



## ***Rural New York Initiative*** **Research Brief Series**

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Cornell University  
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### **Organic Agriculture at a Crossroads**

**by**

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#### **Surveying NYS Organic Farmers**

The 2003 New York State organic farmer survey is part of the dissertation research project called *Regulating the Grassroots: The National Organic Program and the Future of Organic Agriculture*. This research project employs two telephone surveys of organic farmers in New York State (NYS), archival research, and in-depth interviews to examine the role of the National Organic Program (NOP) in the conventionalization of organic agriculture.

#### **Purpose of the Survey**

The 2003 telephone survey was conducted to gain an understanding of how NYS organic farmers are responding to the implementation of the National Organic Program and what impacts they believe the NOP will have on the future shape and character of organic production in the US. The survey assesses how the majority of NYS organic farmers feel the NOP will affect them individually and as a community. An additional goal of the survey is to get a snapshot of the current structure of organic agriculture in NYS before the first growing season under NOP guidelines.

#### **The Survey**

- A telephone survey of organic farmers in New York State was conducted in February and March of 2003 to gain a farmer-level perspective of the National Organic Program.
- A list of organic farmers was compiled from several public sources, including the *NOFA- NY Food Guide* and *Farm to Table* website.
- One hundred and seventy-seven telephone interviews were completed.

#### **A Snapshot of Survey Results**

##### ***Characteristics of Organic Farming in NYS***

- Over half of organic farmers (54%) produce at least some horticultural products (vegetables, fruit, etc) and over half (53%) produce at least some commodity products (dairy, field crops, etc).
- Two-thirds of organic farmers (65%) engage in direct marketing and almost three-quarters (72%) engage in wholesale marketing.

- Majority of organic farmers (88%) cited philosophical motivations (such as a desire to produce healthy food and take better care of the land, people, and animals) among the reasons they farm organically. Less than half (41%) cited financial motivations (such as financial stability of the farm and getting a better price) among their reasons.
- Fifty-five percent of organic farm households get half or more of their income from farming.

### ***Certification and Labeling***

- Majority of organic farmers (63%) who were certified organic in 2002 have been certified organic six years or less.
- Majority (85%) of organic farmers planned on becoming certified in 2003. Three-quarters (76%) of these organic farmers cited market reasons for organic certification, while one-fifth (20%) said that they wanted to support organic farming.
- The organic farmers (14%) who did not plan on becoming certified in 2003 said that certification was either too aggravating because of the paperwork and cost of certification or/and that they did not like certification under the NOP.
- Over a third of organic farmers (36%) have considered using a label other than “organic”. Half of these farmers considered using the label as an alternative to certification, while the other half considered using another label in addition to certification.
- The most common alternative label considered was NOFA-NY’s Farmer’s Pledge.

### ***Farmer Opinions about the NOP***

- Many organic farmers anticipate the NOP will bring both positive and negative changes to organic farming. For example:
- Thirty percent feel the NOP will create consistency, honesty, and equality.

- Twenty-eight percent feel the NOP will bring attention and legitimization to organics.
- Fifteen percent feel the NOP will assure a large organic market for both consumers and producers.
- Thirty-eight percent feel the NOP will negatively change the structure of organic agriculture and organic certification.
- Twenty-four percent feel the NOP will hurt the integrity of the organic label.
- Eleven percent feel the NOP will make organics a political arena open to the agri-business lobby.
- Seventy percent of organic farmers feel that the NOP will increase the ability of industrial-size organic producers to undersell small-scale organic producers. Majority of these organic farmers were participating in direct-marketing and selling horticultural products such as vegetables and other produce.

### **Conclusion**

The results of the 2003 NYS organic farmer survey provide a glimpse into organic farmers’ decisions about organic certification under the NOP and the impacts organic farmers believe the NOP will have on organic agriculture in general. A second telephone survey of NYS organic farmers will be conducted in March and April of 2004 to expand on the findings of the 2003 survey.

### **Contact Information**

The primary goal of this research is to provide useful data and analysis to a wide range of stakeholders in the organic farming community of New York State and nationally. The findings and analysis will be made available to all interested parties. Please contact Robin Kreider if you have any questions and/or comments or would like further information about the research project.

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Robin Kreider is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell University. Her dissertation examines the current and historical changes in the regulation of organic agriculture with a focus on the organic farming community in New York State. Her research interests focus on the concentration of power and control in the organic agro-food sector and its affects on small, alternative farmers. She may be reached at Cornell University Department of Development Sociology, Warren Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853. Telephone: (607) 256-9590. Email: [rpc25@cornell.edu](mailto:rpc25@cornell.edu).