

**Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network Farmer-to-Farmer Program
Organic Outreach
Karen Wynne
Final Report**

Project Summary

Since the Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network (ASAN) was founded in 2001, Alabama's organic and sustainable farming community has grown. However, certification of organic farms in the state has been minimal, due in part to the lack of a historical certifying program, confusion about how the certification process works, relatively high costs with no state cost-share program, and direct farmer-to-consumer markets with less need for third-party approval. While interest in organic production has increased among producers and new programs through the cooperative extension system and federal agencies are encouraging new organic farms and ranches, the lack of accurate information about the National Organic Program and its regulations continues to cause confusion.

The Organic Farming Research Foundation provided ASAN with funds to provide information on organic certification and to assist in the development of organic system plans through its Farmer-to-Farmer mentoring program, workshops around the state, and its annual Food and Farm Forum. Over 20 farmers were mentored individually, almost 60 participated in the annual forum, and hundreds received accurate information on organic certification, compliance, and production. The project was able to complement a number of other programs, including the beginnings of the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative (OI), the organic certification cost share program, and various farmer outreach programs.

Alabama may be reaching a critical mass. At least four farms in Alabama were certified organic for the first time and more are in the process of becoming certified. Markets that reward their efforts will be a key component of maintaining and increasing levels of certification. ASAN will continue to provide ongoing support through continued mentoring, peer training, and expansion of markets for organic products.

Introduction

Recent maps of the United State published in the New York Times show large clusters of organic farms in the northeast, west coast, and Midwest. Certified organic farms become much sparser as one moves into the Great Plains and South. Alabama, with only four farms represented, competes with South Carolina and West Virginia for the dubious honor of the lowest number of organic farms (Fairfield, 2009).

While the number of certified organic farms in the state is low, this does not reflect the larger and growing number of farms and ranchers producing organically. Most market directly to their customers and do not believe that the additional expense and paperwork of certification derives enough benefit. Others avoid government programs in general. Some fall below the \$5,000 annual sales exemption. Some have opted for certification as “Naturally Grown,” an alternative certification that is inexpensive and non-governmental but based on USDA standards, but even their numbers have fallen from over 20 to 12 (www.naturallygrown.org, 2011). And a number just do not describe themselves as “organic,” using other words to convey the meaning. The most recent USDA Census of Agriculture reports that 63 farms in Alabama, representing 1766 acres, describe themselves as organic; another 129 are converting acreage to organic production (USDA, 2008). Comparing the four farms on the map with the almost-200 reported to the USDA, there is an evident disparity.

The agricultural establishment is now getting involved. Auburn, Tuskegee, and Alabama A&M Universities have established organic field trials on at least four experiment stations. The Alabama Cooperative Extension Service is training its horticulture agents about organic certification and production methods. The Alabama Department of Agriculture has reinstated cost share money for organic certification after five years. The Natural Resources Conservation Service is offering EQIP funds for transitioning and certified organic farmers. Also, natural grocers such as Whole Foods and Earthfare as well as traditional grocers like Publix and even Walmart are expressing their interest in purchasing local certified organic products. Even politicians are talking about organic farming. For the first time, there is a significant push for organics in Alabama.

However, there continues to be a dearth of information about organic production and certification. The lack of a certifying agency in Alabama has been a major source of confusion; growers and educators assume that they cannot be certified without an agency in the state. Some growers that call themselves organic do not fully understand the national rules; one grower at a state-wide conference started his talk on genetically-modified corn trials by telling the audience that his farm had always been organic. The vast majority of Alabama’s organic growers are self-regulating, which makes it even more important that they understand all the rules of the National Organic Program.

For ten years, ASAN has held workshops on organic certification, conferences on organic production, and field days at organic farms. We researched the existing resources in the state with help from small organic farmers and published the Alabama Farms Resource Guide. Almost 2000 copies have been distributed and the information is available on the ASAN website (asanonline.org/Resourceguide_pdfversion.pdf). It seems that this outreach has either not been sufficient, has not reached the right people, or was delivered too early. We hoped that expanding our educational programs on organic

certification to meet the growing interest would make a big difference with the increased interest and outreach in organics.

Project Objectives

Objective 1: Provide 10 farms and ranches with individual assistance with the development of an organic farm plan.

Measurement:

- Number of farmers meeting with mentoring farmer to develop organic farm plan
- Number of farmers completing organic farm plan

Objective 2: Educate at least 300 Alabama farmers, ranchers, and educators on the National Organic Program rules and certification procedures.

Measurement:

- Number of farmers receiving educational packets on organic certification
- Number of educators receiving educational packets on organic certification
- Number of farmers and educators attending organic production sessions at 2010 Alabama Food Summit

Educational Approach

ASAN focuses on peer learning opportunities that provide practical information for farmers and ranchers and recognizes that each teacher and learner has his or her own skills and assets to share.

In our Farmer-to-Farmer program, the coordinator works to identify a suitable experienced farmer, hopefully near the participating farm, and facilitates the initial meeting of the mentor and mentee. ASAN's program mentors understand first-hand the process of developing a system that works. They have been through the process of deciding on a business structure, developing a record-keeping system, evaluating marketing opportunities, testing cropping systems, and finding local sources of supplies, equipment, and knowledge. By sharing their experiences with beginning farmers, they lessen the steep learning curve involved in starting a farming operation. More importantly, they provide a model of success and encouragement to producers that are just starting out.

The same approach is used for ASAN's annual meeting, the Alabama Food and Farm Forum, held last winter in Selma. This meeting is ASAN's annual effort to bring together the diverse representatives of Alabama's food systems, including farmers, policy makers, educators, and community activists. The focus of the

program is on peer-sharing of the many good works happening around the state in an attempt to not only learn, but also develop new relationships that can impact communities around the state. Participants are encouraged to share their experiences and insights.

In addition to our own programs, ASAN supports its partners' programs by providing promotion, speakers, and materials for local training events related to sustainable production.

Project Results

Mentoring

We surpassed our goals for mentoring individual farmers and ranchers, reaching 22 farmers through the OFRF program rather than the proposed ten. Andrew Williams is working with twelve transitioning and exempt organic vegetable growers in west central Alabama on organic plans for their high tunnels, and Randall Hastings on the Gulf Coast is working with six cattle producers, all beginning or transitioning organic producers. Karen Wynne is working with four additional producers as part of the Farmer-to-Farmer program, including two aspiring to grow organic grains, one with a mix of dairy, poultry, and vegetables, and one more beginning vegetable grower. Over 50 producers, including some of those enumerated above, are also enrolled in the EQIP OI and are receiving assistance from Ms. Wynne on the development of a conservation activity plan for organic transition including an organic system plan. The EQIP OI provides technical and monetary support for existing, aspiring, or transitioning organic farmers. Equally important is ongoing support in production and marketing that will help these new organic growers succeed.

Outreach and Training

ASAN staff was able to attend a number of meetings over the past year to talk about organic certification and distribute resources. A list of events that were attended and handouts are included at the end of this document.

In addition, almost 60 farmers attended ASAN's annual Food and Farm Forum in Selma in December, 2010. About 85 total participants attended the forum, which included sessions on sustainable pest management, compost production, integrated farming systems, weed control, and a growers' roundtable on commercial vegetable production facilitated by two of Alabama's most experienced organic growers. A pre-forum bus tour visited an organic vegetable demonstration site and a historic plantation that is transitioning to organic grassfed cattle production. Most participants said that they made contact with someone they would work with in the future, which is a key goal of the meeting.

Certification

For the first time, Alabama has over ten certified organic farms. At least four new farms were certified in 2010: Working Cows Dairy, Hastings Farm (beef cattle), RRBG Farm (fruits, vegetables, and herbs) and Darby Farm (fruits, vegetables, herbs, and livestock). We should see a more significant increase in 2011 as applications are processed and finalized. Of the farms that ASAN and partners have worked with in the past year, at least eight farms are in the process of becoming certified, nine are currently exempt, and 18 are eyeing certification in the next few years.

Conclusions and Discussion

This project supported organic farmer education during a critical point. The increase in services and cost-share funds for organic farmers may provide the support they need to start successful organic farms, but without some practical input from other farmers the odds of failure are still high. This is especially true in a place like Alabama where it is more difficult to source organic inputs, identify promising markets, and find solutions to the pests of the Deep South.

One of the key components of encouraging new organic farms is connecting them with promising markets. Marketing opportunities for organic growers continues to be a challenge. The USDA's 2008 Census of Organic Agriculture documented that the top-grossing level of Alabama certified or exempt organic farms was met by four farms selling \$5,000-9,999 of organic product. California by comparison had 361 farms that sold over \$500,000 worth of organic product in 2008. Even the farms that Alabama competes with for last place, West Virginia and South Carolina, are selling more. West Virginia had four farms selling \$40,000-99,999 in organic products, and South Carolina had four farms with sales ranging from \$25,000 to over \$500,000. The booming industry of organic agriculture is not reflected in Alabama's current market, but this may be changing. The number of grocery stores that are interested in purchasing local and certified product is increasing, and even Walmart is talking with local farmers about procuring certified organic products. Securing a fair price on these larger markets will be an additional challenge, but the increase in demand is promising.

The EQIP OI provided ASAN with a larger pool of new organic growers and additional support, including the development of a conservation plan which included a draft of an organic system plan. Our original proposal had mentors helping prepare the organic system plan for ten producers. Instead, the mentors in the Farmer-to-Farmer program were able to reach more producers and focus on the technical and marketing aspects of the organic system.

Leveraged resources

ASAN's Farmer-to-Farmer program was originally funded as part of a project with Heifer International and the Small Farms Research Center at Alabama A&M University, and the program was recently funded again through the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. OFRF's funds provided support during a key period between these sources of funding and allowed the program to continue without interruption.

Participants in the mentoring program have gone on to become formal and informal mentors and trainers and are keeping the information flowing to the next group of new and transitioning farmers.

The Alabama Food and Farm Forum was funded primarily by the OFRF, Heifer International, and the Ford Foundation, with registration fees and a number of other partners including Wallace Community College, the Gateway Foundation, the Selma Chamber of Commerce, and others providing additional support.

The EQIP OI and the state organic cost-share program have provided important incentives for transitioning and aspiring organic producers. By working with individual producers on their conservation planning efforts through the OI as well as through mentoring and training, ASAN and its partners were able to provide more comprehensive support to more producers. Much of the travel for outreach meetings around the state, additional printing of information, and resources on cd were supplemented as part of Karen Wynne's OI conservation planning outreach.

The new state-wide Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program grant brings together our three land grant universities and other partners to develop a comprehensive approach to growing new farmers. Ongoing funding for mentoring, the creation of a Mentor Academy, and the compilation of farm planning resources are key components of the project. ASAN staff will play an important role in the development of these programs and keep sustainable and organic production well-represented.

Training on organic production is ongoing. ASAN is a partner on additional projects including training of trainers in organic production, research on organic no-till vegetable production, and support for the development of training on demonstration farms around the state. Eventually we hope to have a critical mass of well-trained organic producers and educators around the state that can provide less formal ongoing support.

References

Fairfield, Hannah. May 3, 2009. *The Hot Spots for Organic Food*. New York Times. May 14, 2009.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/03/business/03metrics.html?_r=1&scp=4&sq=organic&st=cse>

USDA "Alabama State Profile." *2007 Census of Agriculture*. 2008. March 29, 2011.
<http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Online_Highlights/County_Profiles/Alabama/cp99001.pdf>

USDA "Farms, Land Use, and Sales of Organically Produced Commodities on Certified and Exempt Organic Farms." 2008. March 29, 2011.
http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Online_Highlights/Organics/organics_1_01.pdf

Photos and other addends

Photographs, information on handouts, and the Food and Farm Forum program are attached.

Organic outreach at workshops and conferences, January 2010 – March 2011.

January 22, 2010. Chattanooga, AL. Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group conference, Alabama state breakout session. Distributed information on organic certification and the EQIP OI sign-up deadline to over 40 participants.

February 27, 2010. Camden, AL. NRCS Outreach Meeting. Karen Wynne spoke on organic certification to about 20 small farmers.

April 26-27, 2010. Clanton, AL. High Tunnel Production Workshop with Alison and Paul Wiediger of Au Naturel Farm. In partnership with Southern SSAWG and USDA Risk Management Agency. Two-day workshop on high tunnel production using organic methods. About 70 participants. All received SSAWG's "Organic Vegetable Production with Alex Hitt" cd and "From Fields to Market," a dvd on the marketing approach of a certified organic farm in South Carolina.

July 29, 2010. Ozark, AL. NRCS Outreach Meeting. Jonathan Austin from OIA North America spoke about the process and requirements of organic certification; Karen Wynne spoke about the EQIP OI. About 30 farmers, educators, and students participated.

November 4, 2010. Ozark, AL. North-South Institute Echo Workshop. Karen Wynne spoke to approximately 40 farmers, educators, and students about organic certification and the EQIP OI.

December 2-4, 2010. Selma, AL. Alabama Farm and Food Forum. About 85 participants attended the meeting, which included sessions on sustainable pest management, compost production, integrated farming systems, weed control, and a growers roundtable on commercial vegetable production, facilitated by two of Alabama's most experienced organic growers and educators. A bus tour visited an organic vegetable demonstration site and a historic plantation that is transitioning to organic production. The program and photos are attached.

December 12, 2010. San Diego, CA. Entomology Society of America Annual Meeting. Karen Wynne spoke to about 50 entomologists and students on Organic Production in the Deep South as part of the Organic and Sustainable Agriculture Symposium. Watch it at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cPK65-di4k&feature=related>.

January 21-22, 2011. Chattanooga, AL. Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group conference, Alabama state breakout session. Distributed information on organic certification and the EQIP OI sign-up deadline to at least 51 participants.

March 24, 2011. Geneva, AL. Wiregrass Farmers Coop Outreach Meeting. Karen Wynne met individually with producers interested in certification.

March 25, 2011. Atmore, AL. Alternative Cattle Meeting. Randall Hastings, certified organic cattle producer, talked about his experiences producing and marketing organic grassfed cattle to 31 ranchers and educators.

Handouts provided for workshops and individual producers:

ASAN. 2006. Alabama Farms Resource Guide.

<http://www.asanonline.org/resourceguide/tableofcontents.htm>

Baier, Ann, and Lance Gegner. *Organic Materials Compliance*. National Center for Appropriate Technology. 2008. www.attra.ncat.org

Dufour, Rex. *Farmscaping to Enhance Biological Control*. 2000. www.attra.ncat.org

Kuepper, George. *Organic Farm Certification and the National Organic Program*. 2002. www.attra.ncat.org

Kuepper, George, Holly Born, and Lance Gegner. ATTRA. *Organic System Plan Templates for Certifiers*. 2007. www.attra.ncat.org

Excerpts from *NCAT's Organic Crops Workbook: A Guide to Sustainable and Allowed Practices*. 2003. www.attra.ncat.org

USDA NRCS Alabama EQIP Organic Farming Initiative 2010 and 2011 sign-up announcements.

Information on cd:

From ATTRA:

- Organic Materials Compliance
- Organic Farm Certification and the National Organic Program.
- NCAT's Organic Crops Workbook: A Guide to Sustainable and Allowed Practices.
- NCAT's Organic Livestock Workbook: A Guide to Sustainable and Allowed Practices
- Organic Alternatives to Treated Lumber
- Organic Standards for Crop Production: Highlights of the USDA's National Organic Program Regulations
- Organic System Plan (OSP) Templates for Certifiers
- Organic Standards for All Organic Operations
- Organic Standards for Livestock Production: Excerpts of USDA's National Organic Program Regulations
- Organic Livestock Documentation Forms
- Organic Field Crops Documentation Forms

From USDA National Organic Program.

Fact Sheet. "Certification".

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELDEV3004346&acct=nopgeninfo>

Southern SAWG provided the cd "Organic Vegetable Production and Marketing in the Southeast with Alex Hitt" and the dvd "From Fields to Market"

Scholarship recipients, Food and Farm Forum
*travel covered

Yawah	*Awolowo
Omar	*Awolowo
dorothy	Barnes
bruce	Barnes
Bertha	*Bennett
John	Brown
William	*Cureton
Peggy	*Cureton
Greg	Dansby
Pam	Dorr
Carol	Eichelberger
Rose	Hill
Marshall	*Hunt
Osa	Idehen
Mike	Klinner
Sharon	*Fitzpatrick
Pamela	Madzima
Elaine	Melton
Jean	Mills
Stanley	Moore
Elisa	Munoz
Carolyn	Pickett
Frank	Randle
Euneika	*Rogers-Sipp
Khaiwa	*Rowe
Paul	*Rowe
Hank	Sanders
Malika	Sanders
Barbara	*Shipman
Roy	*Shipman
Olimatta	Taal
Gene	*Thornton
Rose	*Thornton
Connie	Tucker
Sharon	*Tyson
Laura	Underwood
Virginia	Ward
Andrew	Williams
Karen	Wynne

Application reimbursement

* Now applying for certification

** Certified in 2010

Sneaky Crow Farm, Randolph County*

RRBG Farm, Barbour County**

KMAC Greenfields, Talladega County*

Gypsy Ranch, Etowah County*

Darby Farm, Shelby County**

Mahalah Farm, Sumter County

Hastings Farm, Baldwin County**

Long Farm, Geneva County

Oates Farm, Houston County

Adair Orchards, Lawrence County*

At the Pond Farm, Morgan County*

Reed Farm, Madison County