

Commentary

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U.S. organic agriculture: 30 years after the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. Introduction to themed issue

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The year 2020 marked 30 years since the passage of the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA, 1990). Since 1990, the organic sector has grown significantly in both size and scope. Measurable changes include growth in certified organic farmland, new types of firms producing organic foods and increased retail sales. During this time period, USDA began collecting systematic, publicly available data on the organic farm sector. U.S. organic farmgate sales reached \$9.9 billion in 2019 (USDA, NASS, 2020), and industry estimates place retail sales of organic food at \$57.5 billion in 2021 (OTA, 2022). Organic food is widely available in retail stores throughout the USA.

Equally important but harder to quantify changes are those regarding on-farm research on organic practices; regulatory debates such as those about the national list, origins of livestock and animal welfare; and questions about the integrity of organic products, including imports and internal industry debates concerning new, possibly competing labels, such as regenerative agriculture. This themed issue provides a perspective on the development of the U.S. organic sector, given its transformation since 1990. The seven papers cover a range of topics related to the organic sector, with several addressing long standing problems such as moderate growth in certified organic farmland, prices as barriers to consuming organic food, slowness in the regulatory response to market needs, and the challenges of international trade in organic products.

The moderate growth in the amount of certified organic farmland in the USA remains a puzzle, since organic farms are often more profitable than their conventional counterparts. Thirty years since the passage of OFPA, the decision to transition to organic production on the part of farmers remains poorly understood. Stephenson *et al.* (2021), in their study of the organic transition, find that having values-based motivations for farming organically is important to a successful transition. Producers who begin to transition, but do not complete the process, indicate that access to processing facilities and labor costs are obstacles. Stephenson *et al.* (2021) make multiple recommendations to address these obstacles. In a related paper that examines organic production in the south, Miller *et al.* (2022) point to the lack of certified organic producers in the south, where organic farms supplied 2% of farm level organic sales in 2016. They suggest that regional factors are important determinants of a farmer's decision to produce organically, and recommend region-specific research to support the development of the organic sector in the south.

The fact that organic food sells for a premium at the retail level is no secret, but the higher price may be a barrier for many consumers. Chen *et al.* (2021) investigate consumer price sensitivity for organic products for different food product categories, and examine their response to promotions, such as price discounts. They find that consumers are more responsive to promotions for organic virtue foods, defined as foods they perceive as providing quality, healthfulness or environmental benefits, in comparison with conventional virtue foods. The authors suggest that intensive price promotions on organic virtue foods may help convert price-sensitive shoppers to organic consumers.

International trade of organic products relies on a series of agreements among countries, referred to as recognition agreements, reciprocity agreements, and equivalency agreements. Whether such agreements are effective policy instruments, in terms of facilitating and increasing trade of organic products, is the subject of the work of Boys *et al.* (2022). The authors find mixed evidence of a measurable impact of agreements on the level of international trade, but point to the experience of Canada–USA trade as promising for the effectiveness of agreements as policy instruments.

Two papers examine the organic dairy sector. The first focuses on grass-fed organic dairy, which is a growing part of the organic milk market. To date, organic grass-fed dairy production has received less attention from researchers than mixed-feed organic dairy. Using primary data collected from grass-fed organic dairy producers, Snider and colleagues (2021) examine on-farm production practices along with influencing agronomic and social factors. A primary factor for adopting grass-fed organic dairy production is economic. The authors identify numerous knowledge gaps related to animal diet, including forage quality and other

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nutritional factors, and make several recommendations on how to better support organic grass-fed dairy producers.

The second organic dairy paper is motivated by the controversy regarding the definition and enforcement of regulations relating to access to pasture and transitioning livestock, which has been longstanding and slow to change to meet the needs of the sector. Dimitri and Nehring (2022) examine the 30-year trajectory of the organic dairy sector and organic standards. To do so, they use USDA data and other evidence to trace changes in the discourse about organic dairy, the market, and processing and farm profitability, along with the evolution of the regulation. They examine the impact of changing regulations on pasture per cow, amount of feed obtained from grazing, and estimate the profitability of organic dairies over time and by region.

The final paper highlights three women organic researchers who have devoted their careers to creating novel research programs covering organic agricultural systems. Figueroa (2022) presents an oral history of Kathleen Delate, Catherine Greene and Deborah Stinner. In their own way, the work of these three scholars influenced the direction of applied economic and agroecological research on organic agriculture. Kathleen Delate is the first tenured faculty member in Organic Agriculture at a land-grant university in the United States. Catherine Greene, now retired, pioneered economic research on the U.S. organic sector in the USDA's Economic Research Service from 1988 to 2020. Deborah Stinner served as Director of The Ohio State University's Organic Food & Farming Education and Research (OFFER) program for 13 years, from 1998 to her retirement in 2011. The paper illuminates what motivated each to work in the field of organic agriculture, long before there was social and academic support for doing so.

Conclusion

Since the implementation of OFPA in 1990, the organic sector has grown in size, and consumer demand for organic food is expected to continue to increase. The seven papers in this special issue point to the challenges facing the organic sector: slow to respond regulation, difficulties with harmonizing standards for international trade, price barriers faced by consumers, and cultural and physical barriers to adopting organic farming systems. Each

paper provides insight into how the sector has adapted to one or more of these challenges, and offers a policy or market-based solution to support continued growth. Finally, the oral history article highlights how the persistence of dedicated researchers enhanced our understanding of farming practices, marketing approaches and data collection. The research of these three organic scholars, along with numerous others, continues to illuminate the economic and environmental benefits that result from the adoption of organic farming systems.

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