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# Organic

## Educating Future Organic Leaders

Cultivating the Future of Food



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# CERTIFIED Organic



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## Educating Future Organic Leaders: Cultivating the Future of Food

*Investing in future organic leaders, with support from the organic community, has been a monumental success for the CCOF Foundation.*

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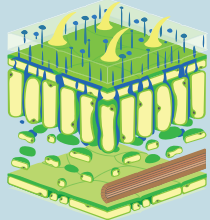
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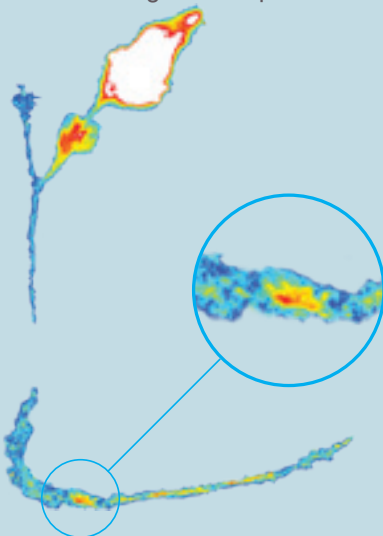
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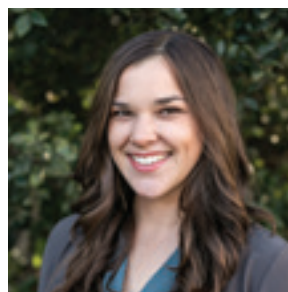
The fundamental driving passion behind our work is helping organic farmers and processors thrive. This passion underpins all the work we do, from investing in expert support for our certified members, advocating for policies that streamline and enforce organic standards, and filling in the support gaps for future and current organic professionals.

In the last year, as we've seen greater need for support in the organic community, we've stepped up our efforts in response to an unpredictable, challenging season. You'll read about many of these initiatives in this issue of *Certified Organic*:

- Our work on legislation that will include the biggest investment in organic in California's history (Page 24)
- A new certification that includes even more crops in the organic community (Page 28)
- Grants that help farmers transition their land to organic production (Page 11)
- Education of the whole supply chain to increase profitability for farmers at farmers' markets (Page 13)
- Policy solutions and education that address the many challenges faced by the organic livestock community (Page 25)

The CCOF Foundation's Future Organic Farmers program also went under the microscope in the past year to make it even more effective and helpful for young people interested in organic. Since we started giving scholarships to students in 2014, we've had the privilege of watching grantees' development over the years, giving us an invaluable perspective on how we can best impact these students. We've made some changes to the program that provide a lasting impact on the beginning trajectory of these new farmers' journeys. Melody Meyer has been with us since Future Organic Farmers' inception, and we invited her back to *Certified Organic* to share the program's newest evolution with you in this issue's feature article (Page 16). You'll also hear how these scholarships directly impact students' lives. We're immensely proud of the Future Organic Farmers program and all the students we meet who are becoming leaders in organic.

Our Foundation programs are made possible through outside contributions, and Future Organic Farmers is a particularly special program where 100% of funds donated to the program go directly back into the hands of the organic farmers who need it most. Learn more and donate at [www.ccof.org/get-involved](http://www.ccof.org/get-involved).



*Kelly Damewood*

**Kelly Damewood**  
CCOF CEO

## Issue Contributors

### Educating Future Organic Leaders: Cultivating the Future of Food, Page 16



**Melody Meyer** discovered her passion for organic food and farming in 1976 at a co-op in Iowa. Since then, she has taken on many roles in food and agriculture. Meyer has worked with organic farmers and companies in international trade, marketing, policy and regulations. She has also worked with nonprofit organizations, including the CCOF Foundation. After founding the first woman-owned brokerage company, Source Organic, Meyer spent two decades fostering organic initiatives at Alberts Organics and UNFI. Her board of directors service includes nine years at the Organic Trade Association, 10 years on the California Organic Products Advisory Committee, and a current appointment on the boards of Organically Grown Company, The Organic Center, and Only Organic.

Meyer continues her passion for organic, consulting, writing, and mentoring the next generation. Find out what she's up to at [www.organicmattersblog.com](http://www.organicmattersblog.com).





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## Tea Drops Brings People Together

The scent of cardamom fills the air as the Tea Drop dissolves into the hot water. Pressed Assam black tea, spices, and cane sugar quickly disperse, transforming the water into a cup of Chai Spice Black Tea. An added splash of milk fills an afternoon break with daydreams of India. Tea Drops are a contemporary version of the ancient tradition of tea drinking. As described on their website, Tea Drops melt in water like a bath bomb, except it's tea!

Started in 2015 by founder Sashee Chandran, Tea Drops was her vision for the modern tea ritual. Sashee grew up immersed in tea culture. Her parents are immigrants; her mother is from China and her father is from Sri Lanka. As an adult, she found it difficult to source tea that was high-quality and quick to prepare. She felt that tea bags were wasteful and lacked the aroma and depth of whole leaf tea. Chandran made it her goal to create a convenient, high quality tea experience while prioritizing the environment and equitable trade. Starting a business in a new industry was overwhelming at times. Her background in marketing did little to prepare Sashee for starting a full-time business in the food industry. She used savings to get started, and her first buyers were secured at trade shows. "I wish I would have gravitated toward food industry networks earlier," she says. "It would have given me a better sense of community and helped me learn faster from people who have walked the path before."

Like many brands, Tea Drops started with a rough sketch in a notebook. The packaging was a horizontal wooden box that

paid homage to tea chests of the 16th century. When the company started selling in grocery stores, the wooden box was replaced by a paper carton in the same orientation. After they realized that the footprint took up too much shelf space (which is always limited in grocery stores), they switched to a vertical box. As the brand grew, Tea Drops became more aware of what they wanted to convey to the customer through their packaging. From the start, the company prioritized organic, fair trade, and kosher ingredients, and was proud of their identity as a woman-owned business. They decided that a cylindrical canister would have space to share their story, describe how the Tea Drops work, and showcase the flavor profiles. The current packaging is eye-catching as well as 100 percent recyclable and biodegradable.

There are now 17 different certified organic Tea Drops varieties, including Rose Earl Grey, Vanilla White Tea, Turmeric, and Pineapple Chamomile. The original teas have a base of ground whole leaf tea and are held together by a small amount of cane sugar. Tea Drops recently launched an unsweetened line, which took four years to develop. "I struggled to find a composition, format, and taste that I could stand behind," explains Chandran. "I went through several rounds of formulating and enlisted multiple food scientists to help. Finally, after many years, we landed on a format and taste that we felt proud of."

The choice for Tea Drops to be certified organic was easy for Chandran: "Organic certification is very important to me because it ensures sustainable and clean tea harvesting practices. In an industry that is often riddled with pesticides and ecological damage, organic ensures that we are not only delivering the cleanest cup of tea but also supporting our planet's future." Tea Drops are also Fair Trade Certified, ensuring safe working conditions, environmental protection, and sustainable livelihoods for tea growers.



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In addition to these certifications, Tea Drops chose to give back to a water crisis organization. Thirst Project, which, like Tea Drops, is based in Los Angeles, works, with the support of young people, to end the global water crisis by building freshwater wells in developing communities. Says Chandran: “We have an amazing partnership with our nonprofit partner, Thirst Project. The decision to support the water crisis felt natural for us. It is a global crisis that really has drastic ramifications.” For every box of tea purchased, Tea Drops donates a year’s supply of clean water to someone in need. Says Chandran, “To date we have donated enough water to support nearly 150,000 individuals. We have built three water wells with Thirst Project in Eswatini.” Sashee looks forward to traveling to Eswatini so that she can work on a well project and see firsthand what Tea Drops has been supporting.

“Clean water provides hydration, but it is also the key to good hygiene, education, and opportunity,” Chandran says. “Not only is clean water essential for life, but [without it] you also cannot enjoy life’s simple pleasures, like a cup of tea.”

“Tea is a powerful beverage. Second to water, it is the most-consumed beverage in the world, and it is also a communal beverage that brings people together.” You can learn more about Tea Drops’ story and find their products at [www.myteadrop.com](http://www.myteadrop.com).

## Golden Nectar: Hoku Hawaiian Honey

“Honey is a uniquely beautiful souvenir,” stated Chelsea Löw, a beekeeper at Pu’u O Hoku Ranch on the east end of Molokai, Hawaii. “Honey symbolizes whatever place it came from—the sunlight, the rain, the nectar, the moon phase. It tastes like the specific place at a particular time.” There is no doubt that the honey from Pu’u O Hoku Ranch—CCOF’s only certified apiculture operation, with its 16,000 acres of certified organic forage and a surveillance area for bees—carries its own diverse array of flavors and medicinal benefits.

The honeybees on Pu’u O Hoku Ranch are descendants of colonies imported until the early 1900s that swarmed and went feral during the past century, and they are living much more freely, in their dual-certified organic and Biodynamic home, than most bees today. Originally, honeybees were sought in Hawaii because the “kiawe” (mesquite) that had been planted for the burgeoning cattle ranching industry required bees for pollination.



## *“Honey is a uniquely beautiful souvenir ... It tastes like the specific place at a particular time.”*

In 1908, the state of Hawaii banned the importation of live packaged bees, and later, in the 1980s, banned the importation of breeder queens. Molokai is uniquely suited for organic apiculture: It is one of the extremely rare places that does not have varroa mites, a major pest concern for most beekeepers. Because it never gets cold in Molokai, the bees never need supplemental feed. Pu'u O Hoku Ranch's vast expanse of remote acreage is managed organically. The land was purchased over 30 years ago, so the operation is not feeling pressure to purchase new land at today's exorbitant prices and can keep their established practices in place. Today, the apiary is expanded by collecting feral swarms entirely within the ranch's property lines, and unlike most commercial beekeepers, Pu'u O Hoku staff allow their bees to keep swarming as they please. Says Lööw:

“Biodynamic certification has more to do with a holistic approach to the whole ranch that is about interconnectedness of the farm with everything interrelated in a single system. All our interactions impose the least amount of strength; we do not hinder animals for our economic purposes. Industrial beekeeping can be disrespectful in the way it manipulates nature on a large scale with unnatural living conditions, genetic manipulation, stressful interactions, and transport. None of that applies here. We do not intervene when a hive swarms; we do not stifle them from living as their truest selves.”

The guidelines imposed by organic and Biodynamic certification ensure the highest quality honey and support bees to express their true natures, according to Lööw. For instance, rules prohibiting the clipping of a queen's wings and rules allowing bees to create their own wax combs rather than making straight lines in an established foundation are important to beekeepers who feel strongly that bees should live in conditions that support their thriving. That being said, it is often difficult for most other certified operations to add apiculture because certification requires a 1.8-mile radius, certified organic forage zone around the hives, and beyond that, a 2.2-mile radius surveillance zone that must not contain high-risk activities. This requirement feels “very meaningful” to Lööw, who believes it ensures the foraging bees will not contact contaminants and bring them back to the hive. The requirements “really mean something” because they distinguish organic honey and its potential added health benefits as especially unique and noteworthy.

With honey's immune-boosting properties and the plight of pollinators both gaining national attention, there has been an increase in hobby beekeeping within the last several years. Though the pursuit of beekeeping has many draws, Lööw is concerned that neglect of these new hives can damage wild native bee populations, spread diseases, and harm local, established hives. Lööw's advice?



“There are a lot of textbooks that describe problems and solutions, but solutions that work in one time or place may not work again. Bees are so variable depending on the season and location. Stay innovative—the bees did not read the rule book. Take classes. Find a mentor. Become a total bee nerd and be active in your approach. Then you will be ready.”

There are absolutely “hot, heavy, dusty, painful days” of getting stung under the sweltering sun that occasionally give the beekeepers pause. A rugged attitude is required. Overall, however, Lööw describes daily life tending to bees on the island as humbling and refreshing. Getting “tumbled and tossed around by the waves, trying to surf, taking in the beautiful waterfalls, feeling the glow of orange from the rising sun” are all part of the overall allure that keeps Pu'u O Hoku drawing new visitors every year. These visitors appreciate being able to purchase honey that aligns with their ethos and gives them a special taste of the specific flora local to that very remote island.

On the horizon are additional products to join the honey sold in their local ranch shop. Lööw is harvesting the ranch's own organic turmeric and Hawaiian hot chili peppers that are dehydrated, pulverized, and added to the honey, along with black pepper, for a flavorful honey flight. Entire frames of honey will be lifted from supers and packaged in handmade wooden boxes with the hive's GPS coordinates burned into the wood as a unique souvenir for visitors. Sitting on a beautiful Hawaiian island, spoon in hand, ready to carve into a freshly harvested frame of certified organic and Biodynamic honey sounds like a version of heaven.

For more information, including the option to purchase this certified honey online, visit Pu'u O Hoku's website at [www.puuhoku.com](http://www.puuhoku.com).



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*Organic transition grantees Jared Siverling (left) and Katharine Juhan-Arnold (right) are part of the growing organic community.*

## ***Growing the Organic Community***

In 1973, a group of organic farmers in California created the 13 original standards for CCOF's organic certification. The rules centered on high-quality produce, soil health, prohibition of toxins, animal welfare, accurate recordkeeping, and truth in advertising. The original CCOF farmers formed a community of practice, organized into regional chapters, and worked within these structures to hold themselves accountable to their commitments and to certify one another. The original CCOF chapters (formed to work together to succeed in organic growing) created the backbone of the organic community in California, and together with similar groups across the country, seeded a nationwide movement. Through this growing network, farmers supported their fellow organic producers in transitioning to and succeeding in the use of organic practices.

The environmental and ethical standards written into CCOF's original organic certification practices are a hallmark of what it means to be an organic farmer. While the original 13 standards have evolved, becoming more nuanced and complex, the intention of those first agreements remains an imprint on today's organic regulations. The spirit of the early organic community shines through today in acts of goodwill within the industry.

In the early 2000s, the CCOF Foundation's first official Going Organic program organized over 60 workshops for hundreds of farmers across California. Farmers were given the knowledge needed to transition to organic, and they connected with peers who had successfully made the leap. This initial program helped transition over 4,000 acres of farmland to organic throughout California.

In the tradition of helping farmers transition to organic, in 2020 CCOF partnered with Anheuser-Busch to support the transition of over 100,000 acres of farmland to organic. In alignment with our mission to create a world where organic is the norm, CCOF was proud to support Anheuser-Busch not only in giving back to the communities that needed additional financial income to transition to organic but also in verticalizing the company's own organic supply chain through agronomy trainings and peer-to-peer mentorship. This involved cultural shifts; conventional growers needed to see and hear from peers successfully producing organic and showcasing sophisticated growing practices and financial prosperity. Producers learned more about the valuable investment and the long-term stability of building healthy organic soils, which are able to replenish crops year after year and better endure climate instability than conventional soils. During times of stress, like drought, yields can be higher and more consistent in organic production than on conventional farms that don't yet have robust soil health or ecosystem resilience. With the support of Anheuser-Busch, the CCOF Foundation granted half a million dollars to farmers transitioning to organic who understand and are committed to the benefits of going organic but need additional capital to get them through the three-year transition period. One such grantee is Katharine Juhan-Arnold from Snellville, Georgia.

Healing her community and healing the earth through organic farming are one in the same for Juhan-Arnold. A millennial, female farmer, and woman of color, Juhan-Arnold began growing her own organic vegetables and herb patch to save money on groceries after she lost her job. As a full-time student and mother, Juhan-Arnold grew her backyard vegetable garden into a full-blown micro-farm. Funding from the CCOF Foundation's Organic Transition grant was a reaffirmation of Juhan-Arnold's larger journey as a leader in her community. She is currently on a path to empower her food-insecure neighbors to source organic and grow at home. Juhan-Arnold's leadership was vital in 2020 as many of her peers relied heavily on publicly provided school food as a primary source of nutrition for their children. The Organic Transition grant supported Juhan-Arnold's 5-acre farm, where she is in the process of certification.

Another 2020 grantee of the Organic Transition program is Jared Silverling of Bloomer, Wisconsin. While serving in the U.S. Army on deployment in Iraq, Silverling read Gary Zimmer's *Advancing Biological Farming*, which inspired him to convert more of his family's land to regenerative organic practices upon his return. The Silverling family has been farming for more than 100 years, and the CCOF Foundation grant enabled Jared and his wife Vanessa to continue their goal of transitioning their land to organic production. Before receiving the grant, half of the family's acreage was farmed organically,

and the financial support they received helped them push further toward becoming fully organic. The Silverlings produce corn, soybeans, rye, oats, barley, winter peas, alfalfa, clover, and cattle on their farm. They are passionate advocates for regenerating the land through organic agriculture and understand the critical roles soil health, biodiversity, and climate-smart agriculture practices will play in feeding future generations of Silverlings and their community members.

Silverling and Juhan-Arnold are two of the many impressive farmer grantees who received grants to begin their transition in 2020—many of whom only needed a little financial support to expand their businesses and invest more deeply in organic.

### The Next Iteration of Going Organic

The CCOF Foundation's Organic Transition work is expanding in 2021 with the support of Michelin-starred restaurant group Rustic Canyon Family. Founded in 2006, this independent restaurant group based in Santa Monica, California, features a variety of neighborhood dining destinations in partnership with award-winning leaders in the food and wine industry. Rustic Canyon has long been a leader in supporting their community through fundraising, donating food, and volunteering. They raised more than \$1.56 million for Los Angeles-based nonprofits Upward Bound House, the People Concern, Program for Torture Victims, and many other



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organizations focused on promoting environmental health, racial equity, education, and feeding the hungry. This new partnership with the CCOF Foundation builds on Rustic Canyon Family's commitment to uplifting farmers, promoting planet-friendly practices, and raising awareness of the regenerative benefits of organic farming.

With Rustic Canyon's support, the CCOF Foundation will build off our partnership with Anheuser-Busch to equip small and medium-sized farms in socially disadvantaged communities with the financial, technical, and community support and farmer-to-farmer mentorship required to become successful organic producers. With increased awareness of racial injustice, highlighted by the 2020 protests, many CCOF Foundation donors have asked how our grants and educational programs serve communities of color. The truth is we always have. Our grant criteria have always included a needs assessment to ensure we support those most in need and award our grants based on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many CCOF Foundation grantees are farmers of color. The intent has always been to build more equity into the food and farming system. By granting to farmers transitioning to organic who hail from historically disadvantaged communities, we achieve our mission.

The first installment of this expanded Organic Transition program in partnership with Rustic Canyon Family will run for three years and will double the individual grant amounts awarded in 2020, offering \$10,000 of financial support each year mainly to small-scale, immigrant, and Latinx producers transitioning land to organic on the Central Coast of California. In partnership with the Agriculture and Land-Based Association (ALBA) and California FarmLink, the CCOF Foundation will see these farmers through, not only with funding for the entire three-year transition period required for NOP certification but also with mentorship and peer-to-peer networking opportunities that are imperative for any farmer making the transition from conventional to organic. Farmers experience high levels of stress in a normal workday, let alone during climate disasters, pandemics, and supply chain shortfalls. A farming family can easily feel overwhelmed by these circumstances, disconnected from support and unable to find the help needed to be successful. Being part of a group of people on the same path is an integral component often missing from the conversation around being a successful organic producer.

By providing financial, peer, and community support to our first cohort of 10 farmers (to be announced early 2022), the CCOF Foundation will launch a model of organic transition granting that will serve as a template for other regions across the United States.

It takes a village to raise organic and a well-funded village to support historically disenfranchised communities on the path to organic farm ownership. At the CCOF Foundation, we do our

best to embody the ideals laid forth by the founders of CCOF; we try to be good people. This work will—with your support—become a beacon of hope and goodness for generations to come. We have a strong network of current funders, but we need more help. Will you join us?

For more information about this grant opportunity or to become an investor in the project, email [ccoffoundation@ccof.org](mailto:ccoffoundation@ccof.org).

## From Produce Displays to COVID-19 Pivots: The CCOF Foundation Offers Marketing Education to Support Organic Producers

Small and midsize organic farms faced challenges marketing their products even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Farmers' markets, once solid sales outlets, had become saturated and increasingly competitive. Many organic producers found themselves in competition with farms catering to health-conscious consumers by advertising "no sprays" and offering lower prices than organic.

To assist organic farmers in addressing these two issues, in 2018 the CCOF Foundation applied for and received a Farmers Market Promotion Program grant from the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. Aimed at increasing profitability for farms that sell through farmers' markets, the project provided marketing tools and technical assistance to farmers, as well as education on organic regulations for farmers' market managers. The CCOF Foundation partnered with the California Alliance of Farmers' Markets (the Alliance), Kitchen Table Advisors, and longtime organic farmer and marketing consultant Jamie Collins of Serendipity Farms to execute the project.

### Farmers' Market Managers Get the Lowdown on Organic Regulations

Farmers' market managers wear many hats and must understand a multitude of regulations to do their jobs. To help market managers better understand organic—and thus better support their local organic producers—the CCOF Foundation and the Alliance hosted in-person and online trainings for farmers' market managers on organic certification. The CCOF Foundation also updated the organic chapter in the Alliance's farmers' market manager manual.

The market manager trainings reviewed the basics of organic certification, highlighted organic best practices for farmers'

# The CCOF Foundation's ..... **ORGANIC TRAINING INSTITUTE**



Through trainings, workshops, and seminars, the Organic Training Institute provides intentional education to aspiring and current organic professionals.

Our online educational offerings for the second half of 2021 include:

- FSMA food safety webinars for small and medium-sized organic processors
- Podcasts on marketing strategies for farms that sell directly to consumers

**Learn more about upcoming Organic Training Institute events at [www.ccof.org/oti](http://www.ccof.org/oti) »**

You can check out our webinar recordings on the CCOF YouTube channel. Popular recordings include:

- Organic Labeling and Marketing Strategies for Meat Producers
- FSMA Food Safety Updates for Produce Growers
- FSMA Preventive Controls Rule Supplier Verification for Food Hubs and Farms
- Farm and Food Business Marketing Collaborations

**View recordings of past webinars and follow our YouTube channel at [www.ccof.org/youtube](http://www.ccof.org/youtube) »**

The Organic Training Institute's 2021 events are supported in part by funding from private donors, the California Department of Food and Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

market displays, and provided information on the Organic Certification Cost Share Program for farmers. To help market managers test out their new skills, the CCOF Foundation and the Alliance set up mock-up market stalls that included numerous organic noncompliances. Market managers identified comingled organic and non-organic produce, recognized improper organic signage, and noted items for sale that were not listed on the organic certificate.

The majority of market managers who filled out post-workshop surveys indicated that they gained valuable knowledge from the workshops and webinars. Many market managers requested materials on organic in both English and Spanish to take back to the farmers at their markets. When asked what they intended to implement from the trainings in their work, market managers commented:

- **"Remind vendors about allowed organic/non-organic language."**
- **"I am constantly asked about the definition of 'organic' and now I can say it is a 'federally controlled' term."**
- **"I just wanted to be aware of what our farmers go through to become organic and how much they pay. Now I will be able to have a bit more understanding of their process."**

## **Technical Assistance and Farmer-to-Farmer Marketing Tips and Innovation**

Marketing impacts many different facets of farming. Decisions on what crops to grow, what sales avenues to sell through, and how to set up a farm stand display all impact a farm's bottom line. To address this broad array of topics, CCOF Foundation partnered with Kitchen Table Advisors to provide individualized technical assistance to 60 farmers and collaborated with Jamie Collins of Serendipity Farm—an experienced organic farmer and savvy marketing consultant—to conduct trainings on various marketing topics.

## **Supporting Strong Local Food Systems During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Initially, the farmer-centered aspect of the grant project focused on helping farmers leverage their farmers' market stalls to increase revenue. Kitchen Table Advisors worked with farmers on recordkeeping, crop and business planning, and marketing. Collins gave in-person presentations on how to increase farm revenue through various techniques, including farm stand displays, creative marketing, and communication strategies for connecting with customers.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 sent farmers, farmers' market managers, and organizations that support farmers scrambling to adapt to shelter-in-place and social distancing orders. The CCOF Foundation and its grant



partners shifted both training topics and delivery methods to address the new pandemic reality.

## Organic Farmers Share Successful Pivoting Strategies

No one knows better than farmers how to shift marketing strategies and maintain customers during troubled times. That's why the CCOF Foundation reached out to our farmer network to showcase successful marketing pivots from the organic farming community. No longer able to hold in-person trainings, we instead hosted webinars and published blog posts.

Hannah Muller from Full Belly Farm taught a webinar on social media marketing during the spring of 2020, just as many farms were moving their marketing online. Attendees reported that they learned key social media concepts to use in their own marketing plans, including how to identify their audiences, use more hashtags, and create a cohesive aesthetic for online platforms.

Additional webinars featured creative and practical marketing tips. Janet Zeller of Soil Born Farms showcased how her farm partnered with local food producers to host a drive-thru farm stand. Collins reviewed factors to consider when starting a CSA and explained how she runs a virtual farm stand via her Facebook page. Representatives from Sambrailo Packaging and Sun Sugar Farms presented sustainable packaging options for farms looking to pack more grab-and-go items for their customers.

Through surveys, attendees indicated that they learned valuable information from the webinars. Some also shared how they intend to apply what they learned to their own work. Attendees also commented on the quality and usefulness of the webinar presentations:

- **"Presenter was very knowledgeable. I found the tips on marketing during COVID were very helpful."**
- **"[What I liked best about the webinar were the] creative ideas for tough times."**
- **"Good presentations, good examples, very thoughtful and colorful."**

With the in-person workshops she intended to teach disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Jamie Collins instead shared her marketing expertise and her experience as a farmer grappling with the pandemic via blog posts in CCOF's weekly e-newsletter. Collins shared how she and her crew stayed safe in the field and at the market by following public health protocols. In a blog post on transparent marketing, she encouraged farmers to share both successes and failures with their customers. She noted: "Whether we try to hide it or not, life is messy! Everyone can relate as we adapt to our new COVID-19 reality." Other posts discussed considerations for investing in CSA software, selling seedlings to support your community in growing its own food, and strategies for

reflecting on your farm business to improve business and farmer health. At last count, her blog posts have reached over 700 readers.

## Key Resources to Help Keep Farmers' Markets Open During COVID-19

The California Alliance of Farmers' Markets worked diligently in 2020 to keep farmers' markets open during the pandemic. The Alliance's small but dedicated staff worked tirelessly to share best practices on implementing COVID-19 social distancing protocols in farmers' market settings. With funding from the Farmers Market Promotion Program grant, the Alliance updated COVID-19 resources and hosted webinars wherein market managers shared strategies for adapting to the pandemic. The alliance also kept tabs on farmers' market closures and reopenings throughout California. Market managers reported that they found the resources very useful. One market manager commented: "I appreciate the resources. We held our first farmers' market last Saturday after being closed for a month, and it was very well-received. We greatly appreciate all the COVID resources being shared."

## What's Next?

As this grant project enters its third and final year, the CCOF Foundation continues to adjust its programming to meet the needs of farmers and market managers. Noticing that folks seem tired of online trainings ("Zoom fatigue" is real!), we will launch a podcast series later this year. The series will feature marketing strategies from resilient organic farms that sell directly to consumers. Feel free to listen while you are packing CSA boxes, making deliveries, or taking your lunch break.

## Final Thoughts—Adaptation, Generosity, and Community

As the program coordinator for this grant project, what has inspired me over the past year is the adaptability and generosity of the organic community. I am in awe of the quick-thinking, deeply committed farmers and market managers who came up with innovative ways to keep their businesses afloat and their employees working during a tumultuous year. Not only that, but they were willing to share their success strategies with other farmers (their competitors) to assist their peers in doing the same. The CCOF Foundation has been honored to serve as the platform from which this farmer-to-farmer education can be shared and broadcast.

While this specific grant project is wrapping up, the CCOF Foundation looks forward to collaborating with the organic community on future projects. We hope to see you at upcoming trainings, and we always welcome suggestions of topics for educational programming.









# Educating Future Organic Leaders

## *Cultivating the Future of Food*

WRITTEN BY Melody Meyer

Ideas are like visitors: If you don't pay attention to them, they go away. In 2012, CCOF, along with a few organic companies and leaders (myself included), had an idea: Our collaborative funding could make a bigger impact on organic agriculture.

We were concerned about the future of food and farming. The first generation of organic leaders and farmers was aging; fewer young people were seeking agricultural careers. Real barriers exist for organic entrepreneurs. Advancing their education and careers was (and still is) crucial to growing organic agriculture. Mentoring our youth to become future organic leaders was an audacious idea—one that the CCOF Foundation's board embraced. Thus the Future Organic Farmers program (FOF) was born. That seed of an idea has grown into a grant program that cultivates organic careers and impacts communities and the very future of food.

Investing in future organic leaders, with support from the organic community, has been a monumental success! Since 2014, the CCOF Foundation has awarded over \$700,000 to 42,000 students in 35 U.S. states. Nearly 60 percent of the grants went to students from disadvantaged communities—the ones who need them most. FOF is made possible by generous donations from organic supporters of all kinds.

Far-ranging impacts and insightful realizations arose from those first years. Originally, FOF was designed to fund three areas: students in kindergarten through eighth grade, middle and high school participants in Future Farmers of America (FFA), and vocational and higher education students. In particular, the success stories from students engaged in FFA and higher education were profound. These were students making real progress in their education and realizing that organic is a viable career choice.

**We found that something truly inspirational is cultivated when students receive sustained financial support at the beginning of their careers, and we have redesigned the program to maximize this impact.** Beginning in 2021, grants will focus on two groups: middle and high school students and students in higher education.

CCOF will continue to award \$1,000 grants to 15 middle and high school students each year to help them cover expenses for FFA Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) projects that use USDA organic production methods. Traditionally, FFA has not focused on organic projects because funding from conventional agriculture companies influences their agenda. CCOF Foundation is a trailblazer, establishing long-term organic educational projects at FFA and providing a unique opportunity for FFA students to realize organic as a successful career path.

PHOTOS: Future Organic Farmer grantees (left to right, from top) — Jaynie Miller, Emilio Otontiopa, Lynn Batten, Audrey Jen, Erin Franey, Elda Garcia, Joshua Dransfield

*It was a financial risk for Coronel and his family, but he decided to make a leap of faith by sacrificing his steady farmworker income to reach for his dreams.*

In addition, 15 vocational and higher education students will now receive grants of \$5,000 to offset tuition and educational expenses while pursuing degrees or certificates in organic agriculture. **That's double the amount granted in previous years!** Why? Because tuition costs are rising. This increase will alleviate the financial burden on the next generation of organic farmers and professionals and provide incentives for continuing education. The CCOF Foundation continues to welcome previous recipients to reapply for further funding to broaden their technical education and to become organic advocates. This multiyear funding will foster the long-term success of our future leaders.

**Need and commitment are critical considerations in the grant process.** Knowing that students in underserved communities need grants the most, we have always prioritized diversity, equity, and inclusion in our outreach and grant-making processes. Students who are Black, Indigenous, Asian American, Latinx, immigrants, people of color, women, and farmworkers don't have equal access to organic education and are historically underserved and underrepresented in agriculture. In the application review process, FOF prioritizes awarding grants to applicants who are from historically underserved communities. CCOF Foundation staff also partner with farmer education organizations who work with underrepresented farmers to reach these individuals, and provide one-on-one applicant support in both English and Spanish to make sure everyone has access to the fund's financial support. Another fundamental criterion is commitment. Recipients must display a commitment to leading a lifelong career in organic, growing the organic movement, and participating in the organic community.

**Providing networking opportunities for grantees is a key success strategy.** An informal alumni network keeps grantees in touch with one another, providing insights and opportunities to advance their budding careers. CCOF plans to deepen this network in the future by connecting recipients with each other and with businesses, funders, fellowship programs, and internships. Grantees are invited to all CCOF Foundation events, where they can interact and learn from the CCOF membership and the greater community. They're also encouraged to speak at these events and tell their stories, building confidence that can transform them into organic advocates.

The CCOF blog highlights the dreams and aspirations of our FOF grantees. The blog is read by over 17,000 people, and you can be one of them by subscribing at [www.ccof.org/blog](http://www.ccof.org/blog).

These future organic producers are truly inspiring, and I'm honored to share a few stories from budding organic leaders who've blossomed with the CCOF Foundation's support.

## Meet Grant Recipient Malcolm St. Cyr

**Malcolm St. Cyr is a previous grant recipient and a young man on a mission to enhance sustainable organic production and food self-sufficiency in sub-Saharan Africa.** Pursuing dual bachelor's degrees in agronomy and global resource systems at Iowa State University will help him actualize that goal. His aspirations were cultivated during his 20 formative years in Senegal. His firsthand experience of the obstacles to food security and self-sufficiency instilled in him a desire to give back to his community.

He remembers, "Being curious, I wondered why we imported so much of our food. Our diets were based on imported rice, a staple that people can grow there. It didn't add up; we have access to land and water but still imported much of our food. That's when I decided I was going to take on a mission to bring an end to that, to move the process forward and gain steps toward changing it. That's when I really became interested in ag."

Food production is uncertain in sub-Saharan Africa. Crops are "organic" by default because few modern practices such as applied science and technology are available. Dependence on rainfall limits production, further decreasing food security.

**St. Cyr plans to change that.** He wants to return to Senegal after graduation to work as an agronomist applying science and technology to crop production. He believes his theoretical and practical knowledge will enhance sustainable organic crop production.

St. Cyr shared, "People often ask me what kind of job I want after graduation. The truth is, I really don't want just a job. I want to use my knowledge and dedicate it to people. If I make money or not, I will still reach my goal.

"The connection between science and social inequality is clear; scientific biases can negatively impact developing countries. I plan to deepen the research and even things out so everybody has equal opportunity to succeed.

"I do think it's beneficial to show people what they're capable of instead of just telling them. By showing them what I can accomplish on my farm, they can realize new capabilities—ways to leverage and manage their natural resources. I believe they'll be attracted to my work, and then I will help them with open arms."

Global markets disrupt land ownership and food sovereignty. St. Cyr intends to develop alternatives to growing for export so that farmers have more agency over what gets exported and what gets consumed at home. His example: "Many melon varieties are grown in Senegal by foreign companies. They buy our land, grow food, and ship it back to Europe. Almost all the melons you see in Spain come from Senegal. I have nothing





Malcolm St. Cyr (left) and Adelio Coronel (right) received Future Organic Farmer grants from the CCOF Foundation.

against it, but wouldn't it be better if the Senegalese did it themselves? I want to be instrumental in establishing effective organic supply chains between our region and other global organic markets."

When asked how the FOF grant has moved his mission forward, St. Cyr exclaimed, "It has in all ways! Paying out-of-state tuition at Iowa State isn't cheap, so everything is very much appreciated."

"It's an honor to receive a grant that many applied for. I believe everything happens for a reason; we can't succeed on our own. It wasn't a random choice, and that motivates me to become my best—to honor the investment CCOF has made in me."

## Meet Grant Recipient Adelio Coronel

**Adelio Coronel is another grant recipient with inspiring ambitions to have a well-established farming operation and to be an environmental caretaker.**

His passion for agriculture began at his family's farm near Durango, Mexico. He recalls: "As long as I can remember, my ancestors were farmers, sowing in the traditional way by hand and spade, with some machinery. They also work with mules and horses." It was on this family farm that his "love for agriculture was born." The family produced corn, beans, pumpkins, dairy cows, chickens, and owned a few donkeys and mules.

"We saved corn the entire year for the chickens, pigs, and our tortillas," he recalls. "We made cheeses, butter; everything was produced in-house, mainly for our own consumption. If there was extra, we sold it."

**Coronel's path wasn't easy:** "As a child, I always identified with being a farmer, but when I came to the United States, I didn't know where to start, who to turn to, who to ask. The idea started to fade, but I held on to the idea that farming was my future, despite many obstacles."

At the beginning of the pandemic, with an infant daughter at home, Coronel put his farming dreams on hold indefinitely. By fate, he discovered the Farmer Education Course (PEPA) at the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) as well as CCOF Foundation's FOF program. He says, "The flame I thought was extinguished lit up again. I had new hope!" It was a financial risk for Coronel and his family, but he decided to make a leap of faith by sacrificing his steady farmworker income to reach for his dreams.

He was resolved: "I'm going to do this; it's what I've always wanted. I didn't know where the money would come from, but I had faith. It was difficult when I started, but beautiful when I found the CCOF Foundation FOF program. Here was a scholarship that could help! I told [my wife] then, we're going to make it!"

**Coronel is intuitively organic.** He recalls working in the fields in Sinaloa: "They used pesticides there a lot. I proposed they should look for alternatives. I felt like I was out of place. But when I came to the United States, I saw how well the organic movement has done and I thought I wasn't so wrong after all. *This is my place!*"

"Chemicals may be easier and faster, but at the same time, it's hurting us in the end. Many people built this organic movement, and I believe in moving it forward by providing healthy food and a better environment."

**Coronel is well on his way to becoming a successful organic producer:** "At ALBA, they taught how different it is to have your own farm rather than work for a boss. That was a powerful lesson! Now I grow plants, from the soil preparations to seeding and harvest, and I am in charge of it all."

"My vision is to have a well-established company that produces quality products that are healthy, clean, and nutritious. I want to master the way of cultivating that causes the least possible harm to the environment and natural resources—to take care of the water and the soil."

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FOF grant recipients Lehia Apana (left, with husband Brad) and Shannon Good (right) are part of the future of organic.

Coronel is currently in an incubator program, is renting half an acre, and is en route to organic certification. His company is established. "I'm selling romaine, kale, and Broccolini through Coke Farms. I plan to focus on these three crops—to become an expert and master them. I believe my star product is going to be Broccolini."

**Has the FOF scholarship helped him?** He says, "The scholarship helped us with everything. It was a lifesaver because in the beginning my wife didn't agree. Now she's excited, and it has united us as a couple. The grant was the motivation that enabled us to move on. It helped pay for my studies and buy the things I needed to get started farming."

"Every dollar was well-invested, and it served me a lot. It was an emotional realization to know that I can do this. I'm not alone. It was really tremendous."

**Coronel will reapply for another grant to continue studying and thinking big.** He admits, "I have a research spirit and like to investigate things. My plan is to have my crop samples taken to a lab to see if they fulfill the vitamin and mineral requirements."

"I can imagine a future when my own company can create a fund for development and research. Because why not dream big? One time someone funded me, and I want to help fund students like me in the future because we are simply a blink of an eye. We pass, and another generation comes, and it's important to leave something for the next generation, as those who've passed before us did."

## The Future of Organic Leadership

**I want to mention two more multiyear grantees who are embracing organic careers.**

**Shannon Good** is obtaining her degree in animal science at Michigan State University. Her calling is to envision a new way to raise dairy cows with organic methods. Her parents embrace her vision and look forward to her joining them as a business partner in the family's dairy operation.

Good is committed to sharing her vision: "I plan to host farm tours to educate our community about the benefits of organic farming and organic products. The education I received with the help of FOF will be fundamental to understanding organic dairy production and be of utmost importance when I join my family farm."

**Lehia Apana** followed her calling to embrace the ancient traditions of Native Hawaiians by studying under "Growing the Native Hawaiian Farmer," a program funded by the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. She and her husband Brad run Polipoli Farms as an act of cultural reverence. Says Apana of her FOF grant, "At first I didn't feel like a real farmer, but the fact that CCOF believed in me meant so much. The grants helped us invest in developing the farm and our knowledge bank. We're applying organic methods like rotational grazing, cover cropping, and composting to crops grown here for centuries. Breadfruit, taro, coconuts, and bananas are rooted in my Hawaiian heritage. It's allowed me to connect with my native culture."

**Search CCOF's YouTube channel** to view videos of Good, Apana, and other FOF grant recipients and get a sense of their affinity to farming and leadership of an organic future.

**You can cultivate the future of food by supporting future organic leaders.**

I'm concerned about the climate crisis and believe organic agriculture is part of the solution. It's imperative that we cultivate the next generation of organic farmers now. That's why I support the Future Organic Farmers program—**because it's still an audacious idea.**

The journey of an organic leader starts with you. Donate to our grant fund by visiting [www.ccof.org/donate](http://www.ccof.org/donate). No amount is too small nor too grand. Let's raise the number of grants from 15 to 30, or even 100!

I hope to share more success stories from future organic farmers—with your help.

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## ***Staying Connected with CCOF Chapters***

CCOF chapters provide opportunities for members to connect, get updates on CCOF work, and learn together at meetings. With California slowly reopening, CCOF chapters are following CDC guidelines and continuing to host virtual chapter meetings, a procedure we piloted in 2020. While many CCOF members have begun to suffer from “Zoom fatigue” after a year of online gatherings, these meetings nonetheless provide a good way for organic farmers, ranchers, and processors to connect on various matters and take care of chapter business. While meetings will remain virtual for the time being, some chapters are making plans for in-person gatherings in late 2021 or as state and federal health guidelines permit them. CCOF staff are excited to gather with members in person as soon as possible.

## **Chapters Support Members in Need**

Chapters continue to be critical donors to the CCOF Foundation’s Bricmont Hardship Assistance Fund. Named to honor founding CCOF member Barney Bricmont, the fund provides direct financial assistance to certified organic farms and businesses who suffer financial loss due to extreme hardship. With the economic effects of the pandemic and ongoing severe weather in California and beyond, this program remains a vital way that CCOF can support its members through challenges. Each of CCOF’s 15 chapters has a treasurer who oversees the chapter’s finances. With a vote from chapter leadership, chapters can donate to the CCOF Foundation on the chapter’s behalf. With chapters saving money by holding virtual meetings, many have excess funds to provide support for struggling members.

At an April chapter meeting, CCOF’s largest-by-membership chapter, the Processor/Handler Chapter, voted to donate \$5,000 to the Bricmont Hardship Assistance Fund. Thank you to this chapter and others for your continued support of the Bricmont Fund and your organic community!

## **Fresno-Tulare Chapter Meeting**

In March 2021, the Fresno-Tulare Chapter hosted a well-attended Zoom meeting. The meeting’s primary subject was

a project at California State University, Fresno (Fresno State). Chapter leaders Aaron McAfee, Mason Parkinson, and Steven Cardoza are working closely with Fresno State administration and professors to bring a minor in organic production systems to the university. Previous Fresno-Tulare Chapter leaders and longtime CCOF members Dwayne Cardoza and Vernon Peterson are also involved with the effort. After years of student demand and activism from CCOF members and the Central Valley’s organic community, Fresno State will bring on a new faculty member to lead the new organic program. This professor will bring organic production expertise, new course offerings, and research in organic systems to the campus, which already boasts 25 CCOF-certified acres of olives and vegetable crops, plus a greenhouse. Faculty and administrative staff joined the virtual meeting to provide details on the project to local members. Chapter leaders are also working with the Ag One Foundation to raise money for the new position and program and are asking CCOF members to pitch in for the cause. To learn more about this program and get involved, you can contact Alcidia Gomes at the Ag One Foundation at [alcidia@csufresno.edu](mailto:alcidia@csufresno.edu).

## **Yolo Chapter Meeting**

The Yolo Chapter hosted UC Cooperative Extension Small-Farm Advisor Margaret Lloyd at a February chapter meeting. The new Yolo Chapter president, Joanna Normoyle of Guru Ram Das Orchards, invited Lloyd to present about her work as an extension advisor and about how she connects University of California (UC) researchers to the needs of organic farmers. Lloyd collaborates with UC professors to provide educational training and technical support for organic farmers as they face pest pressures and nutrient management challenges. She also communicates needs she hears from farmers in the field back to the university, informing research priorities for scientists so that they can find innovative ways to tackle tough problems. In the meeting, Lloyd provided her contact information and urged farmers to contact her for support. With increasing agronomic challenges for organic farmers, the chapter system is a great way to facilitate communication about local issues and resources.

**To learn more about how to participate in your chapter, visit [www.ccof.org/chapters](http://www.ccof.org/chapters) or contact Noah Lakritz at [nlakritz@ccof.org](mailto:nlakritz@ccof.org).**



## **Diverse Coalition Supports CCOF's Roadmap Vision**

With state policymakers focused on both economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing climate resilience concerns, advocates have an opportunity to highlight organic as a solution. To that end, the CCOF policy team has joined a diverse coalition of supporters to advance policy proposals that are in alignment with CCOF's *Roadmap to an Organic California*, which presents a policy roadmap for the state to reach 30 percent organic acreage by 2030. State policymakers are considering multiple proposals that would advance our *Roadmap* vision, including funding for organic agriculture and the expansion of small-scale meat processing, as well as a California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) recommendation to support organic agriculture as a climate solution.

## **Bond Bill Proposes Historic Organic Funding**

Perhaps the most significant result of coalition support for organic is AB 125, a food- and agriculture-focused bond measure introduced by Assemblymember Robert Rivas, the new chair of California's Assembly Agriculture Committee. AB 125 takes a holistic approach to building community

health through food and agriculture. It focuses on four main investment areas to catalyze recovery from the pandemic and strengthen the food system: sustainable and organic agriculture, local and regional processing and distribution infrastructure, farmworker resources and protection, and food access and anti-hunger resources. The coalition members supporting AB 125 reflect the various funding areas in the bill and include anti-hunger organizations, environmental justice advocates, labor groups, climate-focused organizations, and agriculture groups. Some influential agriculture groups, including the California Cattlemen's Association, endorse the bill, which enjoyed support from both sides of the aisle during its first hearing. On March 15, 2021, it passed through the Assembly Agriculture Committee with a 10-0 bipartisan vote that included all three Republican members of the committee. Bipartisan support for the bill was achieved because funding would directly support the needs of both urban and rural parts of the state.

The bill is the most significant funding proposal for organic in California's history and includes \$35 million to support farmers through the organic transition process, \$10 million for organic cooperative extension advisors and specialists, \$5 million for organic education, and financial support for organic procurement.

These organic funding proposals come at a critical time as organic farmers, ranchers, and processors face quickly changing economic conditions and ongoing challenges with drought and extreme weather. Organic producers need technical and financial support to adapt to these conditions. Producers can receive technical support through the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources (UCANR) research and extension programs. Unfortunately,



## *CCOF's power as an organic advocate is rooted in the strength and participation of our diverse membership.*

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overall state funding for UCANR has decreased by almost 50 percent over the past 20 years, and organic expertise remains limited among extension advisors and specialists. AB 125 would reinvest in cooperative extension while ensuring that new hires have the expertise to address the unique needs of organic producers.

The organic transition proposal in the bill is the continuation of the CCOF Foundation's ongoing work to support the next generation of organic producers through financial and technical assistance with new and undeveloped organic markets. The bill also seeks to expand organic markets and access to organic foods by prioritizing organic procurement in food security and school meal improvement projects.

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### **Meat Matters Campaign**

Another strong coalition supports CCOF's efforts to address challenges faced by California organic livestock producers. The CCOF policy team launched the Meat Matters campaign in March of 2021 after months of consultation with farmers, ranchers, researchers, and advocates. With the campaign launch, we are now pushing forward transformational policy solutions to the challenges we know our members face.

The campaign addresses a fundamental obstacle many organic livestock producers face while trying to get their product to market: finding certified organic processing for their animals. In the last 50 years, California has lost half of its federally inspected meat processing plants, and many of the remaining facilities are operating at capacity, unable to meet demand. Organic producers face the added challenge of finding certified organic processing. With only a handful of the state's 32 federally inspected facilities carrying organic certification, many organic producers use noncertified processors and therefore cannot use the USDA "Organic" seal on their meat products.

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### **State Legislative Action**

The Meat Matters campaign addresses these issues through our work on two important bills: AB 125 and AB 888. With AB 125, we support \$60 million in funding for new meat processing facilities and upgrades to existing facilities to address bottlenecks in the processing sector. The bill also includes \$10 million to support workforce development programs for the meat processing sector. Funding of this magnitude could significantly impact the meat processing sector by investing in much-needed infrastructure and developing a skilled workforce.

In AB 888, CCOF is also working on adding flexibility to regulations, helping small-scale producers find creative ways

to process their livestock. This bill, authored by North Bay area Assemblymember Marc Levine, would allow the on-farm slaughter of goats, sheep, and swine. This regulatory change would give producers the flexibility to set up "herdshare" arrangements to market their meat before the animal is processed. It would also minimize animal stress during travel from farm to slaughterhouse. CCOF has worked closely with the California Farm Bureau Federation to support the bill, which could benefit both conventional and organic producers.

While these policies are big steps in the right direction, we recognize that the challenges are widespread and that solutions to producer and processor needs are not one-size-fits-all. We are working closely with the University of California, Davis Food Systems Lab as they undertake a comprehensive study of the state's meat processing system. This research will help us understand potential solutions and will provide us with more information that we can share with policymakers in the future.

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### **CCOF Member Support**

CCOF members have taken a leading role in CCOF's advocacy work this year. Despite the logistical challenges of advocacy while social distancing, organic farmers and ranchers from across California have stepped up to speak to the importance of organic for the state's future. Members joined many Zoom calls with state and federal legislators. They participated in a lobby week supporting AB 125, represented California in two Organic Trade Association "virtual fly-ins," and attended meetings with state legislators to highlight organic as a climate solution. Watsonville-area farmer Patricia Rodriguez of Rodriguez Farms, Inc. testified before the Assembly Agriculture Committee about challenges in starting a farm in California. Other farmers used their voices to ask state agencies to support organic. During CDFA stakeholder listening sessions, participation from many organic farmers, including Steven Cardoza of Cardoza & Cardoza Farms, Ryan Fillmore of Fillmore Farms, and Gina Colfer of Wilbur Ellis, led to a CDFA report that highlighted organic agriculture as a climate solution. These are just a few of the many examples of CCOF member leadership. From sending comments on organic materials to the National Organic Standards Board to contacting their legislators through CCOF Action Alerts, CCOF members continue to step up as advocates.

CCOF's power as an organic advocate is rooted in the strength and participation of our diverse membership. We recognize and appreciate all our members' efforts to advocate not only for themselves but for the entire organic community. With diverse coalitions of farmers and advocates supporting CCOF's *Roadmap* vision, we can continue to push for a world where organic is the norm.

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## *Bipartisan Legislation Shapes the Organic Future*

The Organic Trade Association is excited about legislation, introduced April 30, that puts in place an improved federal process for the oversight of organic that will bring the government up to speed with today's organic sector and enable organic to continue to forge ahead.

The Continuous Improvement and Accountability in Organic Standards Act (CIAO) was introduced in the House of Representatives by Representatives Peter DeFazio (D-OR), Rodney Davis (R-IL), Chellie Pingree (D-ME), Jimmy Panetta (D-CA), Dan Newhouse (R-WA), and Ron Kind (D-WI). The legislation requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture to implement recommendations from the organic industry in a timely manner and to ensure the continuous improvement of organic standards.

Ensuring strong organic standards now and in the future is the top priority for all of us within the organic sector. In the past several years, the federal regulatory apparatus has fallen behind the evolving organic sector and market and has slowed innovation and improvement within the industry. USDA has not implemented a single one of the 20 recommendations for improving organic standards that the organic industry has advanced in the past 10 years. These recommendations include implementing clear and consistent livestock requirements, encouraging the use of organic seeds, and creating organic production standards for aquaculture, pet food, personal care products, and greenhouses.

This bill reflects the work of our member task force, which convened in late 2019 with a mission to start a conversation on repairing the public-private partnership between USDA and the organic sector and to think strategically about how organic will evolve within this partnership over the next decade and beyond.

The bill also reflects responses from hundreds of our members, Farmers Advisory Council organizations, coalition partners, and certifiers to a survey we sent out last year on how best to improve organic to keep it moving forward. Nearly half of the respondents were organic farmers. Almost all of the respondents agreed that continuous improvement and accountability in organic standards are absolutely crucial for organic to successfully advance and for the organic label to stay relevant and meaningful for consumers.

"Unfortunately, it's been way too long since USDA updated its standards that America's certified organic producers are required to follow for growing and selling their crops," said Congressman Panetta. "Our legislation would mandate the USDA to modernize and maintain its federal organic standards so that farmers can keep up with the 21st-century marketplace. As the representative of nearly 500 certified organic operations on the Central Coast of California, I'm proud to co-lead this legislation to help our local organic agriculture industry innovate and thrive."

### **Designing a Road Forward for Organic**

The CIAO bill lays out a road forward for organic through three main areas:

- **Clearing the backlog of recommendations.** The bill requires USDA to issue an Organic Improvement Action Plan comprised of the backlog of industry recommendations put forward by the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) that have yet to be implemented. The plan must include detailed timelines, prioritization, and implementation steps for each recommendation.
- **Establishing a new framework for advancing future organic standards.** The bill mandates that when the NOSB passes a recommendation supported by the majority of the board, the USDA must issue a final rule implementing the recommendation within two years.
- **Improving oversight and ensuring consistent enforcement.** The bill requires the USDA to report annually to Congress on whether accredited third-party certifiers have implemented new rules and guidance and to identify any inconsistencies.

Since the first nationwide organic standards were officially established on December 21, 2000, the strict and comprehensive federal requirements and regulations that monitor the organic industry—from the farm gate to the dinner plate—have been transparent and driven by stakeholders throughout the supply chain and the organic community. This unique private-public partnership has made the organic regulatory system the gold standard for food and agricultural systems around the world. However, the recent lack of regulatory action for organic has slowed innovation and continuous improvement within the industry.

This latest legislation directly addresses the challenges organic has faced over the past decade, and it provides a clear way to get things back on track for the industry and consumers. However, it still needs to be introduced in the Senate, and ultimately, we need a long-term solution for the next farm bill. It is up to all of us to keep the great organic movement flourishing and enriching the health of our bodies and our planet. Let's keep looking beyond the horizon!



## ***CCOF Poised to Offer OCal, a Comparable-to-Organic Cannabis Certification Standard***

The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) has been working on the development of the OCal program, a California-only certification program for cannabis. The OCal program will implement and enforce standards for cannabis that are consistent with the USDA National Organic Program (NOP), the U.S. standard for agricultural products labeled as certified organic. Currently, federal laws prevent the certification and labeling of cannabis as organic under the NOP. The initial CDFA OCal program launch is designed to serve cultivators and distributors. The California Department of Public Health has been mandated to establish an OCal program for manufactured cannabis products by July 1, 2021.

The OCal program will make California the first state to establish a comparable-to-organic cannabis program. Producers seeking to obtain OCal certification must be licensed to produce cannabis in the state of California. It is important to note that this program will not allow for the use of the word “organic” on cannabis products. Organic is a federally regulated term, and the federal classification

of cannabis as a narcotic prevents it from being eligible for certified organic status. Instead, the term “OCal” will be used to distinguish certified products on labels in the marketplace.



CCOF supports organic farmers and wants to support organic cannabis farmers as well. CCOF has a long history of advocating for organic principles and actively participated in the development of the OCal program to ensure its success. CCOF commented on the three drafts of the regulation, petitioned for registration fees that are economical for producers, and advocated for regulations that align with the NOP standards to ensure that organic integrity is maintained in OCal-certified cannabis.

At their February meetings, CCOF’s governing bodies, the CCOF, Inc. Board of Directors and the LLC Management Committee, both voted in support of CCOF’s offering the OCal program. Since then, CCOF staff have been working to get systems in place in preparation for the program launch. As a leader in organic certification, CCOF is committed to upholding organic integrity through this new OCal certification program. Once the final OCal regulation is released, CCOF will be well-prepared to offer this program to new and existing CCOF members.

To learn more about the CDFA OCal program, visit the CDFA OCal webpage: [www.cdfa.ca.gov/cal cannabis/ocal.html](http://www.cdfa.ca.gov/cal cannabis/ocal.html).



*Every audit will be different. Your program will be stronger and more resilient if you can approach each audit as an opportunity to learn.*

## Get Prepared for Your Food Safety Audit

Summer is a busy time for farmers and for the inspectors who work at your farms and businesses. I have been an organic inspector for 17 years, visiting every size of farm and handling facility across the United States and Mexico. For the past seven years, I have also been conducting CCOF's GLOBALG.A.P. food safety audits. While the specific standards vary, the basic food safety requirements are the same. In this article, I offer a few tips and best practices for success.

Understandably, a lot is riding on the outcome of a food safety audit, including approval from buyers and the high cost of the audit itself. It will take many months to develop and implement your program, train workers, and build a history of documentation to show your inspector. Preparing well in advance is crucial.

So, how do you start preparing for your food safety audit?

First and foremost, **talk with your buyers**. Are they requiring a full third-party Global Food Safety Initiative audit like GLOBALG.A.P., the development of a food safety plan, or something in between? (Visit [www.ccof.org/food-safety](http://www.ccof.org/food-safety) for information about CCOF's GLOBALG.A.P. program.)

If it is your first time seeking food safety certification, **consider working with a qualified, knowledgeable consultant**. This can be costly. However, building a food safety program on a strong foundation will save you time and money in the long run and help you get your product to market. CCOF maintains a list of advisors at [www.ccof.org/advise](http://www.ccof.org/advise).

**Developing a comprehensive risk assessment** is the very foundation of your food safety plan's policies and procedures. There are many ways to go about it, but the plan must assess the potential chemical, physical, and biological hazards across your farm or facility. There are many handy templates online.

**Organize your documentation.** The amount of documentation needed for a food safety program can feel overwhelming. There is no one right way to organize your plan—it must work for you. However, creating an auditable system is key. It will be more efficient, less stressful, and less expensive if your inspector can sit down with your files and walk through your program. How do you go about organizing your documentation?

- Create a detailed table of contents that can function as a “map” that your inspector uses to find the information needed.
- Include clear document titles. For example, question numbers from CCOF's GLOBALG.A.P. checklists can be used as section headers.
- Cross-reference the names of supporting policies, procedures, and logs.


You may have heard the adage “If it isn't written down, it didn't happen.” Remember that every requirement must be demonstrated through documentation.

**See every audit as an opportunity for continual improvement.** Every audit will be different. Your program will be stronger and more resilient if you can approach each audit as an opportunity to learn. No one gets a perfect score right out of the gate, and there is always room for improvement. Food safety is not about being perfect—it is about having solid, consistent practices in place and knowing what to do when you have minor (or more serious) hiccups. Did I mention documentation?

Being prepared and having a well-organized food safety plan will make your audit less stressful and more successful. To learn more about CCOF's food safety audits, visit [www.ccof.org/food-safety](http://www.ccof.org/food-safety).


*Amy Lamendella has worked in the organic sector and with CCOF for many years. She has been director of the CCOF farm department, a regional service representative for certified members, CCOF's GLOBALG.A.P. scheme manager, and recently she has taken her talents directly to the field as one of CCOF's lead inspectors.*





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