



Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture

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Testimony before the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee

Re: HB 2347, Session of 2008

**By: Brian Snyder, Executive Director
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Members of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee:

I wish to open my testimony by expressing to this committee and sponsors of House Bill 2347 the sincere appreciation of PASA members, our board of directors and employees, for taking the time to consider a matter of such critical and timely importance to all citizens of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. You could hardly have picked a better time to make the support and proliferation of organic agriculture a top priority. This is especially true given the confluence of issues now affecting Pennsylvania farmers and consumers alike. These issues include the rising cost of fuel, feed, fertilizer and other inputs to agricultural production, loss of precious farmland, chronic obesity and other health care concerns, global climate change and persistent threats to the quality of the air we breathe as well as the water we drink and depend on for quality of life in such a variety of ways.

Simply put, the time for widespread organic and sustainable farming has come, just as we have known it would for several decades leading up to this poignant moment in our nation's agricultural history. I also wish to urge the committee to join me in publicly acknowledging and thanking some true Pennsylvania pioneers, the Rodale family, as well as the Institute that now bears their name, for their instrumental role in developing the concept of organic agriculture as it is known throughout the world today. They have carried the torch in terms of research, demonstration and public education regarding the importance of organic farming methods. The Rodale name is respected wherever you may go, and is a significant component of the strong international reputation enjoyed by Pennsylvania's agricultural community.

Wherever I personally travel and speak on behalf of the Commonwealth's dedicated and highly skilled organic and sustainable farmers, there is really a very simple message I convey – How nice it is that so many of the world's ills can be addressed in part by farmers, especially those



who are willing to pursue an ideal of growing food that contributes not only to their own economic viability, but also the health of our environment, success of our communities and social justice for people everywhere. Please notice that I used the word "pursuing," because truly sustainable farmers are never finished with the idea of improving their operations, and very many of them are only in the beginning stages of making a transition. Indeed, this is no exclusive club of farmers who feel they know more than everyone else, but an increasingly inclusive community of farmers who understand their responsibility to make positive changes for the sake of our common future.

The bill before us potentially provides a major support mechanism for farmers who wish to take a big step in the direction of sustainability on their own farms by transitioning to certified organic production. While support like this is important at any level of government, it is perhaps most logical for a state government to do so, as it can be done in a way that is regionally specific and targeted to help farmers in any particular state to remain competitive in a marketplace increasingly willing to reward production of high quality food. The really neat thing in this regard is that along the way, not only are the farmers benefitted who are actually transitioning to organic certification, but so are their neighbors and all other farmers in the region, by association. As Pennsylvania becomes increasingly well known as a leader in high quality, sustainable and organic production, all farm products coming from the Commonwealth will also gain value in the mind of the public and thereby the marketplace – this is fundamental to the way free markets work.

The proposed program is very significant and forward-looking for the whole of Pennsylvania agriculture, and it must be done correctly in order to succeed. I therefore offer the following recommendations and comments, in addressing two broad topic areas, for your further consideration regarding this legislation:

Task Force

The Pennsylvania Organic Advisory Task Force, as described in the draft legislation, appears to be too prescriptive in its makeup and possibly too narrow in its mission. Actually, the biggest worry here is that if such a body has to be legislated, it may be doomed to irrelevance and ineffectiveness for lack of enthusiasm from the agency charged to administer it. As a member of the current Pennsylvania Dairy Task Force, I can assure you that broad enthusiasm for organic transition is not easy to come by through conventional channels. In other words...this new effort needs all the allies it can get. Why not expand the title and charge to this group to include all viable strategies for improving and capitalizing on an increase in quality food coming from Pennsylvania farms?

In this scenario, supporting "organic transition" could just be the first order of business for such a group, while other complementary programs, for instance, to expand intensive grazing,

minimize tillage in all agricultural applications and support sustainable farm certification can be considered as well. Why not also leave membership in the group more open to all those who wish to participate? A carefully written charge/mission for the group is far more important than a prescribed membership, and I believe it is critically important that such a body not be perceived as in any way exclusive or handpicked.

I feel that a special note with regard to this last point needs to be made. We in the agricultural community are often categorized or even divided, sometimes by our own devices, in several ways. For instance, in the past few decades we have come to think of particular producers as existing in certain commodity groups (e.g. as "hog farmers" or "grain farmers"), and businesses that service farmers are often aligned in a similar manner. In more recent years, we have come to use terms that refer more to the farming methods employed, like farmers that are *conventional*, *sustainable*, *organic*, *modern* or otherwise.

To my mind there are really just two broad categories of farm operations that are succeeding today, one that emphasizes high quantity production and cost efficiency, and one that aims for high quality production and consumer value. Even these categories oversimplify the reality of the situation to some extent, but there really is no doubting that the bulk of government services over the past 30 years or more have gone to help producers in the "high production" group. What this committee needs to consider in establishing a Task Force, or enacting this or similar legislation, is how we can provide necessary support to the "high quality" group as well. Indeed, the future success of the greatest number of farmers, and farmed acres, may depend on it.

Payments to Farmers

Most farmers I know, particularly here in Pennsylvania and especially among those who choose organic and/or sustainable production methods, are really not all that interested in receiving handouts from the government. Their feeling by and large is that a truly free marketplace, with a level playing field and fair prices, is all they want. That being said, a "truly free marketplace" is hardly what we have to work with at the present time – federal farm subsidies and trade policies that are sometimes "free" to a fault, can make it very difficult for any average farmer to take the necessary risks to do business in new, more innovative ways.

Still, I doubt that farmers not already transitioning to organic certification will flock to the idea of getting reimbursed for their losses. For one thing, it is not clear that significant production losses will occur (refer to Rodale research). For another, it may not be possible to tell when they occur, because a typical organic farm rotates crops and land use from year to year...so the use of historical data may not be comparing "apples to apples." In any case, the complexity of such a reimbursement system (and the uncertainty of funding) may provide its own best counterargument in the minds of many farmers.

When transitioning a farm to organic production, the most objective measurements to use in determining the value of that activity to the general public are the number of certified acres and/or animals that result. Any reimbursement system, it seems to me, should relate to these measurements, and not to a more subjective judgment about production losses. The system proposed in the draft legislation actually provides an incentive for farmers to be less successful in their transition years...or at least to indicate as much on paper. By contrast, a standard that depends on numbers of acres and animals would provide an incentive to shift more significant resources in the direction of organic certification, which is a key for future success.

I also believe that the appropriation of necessary state and/or federal money to support the proposed system might be a pipedream that would doom this effort from the start. A better approach might be to award tax credits against future profits for farms that achieve and successfully **maintain** organic certification. Sustainable and organic farmers tend to be very frugal and to think of their goals in longer timeframes anyway, so the promise of such future savings would likely be a better incentive for current investment of time, energy and financial resources as necessary to attain organic certification.

Ultimately, the best system of providing financial support for transitioning organic farmers might be a combination of upfront stipends on a per acre or per animal basis, depending on available funding, and tax credits for use in sheltering profits later. This would be a much simpler system to understand, and one that is more in alignment with the values of the farmers you are trying to reach...appealing particularly to their willingness to work hard today in anticipation of a meaningful and credible reward in the future. This also makes more sense from the perspective of taxpayers, who would then be providing financial support in response to performance rather than promise alone.

Conclusion

Again, I want to thank the committee for taking this time to consider what I believe to be some of the most fundamental and far-reaching agricultural – and cultural – issues of our times. The opportunity for our farm community in transitioning to organic and other forms of high-value production is immense, especially when you consider the magnitude and breadth of the markets immediately available to us in the major metropolitan centers of the East Coast. We should be known as the “Breadbasket of the East,” and California should be known as the “Pennsylvania of the West.” I am not exaggerating to say that such considerations may be among the most significant you could undertake in the interest of assuring the future security and quality of life for all Pennsylvanians. There is simply no reason Pennsylvania should not be the national leader in responding to the market for “good food,” and our farmers the true heroes of a new economy based on our collective ability to serve our own communities, our region of the country and our very hungry world.