

# Montana Organic Agriculture

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Seeking election to which body or office? Please include district number if appropriate.

Montana House District 58

## Question 1: Organic Agriculture is an Economic Bright Spot

Nationally, income for organic farmers and ranchers has nearly doubled over the past five years. In Montana, sales of organic products reached \$48.9 million in 2015 and have continued to grow. The global organic grain farming market is expected to increase from \$22.47 billion in 2019 and to \$23.84 billion in 2020 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.11%. The growth is mainly due to the change in perception towards food intake in general and growing health consciousness. The market is then expected to reach \$34.54 billion in 2023 at a CAGR of 13.15%.

Clusters of organic businesses, known as organic hotspots, reduce poverty 1.3%, on average, an additional \$2000 per household – more than some major anti-poverty programs. A 2019 study in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition found that consumers eating a mostly organic food diet generally enjoyed “strong nutritional and environmental benefits.” For more background, refer to Organic Trade Association (OTA) information based on “US Organic Hotspots and their Benefit to Local Economies, Edward C. Jaenicke, May 2016.” Agriculture is Montana’s top industry. The state has the second-largest amount of agriculturally productive, certified organic land in the nation. However, the identified “hot spots” do not include Montana communities.

Organics is a growing industry. The current Farm Bill provided funding for the Organic Cost Share Program that provides reimbursement for 75% of organic certification costs or \$750 maximum for each certification scope (crops, livestock, wild crops, and handling). However on August 10, 2020, the Farm Service Agency unilaterally reduced support for the organic certification cost-share program and reduced the amount of the cost share amount to 50% with a \$500 with a maximum reimbursement. In Montana, these funds helped 174 recipients with \$132,881.22 in dispersed cost-share funds. Montana has over 300 certified organic operations; this represents about a 51% use rate. Montana’s Department of Agriculture Organic Program encourages all entities to sign up for cost-share funds. The Cost Share Program is administered through the state on a first-come, first-serve basis.

1 - a. What measures do you think should be taken to support agriculture, farmers, and help our Montana communities thrive?

The state Department of Commerce should take measures to market Montana products, provide funds to research ways to make farming and ranching more efficient, and create loan and grant programs to sustain agriculture and affected communities.

1 - b. What should be done at the state level to increase and sustain the organic market?

Provide funding for research; support educational efforts to assist in marketing.

1 - c. What criteria should be considered for appointing the Secretary of the Montana Department of Agriculture?

Agricultural experience, preferably hands-on, actual farming or ranching.

## Question 2: Transportation and Distribution

Montana farmers, ranchers, and processors frequently name transportation and distribution issues as one of the biggest challenges they face. In particular, Montana farmers, ranchers, millers, meat packers, producers, and processors, is transportation and distribution of their food to city centers. This is particularly difficult in Montana because it is such a large state.

2 - a. What can be done at the state level to help develop efficient food distribution around the state?

Assist in the coordination of food distributors; provide a website for references of local producers and distributors.

2 - b. How can the state support small family farmers by helping get their products into Farm to Institution (schools, hospitals, nursing homes, etc), local, and regional markets?

State agencies can support such programs with funding, staff, and technical assistance to connect the parties.

## Question 3: Meat Processing in Montana

The current COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a fragile food processing and distribution system in the US. Food processing operations have slowed because of social distancing and absenteeism. Slaughterhouses and processing plants have had coronavirus outbreaks resulting in closed facilities. Producers encountered feedlots and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) that had nowhere to keep their animals because of disrupted processing. Because producers cannot feed and house all the animals in the pipeline, millions of animals were euthanized (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/29/millions-of-farm-animals-culled-as-us-food-supply-chain-chokes-up-coronavirus>).

Consumers and retailers have encountered shortages of beef, pork, and poultry, resulting in higher prices and rationing by retailers. At the same time, small producers, including those like B-Bar Ranch near Big Timber and Aspen Island Ranch near Lavina, have seen increased sales and unprecedented demand for their humanely raised and processed meat.

3 - a. How do you respond to the need for mobile, more flexible, and more local meat and poultry processing?

The permitting and development of in-state processing plants, including small local operations.

3 - b. One of the biggest challenges for meat processing in Montana is finding qualified labor. Miles Community College is developing a program that would put journeyman meat cutters on the meat processing floors and augment training with distance-learning coursework. This program seems like a win-win-win; how can you support this and similar initiatives?

By voting for targeted funding.

3 - c. What's your plan for supporting and developing jobs for small agricultural businesses and rural communities?

Expansion of high school programs that include training for agricultural jobs. Red Lodge just passed a high school levy that will do just that, among other career-ready courses.

#### Question 4: Soil and Carbon

A groundbreaking study by Northeastern University scientists and The Organic Center found organic soils have 26% more long-term carbon storage, curbing carbon's transfer to the atmosphere (Advances in Agronomy, Vol. 146, 2017). Sustainable farming methods are recognized to mitigate climate change by increasing crop diversity, improving soil health, and reducing greenhouse gasses produced by the production of nitrogen fertilizers. These methods also reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by sequestering it in increasing amounts of organic matter added to the soil. Healthy organic soil not only increases carbon sequestration, but it also increases the soil's water holding capacity and reduces pesticide and nutrient runoff into waterways. Additionally, healthy organic soils are better able to withstand extreme and volatile weather events. Chemical farming kills the microbial life in the soil, thus destroying soil's healthful benefits and destroying its potential to mitigate climate change.

4 - a. Should sustainable farmers and ranchers be compensated for their efforts to build healthy soil, protect clean water, and to mitigate the economic effects of more unpredictable and erratic weather events?

Yes.

4 - b. Do you foresee opportunities for Montana's farmers and ranchers participating in carbon markets?

Yes.

4 - c. Should state legislation be enacted that would research and promote healthy soil and provide cost-share for land-stewards who use soil health practices?

Yes.

4 - d. Do you support state funds to establish a state-based soils task force to promote healthy soils?

Yes.

### Question 5: Aging Farmers - Beginning Farmers

According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, the average age of farmers in Montana is 58.2, an increase from 57.0 in 2012. In Montana, the average age of a farmer or rancher in organic agriculture is 51.6. Nationally, 27% of farmers were categorized as new and beginning producers, with ten years or less of experience in agriculture.

5 - a. What measures should be taken to support beginning farmers and ranchers?

Local training, financial programs to begin new, more efficient processes. Incentives to produce healthier food.

### Question 6: Pesticides in the Environment

Montana-grown certified organic wheat, durum, and pulses from Montana have tested positive for glyphosate, the active ingredient in Round-Up. The residue has resulted in canceled shipments to European and other export customers. The European Union and other

trading partners have banned the use of Round-Up for most applications. Non-organic farmers are encountering herbicide-resistant weeds and acid spots in their fields due to the continued use of Round-Up.

6 - a. What can be done at the state level to mitigate environmental glyphosate contamination?

Adequate safety standards; monitoring and enforcement by Montana Departments of Environmental Quality and Natural Resources

6 - b. Do you support allocating state funds to study environmental pesticides to understand the problem better?

Yes

### Question 7: Resilient Farming and Extreme Weather Events

Among the production risks that farmers face are those related to adverse weather conditions, such as drought, freezes, excessive rainfall, hail, and even smoke at inopportune times during the farm cycle. These conditions can reduce crop yield and quality as well as damage to structures and equipment. Sustainable farming methods have been recognized as a means to mitigate the effects of unpredictable and extreme weather by increasing crop diversity and improving soil health. Other sustainable farming methods have been identified as reducing greenhouse gasses produced by the production of nitrogen fertilizers and reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by sequestering it in increasing amounts of soil organic matter.

7 - a. What ways should farmers and ranchers be supported as they live with the realities of erratic climate conditions and the “Act of God” economic risks producers assume?

Adequate insurance provided by federal agencies

### Question 8: Internet Access

Montana ranks dead last (50th) in the US for internet service, which includes broadband, DSL, Dial-Up, Cable modem, satellite, and others. Of the over 26,000 farms in Montana, only 21,000 of them have any internet access. Our rural communities still lack reliable broadband internet service and enough cell phone coverage for both household and business needs. Many government, marketing, and education communications and resources rely on the internet, but it is tough for rural Montanans to participate if they have inadequate service. With the COVID-19 pandemic, more business and education activities have moved online and require reliable, fast internet.

8 - a. What should be done to increase reliable broadband internet access in Montana that meets business and household needs?

Incentives and financial support for expansion

8 - b. How should projects be funded to bring enough internet service to Montanans?

Rural user costs will need to be supported by funds (fees assessed) from general users to assure a system that all have access to.

8 - c. Do you support initiatives that would bring better internet service to Montanans?

Yes



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