



## The Story of Creating New York Organic Action Plan NYOAP

After four decades of spreading organic food, farming and gardening, NOFA-NY continues to pursue the vision of healthy communities, where everyone has access to fresh, locally grown food and the resources to produce. That goal has led to the creation of the New York Organic Action Plan (NYOAP), using the [National Organic Action Plan](#) as a model. Volunteer members of the NOFA-NY Policy Committee set out in 2010 to coordinate a state version. With waves of activity and spells of dormancy, the process has involved hundreds of people through web-based questions and face to face brainstorming sessions in creating the NYOAP.

Since the NOFA-NY 2016 Winter Conference, we have held nine NYOAP sessions across the state, from Long Island to Buffalo. Typically, the sessions attracted 15 – 20 people each, except in Buffalo, where 60 people came together to discuss the future of New York State's organic food and farming system during the Friday evening plenary of the World on Your Plate Conference. In addition, Rebekah Williams held a special session with a group of youth involved with the Massachusetts Avenue Project.

Participants included NOFA-NY founding and new members, urban and rural organic farmers, academics and researchers, students, food activists, organic gardeners and anyone interested in organic food and farming. Below is the invitation for the brainstorming sessions:

*Tell us what you think is working and what is not working for organic farming and food in NY. Come with your ideas to help us make a plan that will build on our successes and overcome our obstacles. Share your thoughts on how NOFA-NY can create a food and farming system that is socially just, environmentally resilient and economically vibrant. Help set NOFA priorities for organic advocacy and policy.*

*Get ready to discuss:*

- *Environmental Stewardship*
- *Organic Transition and Incentives*
- *Health*
- *Cultural and Social Change*
- *The Marketplace*
- *Research and Education*
- *What NOFA can do*

Participants arrived prepared to answer these expansive topics, collaboratively, in order to set the stage for New York to be an active leader in organic food and farming. To begin, everyone was asked *What is Working in Organics?* and *What is Not Working?* Here is what we found.

### ***What is Working in Organic in NYS?***

Organic farming supporters around New York State agree that there is a lot to feel good about! There is a strong organic community. Farmers' markets, CSAs and other forms of direct marketing of local farm products are on the rise. Organic farmers are sharing expertise and there is an increase in mentoring and training. The number of organic farms and certified organic farms grows every year, to the point where NYS ranks number 3 in organic farms in the United States, with an increase in organic acreage of 30,000 between 2014 and 2016. The NOFA-NY certification program is highly regarded and services farmers efficiently and with integrity. Organic farmers in New York care about organic standards and are going beyond the baseline National Organic Program. Federal organic cost share program funding has been consistently available, facilitating the ability for New York farmers to afford certification. Some younger generation farmers on conventional farms are beginning to convert to organic. New organic seed companies are making organic, locally adapted seed more available.

A few Long Island towns are realizing that organic farms are far better for the local water supply than farms that use chemicals. Lease agreements for organic farmland makes it affordable for new farmers to get started. There is increasing understanding of the role organic farming can play in solving world hunger by 2050. Many regard organic as the source of non-GMO foods and are understanding the value of eating organic, especially for children. More people appreciate the health benefits for themselves and for the planet, and how important it is for climate change that organic farmers focus on soil health, taking carbon out of the atmosphere and putting it in the soil. Public awareness of food justice is growing. School programs with organic gardens are spreading as well as community gardens in both cities and small towns.

### ***What is Not Working in Organic in NYS?***

There is still a long way to go. The USDA National Organic Program (NOP) provides a floor for organic, but too often the letter of organic overrides the true spirit and the full context of human well-being. Additionally, fairness and social justice are not included in the NOP program. Outside the NOP, organic farmers and the issues they care about are not represented adequately in policy arenas at the local, county, state and federal levels. Migrant farm workers' rights are not in place. Environmentally, too much toxic pesticides and herbicides continue to soak into NY farmland contaminating soil, water and air without adequate oversight.

Organic farms are still a small percentage of the total number of New York farms, as the state does not support the transition to organic or organic farming. It is difficult for organic farmers to make a living and many farmers are not able to pay employees living wages. New farmers have trouble gaining access to land and other necessary resources. Federal crop insurance does not provide an adequate safety net for highly diversified organic farms. Meanwhile, new food

safety regulations are complex, confusing and threaten to cost farmers a lot of money. The Land Grant University and Cooperative Extension lack a consistent program to grow and support organic agriculture and do not conduct enough organic research. Simultaneously, urban farmers are left without meaningful programs and services.

While organic is becoming more mainstream and available in major retail outlets, a lot of the organic food in big box stores comes from outside NYS and the U.S. Certified organic farmers worry about competition and questionable organic integrity from industrial-scale organic farms in the U.S. and abroad and the NOP has not been able to prevent grains imports that have fraudulent organic certification. Hydroponically grown produce labeled *certified organic* undersells soil grown crops from certified organic farms. Competition with conventional farmers persist, as do the cultural tensions.

There is little understanding of organic as a system and uneven media coverage of the importance of carbon sequestration through organic methods. Consumer confusion persists about the meaning of organic, what GMO labeling means, and about the absence of standards to support the “natural” claim. Many New Yorkers still lack access to organic food at prices they can afford and distribution points are few in low-income neighborhoods.

After discussing what is working, what is not working and then putting those ideas within the context of change, an overall goal was set to move New York’s Organic Action Plan forward: **Create an ecological New York State where healthy food and access to land are considered human rights.** To reach this aspiration, bite-sized goals were outlined within specific areas of action.