodity information from certifiers, rather than producers, if possible;
- b) Set a minimum threshold that doesn't require commodity acreage information below a given number of acres;
- c) Create a general point of access to the database that allows operations to search for commodity and other pertinent information;

- d) Allow operations with a number of smaller growing sites to report aggregate acreage; and
- e) Ensure information is collected so that the producer enters the information only once.

*Other items discussed but not forwarded as recommendations include:*

- Eliminate the requirement for providing handler information.

## **2. Enhance Data Collection**

As CDFA works towards a reduction in data collected, stakeholders identified the following priorities that should be considered:

- a) Maintain data collection of the crop/site combination for purpose of enforcement;
- b) The collection of gross sales data is useful for general data reporting to the public and organic industry;
- c) Establish minimum acreage threshold for crop-specific data collection;
- d) Collecting all organic data that can be maintained by a single agency; and
- e) Requiring record retention by handlers is important. Look for opportunities to leverage what is already collected by the certifier to fulfill this need so that data collection is streamlined.

*Other items discussed but not forwarded as recommendations include:*

- Collect site and commodity info for exempt operations; and
- Collecting dollar value by crop type is not necessary because it is already accessible data during an investigation.

## **3. Maximize Data Utilization**

CDFA and the industry should effectively use the wealth of data collected by CDFA to provide benefits to the organic community by taking the following actions:

- a) Synthesize and report organic registration data (being mindful of privacy) publicly so that it can be of use to industry and others;
- b) Work with certifiers to identify a format for information sharing;
- c) Publish and share information collected across CDFA programs. There is value in getting market pricing (quantity, acreage, value, crops);



- d) Crop/site combination could be of benefit to pest prevention;
- e) Fully utilize commodity and production site data for enforcement purposes;
- f) Utilize data to influence research and gain research dollars; and
- g) Include organic as an attribute on all agricultural data collection.

*Other items discussed but not forwarded as recommendations include:*

- Use data to stimulate tourism;
- Consider groupings of commodities;
- Determine how the NOP could use this data in the future for GMO testing; and
- Develop a list of buyers and sellers of commodities.

#### **4. Recommendations for CDPH**

By ensuring that operations are in compliance with organic standards, CDPH aids in protecting California consumers and businesses. This information is not well known across the organic or conventional agricultural communities. In an effort to increase the transparency and public awareness of the work that CDPH does for the organic community, the Working Group made the following recommendations:

- a) Clearly publicize the benefits of the organic program in protecting California businesses;
- b) Develop an online licensing system; and
- c) Provide inspection location data on the CDPH website to increase transparency.

### **B. Improve Enforcement Activities and Enhance Training**

The SOP enforces both federal and state organic regulations in California. In California, the SOP, which includes the County Agricultural Commissioners, the NOP, and Accredited Certifying Agents are complementary pieces of an integrated enforcement model designed to ensure the integrity of organic products. Through coordinated activities, the SOP monitors all aspects of the supply chain through surveillance inspections and surveillance sampling. In contracting with 53 County Agricultural Commissioners, the program maintains an expansive network of trained inspectors for enforcement, surveillance, and compliance through to the point of sale, at minimal cost to the producer. Inspection locations can include production and handling sites, certified farmers' markets, and retail establishments, including exempt or excluded operations (e.g. restaurants). Sampling may also be conducted in these locations as well as any point where integrity of an organic product may be at

risk. Enforcement is one of the most important tasks of the SOP; this includes training of staff tasked with conducting organic inspection and sampling work. A total of 1,274 inspections were conducted in the 2014-2015 fiscal year.

In an effort to protect the integrity of California organic products, bolster consumer trust, and better streamline the enforcement process, the Working Group recommended the following actions:

**1. CDFA should improve on the current approach, visibility, and integration of enforcement activities in the following ways:**

- a) Publicize and report enforcement actions regularly. Look to NOP's Organic Insider as a model;
- b) Increase enforcement activities as the budget allows;
- c) Improve the visibility of sampling and testing;
- d) Circulate an annual summary of achievements and post those achievements online;
- e) Encourage certifier utilization of the SOP's online database; and
- f) Integrate CDFA's database with the NOP database.

**2. Enhance training for inspectors by:**

- a) Providing increased training for inspectors and verification of training;
- b) Conform spot inspections with NOP Guidance 2027 (personnel evaluations);
- c) Reviewing qualifications of inspectors prior to onsite inspections;
- d) Encouraging county spot inspectors to attend organic inspections so they can see how the rules are applied;
- e) Setting expectations and criteria for office inspections versus field inspections;
- f) Creating clear expectations for what an inspection should look like on certified and uncertified operations;
- g) Utilizing the USDA Organic Literacy Initiative for training; and
- h) Incorporating training segments that get to the heart and soul of organic farming. The letter of the rules does not capture the nature of what it means to be an organic farmer.



### **3. Improve the CDFA exam for inspectors:**

- a) Incorporate the organic section throughout the entire exam.
- b) Create a separate exam for onsite inspectors.

## **C. Expand Outreach and Communication to Stakeholders**

CDFA has made recent efforts to increase its transparency and public awareness through outreach, communication and education. A fact sheet with information on the SOP was created and sent out with registration documents, distributed at farm shows and meetings, and is available online at the CDFA, California Organic Program website [https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/is/i\\_&c/organic.html](https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/is/i_&c/organic.html). Though these efforts are a step in the right direction, stakeholders would like to see additional efforts to increase awareness of organic agriculture in California, the activities of the SOP, and the value of organically produced products.

In an effort to further increase these efforts using social media and other state and local agency platforms, the Working Group recommends the following actions:

### **1. Target outreach efforts to: (in order of priority):**

- a) Registrants
  - (I) Educate growers on spot inspection expectations.
- b) Certifiers
- c) Consumers
- d) County Agricultural Commissioners
- e) Outside California
- f) “Foodie” media

### **2. Send a strong message regarding the value of “California Organic” and what it means, with the following criteria:**

- a) Engage stakeholders for integrated, robust messaging;
- b) Provide fact-based information, focusing on growth and accomplishments;
- c) Reinforce and promote consumer trust in the organic label;
- d) Help clarify terminology, (e.g., ‘natural’); and
- e) Refrain from attacking conventional products.

**3. Utilize multiple forms of media for messaging:**

- a) SOP should provide CDFA with information for posting to social media sites;
- b) Improve the information offered on the SOP website; and
- c) Improve communication with counties, including a CDFA presence at county agriculture commissioner meetings.

**4. Publish and share information collected across CDFA programs:**

- a) There is value in getting market pricing (quantity, acreage, value, crops) from the different CDFA program websites;
- b) Crop/site combination information could benefit pest prevention; and
- c) Share pesticide residue results and results of spot inspections.

**D. Empower and Energize COPAC**

COPAC advises the Secretary on current issues related to organic production and makes recommendations to the Secretary on issues pertaining to the SOP. In recent years COPAC has experienced low attendance at meetings, too many vacancies on committees, and has suffered from a general lack of experience among committee members. These issues can be alleviated by increased outreach and education efforts.

The Working Group identified a need to raise the profile of COPAC and provide better recognition and value for members. The Working Group developed recommendations to empower and build credibility for COPAC as the “go-to” advisory committee for certified organic products in California. In an effort to improve upon CDFA’s coordination and utilization of COPAC, the Working Group recommends the following actions:

**I. Enhance the quality of COPAC meetings and increase meeting attendance:**

- a) Provide better notification for upcoming meetings; schedule meeting dates one year in advance;
- b) Send out meeting minutes, agendas and supporting materials further in advance of each meeting;
- c) Distribute/post action items shortly after each meeting;
- d) Solicit stakeholder input to develop agenda topics that are outcome driven and in the public interest.

- e) Establish a regular agenda item to address the filling of vacancies;
- f) Meet in different locations throughout the state;
- g) Offer a place on the website for public feedback and discussion;
- h) Agendize further discussion of specific topics listed in this recommendations document; and
- i) Consider streaming meetings online.

## **2. Improve Succession Planning:**

- a) Conduct targeted outreach to the next generation of potential COPAC members;
- b) Create excitement around COPAC for recruitment purposes;
- c) Establish a training or mentorship program for new members to transfer institutional knowledge;
- d) Groom new chairpersons; and
- e) Create opportunities for committee alternates who may have a desire for a primary seat to learn about the process and appointments.

## **E. Integrate Organic Throughout CDFA and Other State Agencies**

According to the 2016 United States Organic Industry Survey, the industry saw its largest dollar gain ever in 2015, with \$43.3 billion in total organic product sales. Organic soil-building practices enhance biodiversity, and conserve natural resources.

In an effort to share the opportunities that exist within an organic system, the Working Group recommended the following actions:

### **I. Consider stakeholder priorities as CDFA shares organic successes:**

- a) Provide broad education on organic to other agencies and personnel (i.e. NOP 101 and 102);
- b) Facilitate opportunities for transition from conventional to organic;
- c) Collaborate with relevant divisions within state and local agencies to seek process improvements and consistency in regulatory efficiency for the organic community;



- d) Do a better job sharing what the SOP is doing, including the value added in the level of service provided by the SOP in comparison to the level of service provided by the NOP;
- e) Provide support for transitioning farmers through cost share or other functions;
- f) Offer education on the environmental benefits of organic farming; and
- g) All registration documents with information collected by the different CDFA programs should have a checkbox to indicate an operation is also registered in the Organic Program, to reduce collecting duplicate registration information.

Other items discussed but not forwarded as recommendations include:

- Define research priorities relative to California organics;
- SOP should continue to collect available market data;
- Education and outreach to consumers;
- Education on the ‘why’ of organic farming; and
- Build consumer trust in organics by highlighting enforcement.

## **F. Leverage California’s SOP and California Organic Producers on a National Scale**

The effect and importance of the SOP extends beyond California, ensuring consumer trust and confidence in certified organic products both nationally and globally. California’s integrated model allows for not only oversight, but also interaction between organic producers, certifiers and the SOP, developing the added benefit of consumer confidence in California-grown organic products. This model can serve as an example for other states. In the same respect, better integration with the NOP is needed.

In an effort provide additional resources to the SOP and extend its significance, the Working Group recommends the following actions:

### **I. Better integrate the SOP with the NOP:**

- a) Identify and fully understand NOP’s national enforcement strategy;
- b) Collect data from the NOP in the following areas:
  - (1) Baseline of NOP activities provided in other states;
  - (2) Better understanding of NOP’s budget for enforcement;

- (3) Understand the benefits to California from NOP import enforcement efforts (e.g. grain); and
- (4) Ask the question: what would the NOP do in California if the SOP didn't handle the responsibility? Would California get equivalent service from the NOP?
- c) Look at products entering the state and ensure that enforcement and inspections are consistent with in-state products; and
- d) Identify an area of focus and establish a minimum percent of enforcement efforts on out-of-state products entering California. Examine a potential partnership with the NOP on this effort.

**2. Explore opportunities to bring federal resources to California to support organic agriculture:**

- a) Utilize COPAC to make recommendations to the Secretary on national policy regulatory matters;
- b) Seek proportional representation for California on the National Organic Standards Board;
- c) Continue to work as a community to obtain baseline funds from the NOP through the following efforts:
  - (1) Direct ask of the NOP from California;
  - (2) Incorporate into the 2018 Farm Bill;
  - (3) Use unspent cost share funds; and
  - (4) Continue to advocate for national organic cost share reimbursement of state registration fees as an additional scope. State registration fees are a requirement of certification and therefore are a certification cost.
- d) CDFA should automatically reimburse all eligible parties for organic cost share.

**3. Promote the SOP as a model program to be replicated in other states**

- a) Work on integrating California's enforcement strategy into the national enforcement approach; and
- b) Determine the value added in the level of service provided by the SOP in comparison to the level of service provided by the NOP.

## List of Presenters and Presentations Made to the Working Group

CDFA thanks the following presenters, guest speakers and subject matter experts for their expertise and time in sharing their valuable and unique experiences to help inform the process.

1. Patrick Kennelly, California Department of Public Health  
- *Program Update from CDPH.*
2. Scott Renteria, California Department of Food and Agriculture  
- *Part 1: Online Renewals without Changes.*
3. Scott Renteria, California Department of Food and Agriculture  
- *Part 2: Online Renewals with Changes.*
4. Danny Lee, California Department of Food and Agriculture  
- *Part 3: SOP-Importance of Data Collection.*
5. Taylor Roschen, California Department of Food and Agriculture Legislative Office  
- *Legislative Update*
6. Melody Meyer United Natural Foods, Inc. and California Organic Products Advisory Committee (COPAC)  
- *COPAC's Role, Responsibilities and Membership*
7. Danny Lee, California Department of Food and Agriculture  
- *CDFA's Current Outreach and Education Program to Consumers and Partners*
8. Scott Renteria, California Department of Food and Agriculture  
- *Overview on the Visibility of Spot Inspections for the ACA's-What is Available Now?*
9. Scott Renteria, California Department of Food and Agriculture  
- *Inspections: How and why they are conducted*
10. Lars Crail, National Organic Program  
- *NOP Auditor Evaluation Tool*
11. Scott Renteria, California Department of Food and Agriculture  
- *Training for Counties*
12. Danny Lee, California Department of Food and Agriculture  
- *County Evaluations/Audits*
13. Tim Pelican, San Joaquin County Agricultural Commissioner  
- *County Training/Licensing Requirements*



14. Rick Jensen, California Department of Food and Agriculture
  - *CDFA Exam*
15. Scott Renteria, California Department of Food and Agriculture
  - *Database Updates and Changes*
16. Miles McEvoy, United States Department of Agriculture, National Organic Program
  - *NOP Functions and Activities*
17. Danny Lee, California Department of Food and Agriculture
  - *CDFA Organic Budget and the CDPH Organic Budget*
18. Supporting Documents
  - Meeting Notes
  - Meeting Notes (summary)
  - Meeting Agendas



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