

United States Senate
Committee on Agriculture
Witness Statement of
Regina Beidler
Randolph Center, Vermont
September 15, 2010

Madame Chairman, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you and participate in this conversation that celebrates the growth and vitality of organic agriculture in our country as well as the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

My husband Brent and I own and operate a 145 acre organic dairy farm in Randolph Center, Vermont. We currently milk 30-35 cows and are member owners of Organic Valley, a cooperative of over 1600 farmers in 34 states, including 130 farmers in Vermont. Our farm also produces a small acreage of grains which we grow for local human consumption.

Although we are often classified as first generation farmers we like to say that farming skipped a generation in our family since both of us had grandparents who farmed and the experience of spending time with them influenced our own decision to enter farming. Brent's grandparents owned a small dairy farm in Pennsylvania on which they raised 13 children. As a child, Brent spent many summer weeks on the farm, riding tractors, following family members through milking and chores and running down the stairs ahead of his teenage uncles early in the morning. All of this caused his grandfather to exclaim, "Now there's a boy that can farm. He can get up in the morning!" The seed was planted with Brent and 12 years ago, after pursuing schooling, oversees volunteer work and working for other farmers, our dream of having our own farm was realized.

Our decision to pursue organic farming was influenced by several factors. During Brent's college years, his youngest uncle had taken over the family farm. He was well respected in his area with a registered herd of high producing cows that were making record milk production in his region. Despite this, the farm was losing money, the cows were not as healthy as Brent's uncle would have liked and the spring that provided water for the farm was contaminated by nitrates from chemical fertilizers used by several farms that surrounded the spring. Brent's uncle completely changed his production practices shifting to an emphasis on rotational grazing, discontinuance of use of chemical fertilizers and adoption of organic practices even before an organic marketplace existed. The results were clear – improved soils, healthier animals and, over time, a spring that was able to purify itself. Brent was able to watch this change first hand and saw the benefits to farm, family and animals.

Another influential person was Dr. Bill Murphy who was a professor at the University of Vermont and introduced many farms in our state to the practice of rotational grazing. Dr. Murphy and his team, traveled the state helping to set up rotational grazing on farms and documenting the results in practical terms that were helpful to farmers. Although rotational grazing is utilized by a wide variety of farms it brought many people down the road towards organic production. On many farms including ours, rotational grazing is the foundation of a healthy organic system. Our cows are able to graze in Vermont from the beginning of May through the end of October or early November. In addition to the nutritional benefits to cows getting the highest quality forage, they also get the benefits of exercise and socialization time. Another benefit to grazing is the substantial savings we have seen in fossil fuel use on our own farm. The cows harvest their own feed and deposit their own manure during the grazing season which relieves us from having to use mechanical means to harvest feed and spread manure during those months. Many farms, including ours have also vastly decreased or eliminated grain supplements as the nutritional needs of the cows are met with well managed pasture. All of this adds up to increased profitability for the farmer and takes into account the changing dynamics of decreasing world energy supplies.

When Brent and I were approaching the end of our transition to organic production in 2000 we began to look at our options for an organic milk market. Organic Valley came to Vermont at that time looking to establish a pool of

farmer owners to supply milk to Stonyfield Farm for their organic yogurt. We heard one message quite clearly. Organic Valley was started by seven farmers who wanted control over the sale and marketing of their milk. Over twenty years later the primary philosophy that continues to undergird the cooperative is that farmers are paid a fair and sustained pay price. Additionally, owner members at Organic Valley have opportunities to participate in decision making at many levels in the coop as well as being actively involved in the marketing of our product. We are allowed to stay at a farm size that works well for our family and farm while having the advantage of the collective marketing power of many farms working together. We were one of the first five farms in Vermont to join Organic Valley in 2000 and we now have 130 farms in the state that market their milk through Organic Valley. In that same time frame we've seen the cooperative grow from about 300 family farms, nationally, to over 1600 farms today with sales of \$622 million.

It has been our pleasure to be part of the organic community that marries our philosophical beliefs with the ability to farm profitably. Earning our livelihood through farming in a way that is beneficial to water, animals and soil while at the same time meeting our family's needs allows dignity and enjoyment of farming to rest in our daily experience.

The passage of the Organic Foods Production Act in 1990 has enabled consumers to learn about our philosophical beliefs and how we transfer those beliefs into the milk they purchase at the store. Consumers recognize the benefits of the production methods we use on our farm, and realize that the resulting foods, grown organically, are valuable. Because of the strong relationship we have created with the consumer, we, as dairy farmers, receive a strong stable pay price over conventional milk and are able to stay on our farm, work from our farm and raise our child on our farm.

We celebrate the twenty year anniversary of the Organic Foods Production Act and applaud the expansion of staff at the NOP and the commitment to strict enforcement of the standards. However, it is crucial to recognize that our work to support this bright spot in US agriculture must continue.

One critical piece of work has recently been completed and I would like to thank all the members of the committee for working with the USDA to complete the rule requiring strict access to pasture for livestock on organic dairy farms. From the beginning, organic farmers have recognized that strict standards and regulation are important in order for consumers to feel confident that the food they are purchasing is produced in the way they expect. Having this standard, that acknowledges the importance of pasture, protects our brand and the USDA seal. Thank you for your communication with the USDA that has consistently requested a strong pasture rule – we now have it.

Unfortunately, the pasture rule was not the last bump for organic agriculture. Right now a different sort of threat is on the horizon. The USDA is currently completing its Environmental Impact Statement on genetically engineered alfalfa. This alfalfa can be sprayed with the herbicide, Round Up, with no ill effect to the alfalfa. The USDA may choose to allow the commercial release of this alfalfa despite the demonstrated proof that it will cross pollinate with and contaminate other alfalfa including organic alfalfa. Contamination of alfalfa will destroy export markets that have zero tolerance for genetically modified products.

Organic farmers are reliant on a number of perennial crops, including clover and alfalfa, as an essential part of our care and building of healthy soils. In place of chemical fertilizers used by conventional farmers that inject quickly utilized nitrogen into soil, organic farmers use plants that draw nitrogen from the air and fix them into the soil. To remove the use of alfalfa from the crops we can grow would be devastating. Alfalfa is pollinated by insects that can travel over a number of miles. The usual precautions taken by organic farmers to prevent cross pollination such as buffer zones would not work in this case. The release of a genetically modified perennial plant like alfalfa will be with us forever and cannot be re-contained at a later date.

Right now, there is no protection for organic producers from contamination by genetically engineered products. The weight of responsibility lies on organic producers to do all we can to avoid circumstances that would allow cross pollination between organic and GMO crops. In testimony before our state legislature, my husband was asked how an organic farmer could be made whole if a crop was contaminated by neighboring GMO plantings. Currently, there is

no way to get recompense as in a situation like that the farmer, at best, loses the value of that crop and in the worst case loses organic certification and his or her livelihood. I'm not asking for a ban on all GMO seeds but it does raise the question of where the liability for damages should lie. I would suggest that it lies with the seed companies who are benefiting financially from the sale of these seeds and that adding liability requirements may create an atmosphere of caution in the development and planting of these crops.

Organic agriculture offers solutions to many issues that continue to appear in our food system and beyond. Studies are showing increased nutrient density in organic foods as well as decreased pesticide exposure. Over the past three decades the Rodale Institute in Pennsylvania has been doing side by side research trials with organic and conventional crops. What they are discovering is that organic production's focus on building organic matter in the soil has a myriad of benefits from the soil's ability to absorb moisture during wet times to maintaining that moisture in dry conditions. Organically managed soils with high organic matter also sequester significant amounts of carbon. Production practices such as the use of compost, cover cropping and crop rotation reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide by pulling it from the air and storing it in the soil as carbon. Rodale's research, corroborated with other research centers, shows that if practical organic agriculture was practiced on the world's 3.5 billion tillable acres we could sequester 40% of current CO2 emissions.

Despite all the good work and research underway there is always room for more support of organic research and technical assistance. Conventional agriculture has seen the benefit of 50 years of concentrated research on their behalf. As the US organic sector continues to grow and thrive I believe that we too deserve support for programs that expand the breadth of knowledge about organic farming systems and provide that information to farmers.

Organic agriculture, for the most part is centered on small farms like mine. We have been the beneficiaries of a vibrant community that shares information and resources with each other and from organizations like NOFA VT who assist farmers with technical assistance and support. Over the last number of years we have also benefited from the certification reimbursement program which gives back a percentage of the yearly certification fee our farm pays for its organic inspection. We know that for many small farms and for farms new to organic this reimbursement is very important in encouraging these farmers to continue to certify their farms. It is a concrete way that all of you send a message that what we are doing is important and worth supporting.

I am confident that solutions will continue to appear from organic agriculture as every day I see the benefits on my farm with healthier animals, soils and the environment around us. Recently, Secretary Vilsack said that while some advocate for 100,000 more policemen or firemen he wants to advocate for 100,000 more farmers. I agree with him. I believe it is good public policy to have tens of thousands of family farms to provide a diversity of farm operations, to train tomorrow's farmers and to support our rural communities. Organic markets will continue to grow, driven by the consumers who are looking for increased connections to their food. All of these factors together provide hope and a bright future for more generations of farmers to come.



CROPP COOPERATIVE
INDEPENDENT and FARMER-OWNED

Our Producers

As Of 06-30-10

STATES	DAIRY	PRODUCE	PORK	POULTRY	BEEF	EGG	JUICE	SOY	GROWERS	Total Pool Participation	Member Farms Per State
CA	14					1				15	15
CO	1	1								2	2
FL							15			15	1
IA	66	8	7	2	24	27		12	5	151	116
ID	12									12	12
IL	9								1	10	10
IN	103	1	3		6				3	116	110
KS			2		1				1	4	3
KY	20									20	20
MA	2									2	2
MD	4	1								5	5
ME	37									37	37
MI	47	0	2						1	50	50
MN	116	1	0		43	1			1	162	126
MO	1	1								2	2
NC	6								3	9	9
ND					1				2	3	3
NE					1					1	1
NH	9									9	9
NM	1									1	1
NY	122								3	125	125
OH	153				6					159	154
OR	25									25	25
PA	104					6				110	108
SD	5		1		3					9	9
TN	2									2	2
TX	4									4	4
UT	2									2	2
VA	1									1	1
VT	125								1	126	126
WA	27									27	27
WI	319	128	7		123	41			5	623	508
WV										0	0
WY	2									2	2
CANADA		1							71	72	3
33 States & CAN	1339	142	22	2	208	76	15	12	97	1913	1630
	DAIRY	PRODUCE	PORK	POULTRY	BEEF	EGG	JUICE	SOY	GROWERS		

REGIONAL MILK		
REGION	# of farms	# of states
HEARTLAND	848	13
NORTHEAST	230	3
NORTHWEST	66	4
NEW ENGLAND	173	4
CALIFORNIA	14	1
ROCKY MT	4	3
TEXAS	4	1
	1339	29

*Total pools state involvement is 33;
Dairy pool state involvement is 29

Producer Total Notes:

1. Juice Pool is listed as 15.
2. Beef Pool now includes dairy producers who ship cull cows.
3. Soy pool is listed as 12
4. Some producers may be members of more than one pool.*

Pool Membership Participation

DAIRY	1339
EGG	76
PRODUCE	142
BEEF	208
PORK	22
POULTRY	2
JUICE	1
SOY	1
GROWERS	97
Voting Membership	1630

Member Farms/State Notes:

1. Juice Pool is listed as 1 Family Farm.
2. Soy Pool is listed as 1 Family Farm.
3. Total Members does not include multiple farms/tanks.
4. One member coop in Canada equals 70 farms.



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New Members

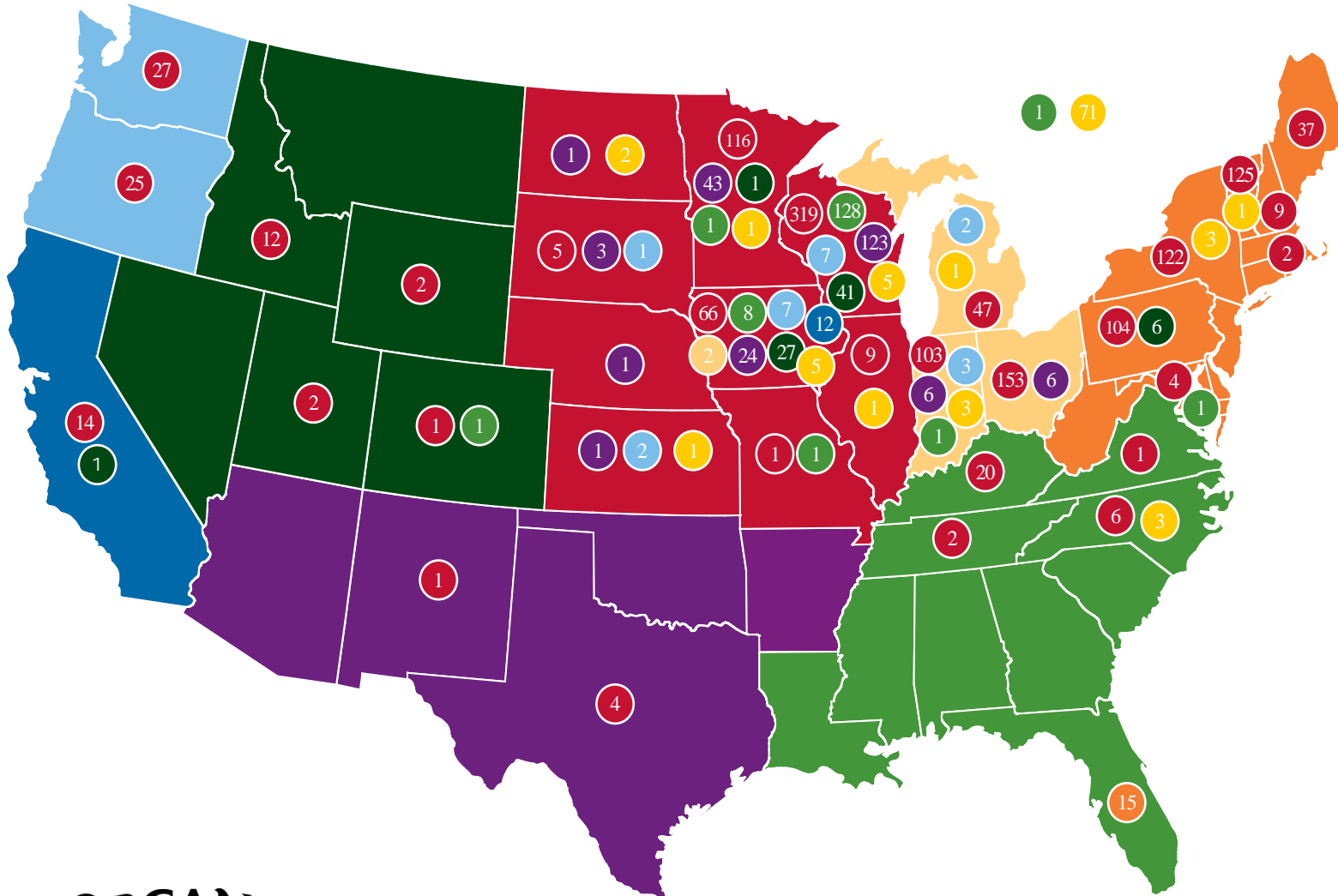
New Members by Pool - YTD		New Members All Pools by State - YTD		Organic Valley Dairy Members		Utilization Pay Group		
DAIRY	39	CA	1	CA	14	State	SSG	RSG
EGG	0	IA	4	CO	1	IA	9	0
PRODUCE	9	IL	0	IA	57	IN	21	0
BEEF	5	IN	4	ID	12	MA	1	0
PORK	1	KY	3	IL	9	ME	10	0
POULTRY	0	MA	0	IN	82	MI	47	0
JUICE	0	MD	1	KY	20	MN	10	0
SOY	0	ME	1	MA	1	NH	4	0
GROWERS	1	MI	1	MD	4	NY	34	0
	55	MN	1	ME	27	OH	54	0
		MO	1	MI	0	PA	20	0
		NC	0	MN	107	VT	5	0
		ND	0	MO	1	WI	34	6
		NH	0	NC	6	Total	249	6
		NY	3	NH	5			
		OH	2	NM	1			
		PA	3	NY	88			
		VT	1	OH	99			
		WA	0	OR	25			
		WI	27	PA	84			
		WY	0	SD	5			
		CANADA	1	TN	2			
			54	TX	4			
				UT	2			
				VA	1			
				VT	119			
				WA	27			
				WI	279			
				WY	2			
					1084			

As Of 06-30-10

1,630

FAMILY FARMS
STRONG

- 1,339 Dairy
- 12 Soy
- 15 Juice
- 142 Produce
- 76 Egg
- 208 Beef
- 22 Pork
- 2 Poultry
- 97 Grower



PRODUCER REGIONS

- Northwest
- California
- Mountain
- South Central
- Midwest
- Great Lakes
- Northeast
- Southeast



CROPP COOPERATIVE
ORGANIC *and* FARMER-OWNED since 1988

