



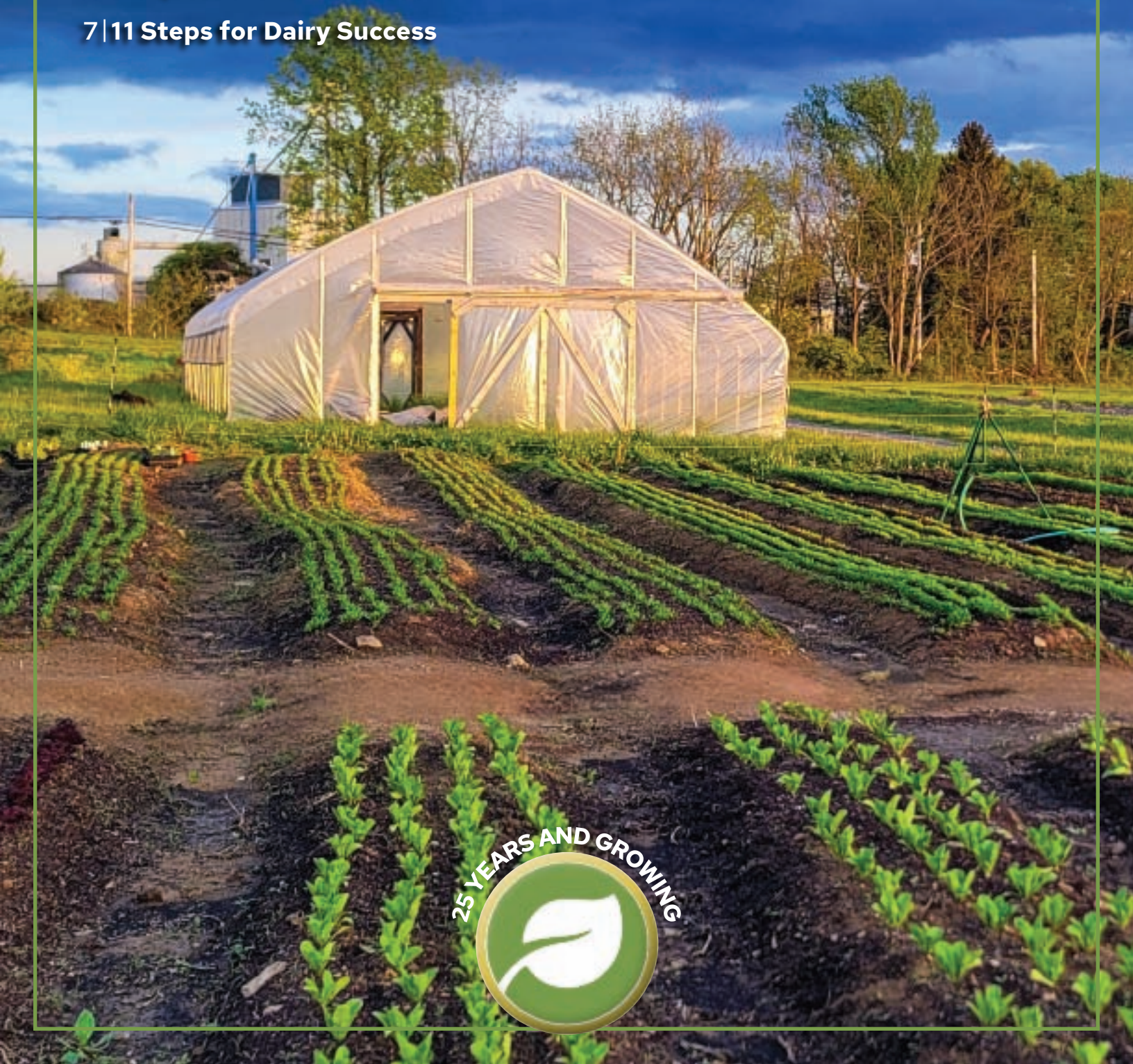
# Organic Matters

Semi-Annual Newsletter | Summer/Fall 2024

**2 | Farmer Profile: Blackbird Farms**

**5 | On-Farm Research:**  
*Getting on-the-ground answers to the questions farmers face*

**7 | 11 Steps for Dairy Success**



# Organically Speaking



Collaboration has no hierarchy. The Sun collaborates with soil to bring flowers on the earth.

– Amit Ray

This spring, my niece graduated high school, and many of the student speeches at various events I attended to celebrate this milestone referenced the cycles of nature and the changing seasons as themes. I was struck by how often these themes were referenced by the students and by how much the class sees themselves as one group with renewed purpose: to go out into the world and succeed. But what does success mean and at what cost and for whom? And just how much are they truly connected to the nature they referenced so often?

As the leader of a big intergenerational team and an agricultural services organization, mental health and all that contributes to it, for better or worse, is always on the periphery of any work we do, as is effective collaboration.

**These are interdependent.** This new crop of graduates is inheriting big challenges in how to care for themselves and each other in a world that increasingly requires higher levels of both care and collaboration in order to be successful.

I celebrated four years of service to PCO on June 15, and the most significant thing I have learned in my four years in the organic sector is reflected in how we commonly refer to it: the organic community. We were formed out of community, we have succeeded because of our abilities to leverage our individual and collective strengths, and (just like this year's high school graduates) our future success is dependent on our ability to truly care for ourselves and each other, so that we can collaborate on the shared aim of transforming our food system. A regenerative mindset must include our businesses and ourselves. We cannot deplete either of these in resources and continue to find success.

This issue of Organic Matters is packed with examples that show tackling our biggest challenges successfully in organic will only happen through real care for each other and true collaboration, the kind that leverages individual strengths and provides for extra care and development where necessary.



Photo: Thomas Iversen from Unsplash

Stewarding and watching the success of the Transition to Organic Partnership Program has taught me that there is something very special about the organic community in our ability to put aside individual benefit for collective success. There is no other sector as practiced, capable, or willing as we are to work in community. Clean and equitable food production is definitely a sacred mission, but that example of successfully working in community is the greater gift that organic provides to the world, and it is one that is needed everywhere now.

With appreciation of your partnership in this community,

Diana Kobus  
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A world where agriculture systems prioritize health, ecological balance, fairness and care.

**PCO's MISSION**  
To uphold and advance organic principles and practices through certification, advocacy, and technical support.

**PCO's CORE VALUES**

- 1. People & Service** – Keep people at the center of every action, interaction, and decision
- 2. Organic Spirit & Environment** – Promote restorative practices that improve the world for future generations
- 3. Honesty & Integrity** – Embrace transparency and integrity in all our work.

# Organic Matters

Summer/Fall 2024



9



7



14

**FEATURES**

**2**  
**Farmer Profile: Blackbird Farms**

**5**  
**On-Farm Research: Getting answers to the questions farmers face**

**7**  
**11 Steps for Dairy Success**

**9**  
**Northeast/Mid-Atlantic Transition**

**to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) Mentorship Success Stories**

**10**  
**Words From The Wise: NODPA Field Day Highlights Six Soil Health Principles for Profitability**

*Certification Legislative*

**18 Marketplace New Faces**

**20 Event Calendar**

**21 New Members**

**COLUMNS**

**Inside front cover Organically Speaking**

**13 Board Corner**

**14 Updates Standards & Policy**



COVER PHOTO: Blackbird Farms



## Farmer Profile: Blackbird Farms

**P**co caught up with Kegan Hilaire, owner and operator of Blackbird Farms, a certified organic fruit and vegetable farm currently located in Emmaus, Pennsylvania. For readers that have worked with the Rodale Institute and are primarily vegetable farmers, you may recognize Kegan from the Rodale Consulting Team where he works as the Small Farms and Diversified Vegetable Consultant. Partnering with the Northeast/Mid-Atlantic Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP), Rodale hosted a field walk at Blackbird Farm on September 28, 2023.

### IT ALL STARTED WITH AN EGG

Kegan's introduction to farming started about seven years ago when he joined his first CSA while living in Philadelphia. Through the CSA, Kegan got his first taste of eggs from hens raised on pasture. This quickly led Kegan to take a deep dive into learning as much as he could about the food system from poultry production to silvopasture. Deciding to leave his corporate sales job in 2017, Kegan started working at a conventional dairy where he managed sales of cheese and yogurt while listening to as many agriculture books and podcasts on his hour plus commute to and from the dairy. The farm's primary income was sales of conventional corn and soybeans but also included agritourism and the traditional dairy. Kegan's focus was selling value-added products to wholesalers, distributors, and specialty shops. Though he spent about two years at that farm, it wasn't the long-term picture of ag that Kegan wanted to do. From there he started working at a pasture based livestock and vegetable operation, Plowshare Farms in Pipersville, PA. This experience solidified the farming

system that Kegan wanted to be a part of. In 2020, he signed up for **Rodale Institute's Farmer Training Program (RIFT)**.

The Rodale Farmer Training Program provides aspiring farmers with the knowledge and experience to start a career in regenerative organic agriculture. The hybrid experience is composed of classroom instruction, farm visits, and hands-on training in the skills necessary to operate a certified organic farm. For more information, visit the Rodale Institute website.

Three weeks into the program, RIFT students were asked to return home due to the Covid pandemic. Unsure what was in store for the coming weeks ahead, Kegan created a market garden at his parents home. Utilizing 1/8 of an acre and the u-pick model, the market garden provided produce for 10 families and additional excess for donation. This provided Kegan with proof of concept that he could grow at scale. RIFT students returned to Rodale a few weeks later to continue their training.

After completing RIFT, with a fully functioning crop and business marketing plan in hand, Kegan applied to the Seed Farm to lease land. Beginning in 2010, the Seed Farm started as a farmer training and apprenticeship program but has since switched its focus on the incubator model providing low cost land access, equipment, and infrastructure support to new and beginning farmers. No matter what facet of agriculture you are a part of, or who in the farming community you talk to, the common challenge across the country for new and beginning farmers is access to land. What Kegan thought would be his

*ABOVE: Kegan Hilaire, owner and operator of Blackbird Farms talks to attendees about the shared resources provided for beginning farmers at the Seed Farm.*

first barrier to entry quickly turned into a pleasant surprise. With the ease and low cost of land through incubator programs like those at the Seed Farm, Kegan said new farmers could actually “see farming in their future.” Today, there are three active farms and eight different farmers growing everything from produce and mushrooms to medicinal and culinary herbs to cut flowers.

### THE FARM NAME FORMULA

One question Kegan is often asked is the meaning behind Blackbird Farms. Kegan noted the farm name formula is a “color plus a noun.” After looking into his French and Irish heritage, Kegan learned that the Celts believed that the blackbird was one of the three original animals on earth, symbolizing the air and water elements as well as a message of change. Blackbird Farms strives to participate in the change of how we participate and eat in our food system.

### THE CSA MODEL

Year one at Blackbird Farms included heavy tillage to get a handle on the weeds and transplanting and seeding 120+ varieties on five acres. To avoid being overwhelmed by the numbers of tasks he could take on, Kegan leaned into his crop plan. While still working off the farm, Kegan, with the help of his mom and a friend, prepped 30 weekly CSA shares and attended two farm markets. He quickly fell out of love with farm markets and fell more in love with the CSA model. For him, the farm markets were too inconsistent; not knowing how much to harvest, sell, not to mention irregular weather. With working a full time job, the stability of knowing exactly what you need to harvest based on CSA shares and what you should and shouldn’t grow was key. By his third season, Kegan reduced the

number of varieties to about 80, added one full time employee, a steady couple of volunteers also known as the “beer and pizza crew” and transitioned fully to the CSA model with some wholesale sales. In addition to solidifying the CSA model as Blackbird Farm’s business plan, Kegan acknowledged one of the farm’s major successes has been cover cropping. As Kegan developed his cover crop plan each season, by the third year he noted he was no longer “reactionary” farming but rather proactive with soil fertility.

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**Did you know? Over 80% of people who join a CSA will join another one even if they relocate.**

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### THE FUTURE BLACKBIRD FARMS

Kegan is currently working on moving his farm to the East 40 site of Northampton Community College in Bethlehem, PA. The move is in pursuit to create a hybrid approach of the “farm to institution” model similar to St. Luke’s Rodale Institute Farm. In partnership with the college, a large component will be student involvement through place based learning and work-study components. Examples could include architecture students building raised beds and biology students talking about seed starting and seed saving/preservation. In addition, the culinary program plans to transition to using ingredients

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*Field day participants touring the Seed Farm, September 2023.*



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only produced onsite. Another longer term goal is to potentially add livestock (cattle) with 5-6 new farmer or student mentees.

## THE FUTURE OF ORGANIC

Kegan is really excited about the ongoing research in organic agriculture and the possibilities that could mean for the future. Rodale is currently doing nutrient density studies on squash and tomatoes grown on conventional and organic fields. This research could provide additional insight into the popular question about whether or not organic food has more health benefits than non-organic.

## WHO INSPIRES YOU?

Kegan draws inspiration and ideas from all of the farmers that he visits and works with. Kegan notes that the number two complaint of CSA members is food waste. Blackbird Farm gives members a compost bucket at the beginning of the year for any produce not used to then return at the end of the season. To then compost onsite. Kegan said he borrowed this idea directly from another farmer.

Kegan is inspired by how much Limerick Home Grown Produce has accomplished in a short period of time. Beginning as a market garden during Covid, they started on  $\frac{3}{4}$  acre, took grass out and put in raised beds. Limerick now participates in four farm markets, sells to wholesalers, and completed only their second season in 2023!

Kegan also recognized the work of Sista Seeds. Sista Seeds, founded in 2021 by seed keeper and community educator Amirah Mitchell, grows heirloom vegetable, herb, and grain seeds focusing on African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and West African cultural crops. Additionally, Sista Seeds is a distributor for Truelove Seeds, based in Philadelphia. Across the Mid-Atlantic region, there are seed varieties that have a long storyline with the Lenape Native Americans. Beans that were thought to be lost to history, such as the Hannah Freeman Bean and Blue Shackamaxon, are now coming back for cultivation due to the work of Truelove Seeds.

*Special thanks to Kegan for sharing his story with us. For additional contact information to Rodale or any of the consulting team, please see the additional resource box below.*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Rodale Institute: <https://rodaleinstitute.org>. Phone: 610-683-1400

Kegan Hilaire, Small Farms and Diversified Vegetable Consultant, [kegan.hilaire@rodaleinstitute.org](mailto:kegan.hilaire@rodaleinstitute.org)

The Seed Farm: [www.theseedfarm.org/](http://www.theseedfarm.org/)

Blackbird Farm: <https://blackbirdfarms.square.site/>

St. Luke's Rodale Farm Institute: [www.slhn.org/wellnow/nutrition/organic-farm](http://www.slhn.org/wellnow/nutrition/organic-farm)

Limerick Homegrown Produce: <https://limerickhomegrownproduce.com/>

Sista Seeds: <https://sistahseeds.com/>

TrueLove Seeds: <https://trueloveseeds.com>

## SOURCES:


Chawner, Megan and Powell, Christi. (Host). (2023, May 2). Episode 5.3: An Interview with Katy Hunter and Kegan Hilaire at the Seed Farm. [Audio podcast episode]. In *Developing Successful Farmers*. Penn State Extension New and Beginning Farmer Team. <https://extension.psu.edu/developing-successful-farmers>

Tucker, Kate. (Host). (2023, October 3). How A Philly Bouncer Became an Organic Farmer. Season 3: Episode 1 [Audio podcast episode]. In *Hope Is My Middle Name*. Consensus Digital Media. <https://shows.acast.com/hope-is-my-middle-name/episodes/kegan-hilaire>

(K. Hilaire, personal communication, Dec 11, 2023)

**Organic Potato Production Field Day: Troyer Farms**  
August 20th, 9 AM- 12 PM

Join the Transition to Organic Partnership Program and Troyer Farms to learn about the growing market for organic potatoes and contract growing opportunities for Folkland Organic French Fries.  
817 Rt. 97 Waterford, PA



Register at: [paorganic.org/resources/upcoming-events/](http://paorganic.org/resources/upcoming-events/)  
or call 814-422-0251 (ext. 262).


**TOPP MENTORSHIP PROGRAM**  
for Transitioning and Certified Organic Producers

Certified organic producers can serve as paid mentors and will be paired with a transitioning producer, providing support through the certification process. Transitioning producers receive mentorship at no cost.

Visit [www.organictransition.org](http://www.organictransition.org) for more information.

The Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) is a USDA initiative that will invest up to \$100 million over five years to provide education, technical assistance, and support for producers transitioning to organic. This is a certifier-neutral program. You may be working with any certifier to participate.

United States Department of Agriculture  
Agricultural Marketing Service  
National Organic Program  
Transition to Organic Partnership Program





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# On-Farm Research: *Getting on-the-ground answers to the questions farmers face*

*Farmer working in lettuce field, Image by jcomp on Freepik.*

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## ELIZABETH TOBEY, ORGANIC FARMING RESEARCH FOUNDATION

**F**armers are experimenters by nature. They regularly engage in a trial-and-error process to address the many questions and challenges related to farming and ranching. The Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) recognizes the inclination of farmers to try new things, adapt, and adjust their farming practices. By releasing a new *Farmers Guide to Conducting On-Farm Research* and launching their Farmer Led Trials (FLT) Program, OFRF aims to support farmers in harnessing that skill and directing it toward conducting relevant research to address their most pressing challenges.

Studies have shown that farmers greatly benefit when they lead on-farm research trials at their farms. Conducting on-farm research allows farmers to address farm-specific questions and has historically supported the adoption and innovation of sustainable agricultural practices worldwide (Wettasinha et al., 2014). A recent study of farmers involved in the farmer-led research program of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario found that farmers who learned to conduct their own scientific research were more “knowledgeable, confident, motivated, and inspired to adopt and/or improve ecological” farming practices (Nelson et al., 2023, p. 2).

OFRF developed the FLT Program with that in mind. The program supports farmers and ranchers in conducting practical, on-farm research that addresses farming challenges and encourages farmer-led innovations in organic farming.

“Helping [farmers] add a few scientific steps to their farm

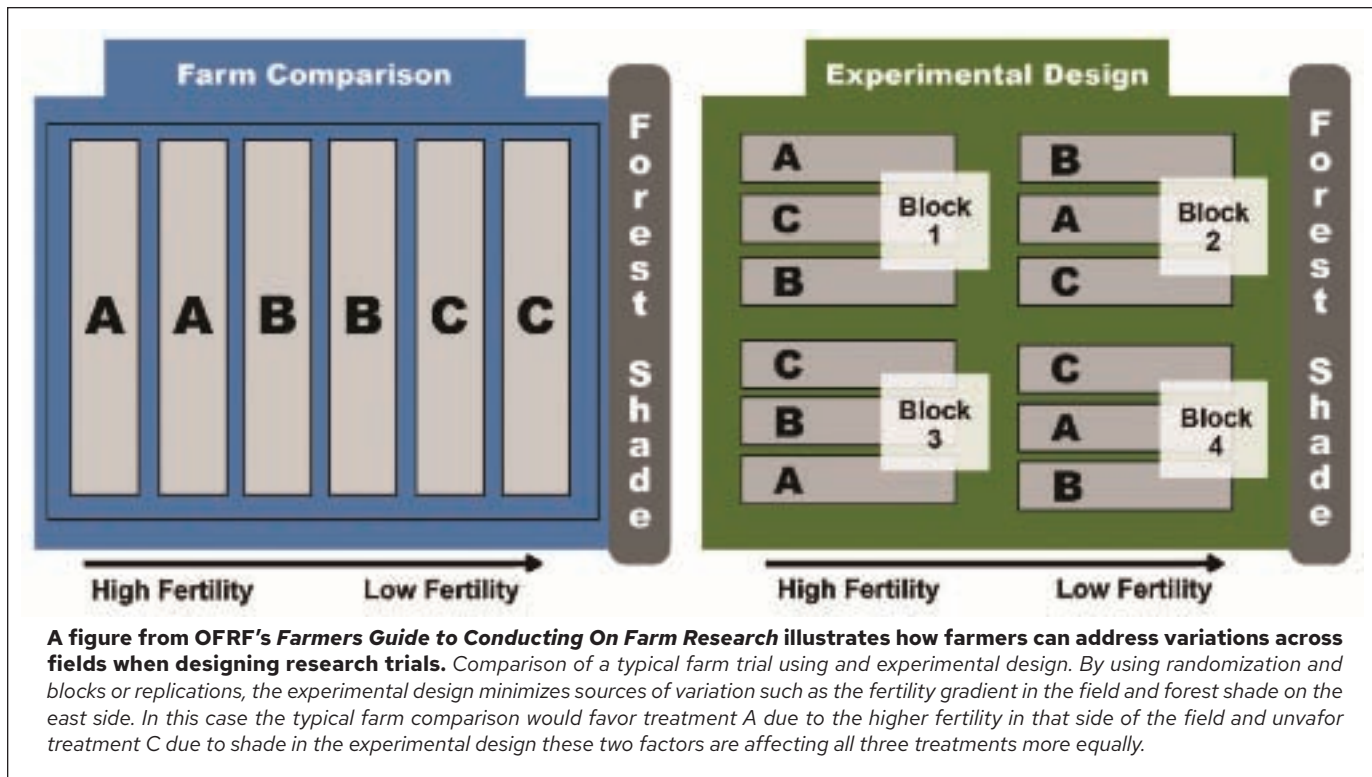
trials can lead to more concrete and trustworthy results that they can share with other farmers,” said Thelma Velez, Director of Research and Education Programs at OFRF.

Through the program, OFRF provides technical support and seed funding to implement these on-farm trials, helping minimize the risk for farmers trying a new practice. The farmers selected for support will also share and learn from each other in a cohort space to foster a thriving community of farmer-researchers.

OFRF recently selected ten farmers from across the country to participate in the first FLT cohort, whose research projects launch this spring. This first-year cohort includes beginning farmers, BIPOC farmers, and veteran farmers spanning specialty crops, grain, and vineyard operations. All participants are certified organic or in transition to organic. The research topics identified by the farmers focus on building soil health, cover crop use, weed and pest management, shade cloth use during summer, planting distances, companion planting, and variety breeding.

Tim and Becky Colby are some of the participants in the first FLT cohort. They own Colby Farms, a 14-acre farm in Papillion, Nebraska, where they produce vegetables, fruits, and some livestock products for their community. They are in their second year of transitioning a historically conventional farm to organic production. Having previously farmed in Arizona for three years, they returned to Nebraska to tend the land where Becky’s grandfather once farmed. They are participating in the FLT Program to research the best cover crop options for reducing soil compaction on their farm.

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"Being part of the FLT program was a no-brainer for us on our farm," said Tim Colby. "The land on our farm is in desperate need of rejuvenation and planting cover crops is the obvious solution. By partnering with OFRF, not only do we get some funding, but we get to create a project that will help us determine the very best cover crops to solve some of our soil health issues. We get expert advice and feedback through all stages of the project, from planning, implementing, data collection, and interpreting results. Then, at the end, not only does our Farm get answers to legitimate questions that will

improve our soil, but we get to share this data with others that might be asking the same question. FLT's are a win-win-win scenario for the farmer, the research group, and future farmers that will be able to learn from the data."

If you want to begin a research trial on your farm, the *Farmers Guide to Conducting On-Farm Research* (available for free at [www.OFRF.org](http://www.OFRF.org)) explains how to design, carry out, and draw conclusions from a trial. It enables farmers to assess the value of a specific practice, variety, or input. The full-length guide details seven major steps needed to conduct a successful on-farm trial:

1. Identify your research question and hypothesis
2. Identify what you will measure
3. Choose an experimental design
4. Choose your field and mark the location of your plots
5. Establish your trial and collect data
6. Analyze your data
7. Draw conclusions and share

The guide provides practical information, including examples from farmers and ranchers conducting on-farm research, links to additional resources, and worksheet templates for designing a sound research trial.

"On-farm research has provided me with the foundation for improved long-term soil health at my farm. I have eliminated several off-farm inputs while fine-tuning my cover cropping and rotation practices," said April Thatcher, the farmer at April Joy Farm in Washington and OFRF Board President.

To learn more about the Farmer-Led Trials Program or download a free copy of the *Farmers Guide to Conducting On-Farm Research*, visit [www.ofrf.org/research/farmer-led-research-trials](http://www.ofrf.org/research/farmer-led-research-trials).



The 7 steps to on-farm research are explained in the *Farmers Guide to Conducting On Farm Research*, recently produced by OFRF and available for free on their website."





# 11 Steps for Dairy Success

TED LEBOW, CO-CEO, KITCHEN TABLE CONSULTANTS & TASTE PROFIT MARKETING, AND EVAN DRISCOLL, SENIOR BUSINESS CONSULTANT, KITCHEN TABLE CONSULTANTS



Ted LeBow



Evan Driscoll

**M**anaging a successful dairy farm involves a combination of strategic planning, financial acumen, clear visibility into key profit drivers, and the ability to control them. In this comprehensive guide, we'll explore 11 essential steps to ensure the sustained success of your dairy operation. From establishing a solid financial foundation to valuing your team, each step plays a crucial role in cultivating a thriving and resilient dairy business.

## 1 STEP 1: CREATE A SOLID FINANCIAL FOUNDATION

To lay the groundwork for financial success, it's important to understand what has – and is currently – happening inside your business, financially. You can get a clear picture of your finances by:

■ **Adopting accrual-based accounting practices.** Accrual accounting is a method that records revenue and expenses when they are incurred, no matter when cash actually changes

hands. This approach involves tracking payables and receivables, offering a more comprehensive view of your financial position. It becomes particularly necessary when dealing with transactions on credit terms, whether involving suppliers or customers.

■ **Tracking finances through programs like Quickbooks Online.** QBO helps simplify financial recordkeeping, providing a centralized system for managing transactions, generating detailed reports, and ensuring accurate accounting records. If you choose to use Quickbooks, our bookkeeping team at Kitchen Table Consultants suggests using their online version instead of desktop for a variety of reasons, including its collaborative features, tools that streamlining your bookkeeping time, and more robust support provided by the platform as they start to move away from their desktop version.

■ **Maintaining clear financial records spanning at least two years.** Understanding your financial history is paramount for making informed decisions and steering your dairy towards profitability. If you are setting up your QBO system for the first time, make sure to include financial history for at least two years—if not longer. If your farm is struggling financially, and historically don't understand why or how, then you'll be doomed to repeat it.

■ **Utilize a Chart of Accounts that maximizes visibility into cost and profit centers.** Your Chart of Accounts is simply how you structure your Profit & Loss and Balance Sheet statements. Kitchen Table Consultants has utilized our tailored Chart of Accounts structure with dozens of dairy farms across the country, and it quickly and easily provides key performance indicators directly into the Profit & Loss and Balance Sheet statements. Your Chart of Accounts is the foundation upon which financial clarity rests.

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## 2 STEP 2: KNOW YOUR ENTERPRISE

Identify and differentiate the various enterprises within your business, such as retail, farming, and crop production. Tailor your bookkeeping system to track these enterprises separately, providing a clearer picture of their individual performances.

**Example:** *Kitchen Table Consultants works with a grass-fed dairy farm that sells milk products directly to consumers through an e-commerce platform, and delivers their product through home delivery and pick-up sites. We split their financials using Classes in Quickbooks Online to delineate between the Farm and Marketing sides of the business. The Farm produces milk, and Marketing brands, sells, and fulfills products to customers. We could see that when the Farm enterprise sells milks for \$50 per CWT to the Marketing enterprise, the Farm had significant negative profitability, while the Marketing enterprise had stronger profits. We increased the CWT price of milk to \$57 so that the farm could become financially sustainable with better profitability, which meant that the Marketing enterprise had to raise their prices to customers to absorb the price increase on the milk. Additionally, this led to a decision for the Farm to produce more hay in-house, which will ultimately drive down their feed costs for this particular producer. These changes led to the best financial year the farm had ever experienced to date.*

## 3 STEP 3: REVIEW YOUR FINANCIALS REGULARLY

Regularly review financial statements (P&L, balance sheet, AR/AP) and pinpoint key income and cost drivers. Establish goals for these drivers, monitor them closely, and take proactive steps to control factors that influence profits.

## 4 STEP 4: DOCUMENT YOUR HERD AND KEY METRICS

You can't manage what you don't measure. Keep track of key herd metrics monthly, including herd composition and productivity. This data serves as a foundation for informed decision-making and optimizing the performance of your dairy herd.

### Common Dairy Key Performance Indicators (KPI)

- **% Active Milking Cows:** Number of Active Milking Cows divided by Total Herd. For grass fed dairies, we see a healthy percentage to be about 60%.
- **Avg Milk Lbs. per Active Milking Cow per Day:** For grass fed dairies, we see a healthy lbs. per day to be about 35 lbs. for the year.
- **Feed to Sales Ratio:** This includes externally purchased feed, and internal costs to produce feed (custom hire, amendments, seeds, etc.) divided by total sales. This can vary widely depending on the operation, but a rough

benchmark for grass fed operations is 30%.

- **Operating Expense to Sales Ratio:** This includes variable overhead costs such as fuel, repairs and maintenance, freight and trucking, and operating supplies divided by total sales. We see a healthy benchmark for this around 20%.
- **Labor to Sales Ratio:** Total Labor divided by Sales. This should include Owner's Pay. We see a healthy benchmark for this around 15%–20%.

**Download our FREE Herd Model Template. The worksheet enables you to track key herd metrics and project revenue. [www.kitchentableconsultants.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/herdmodeltemp.xlsx](http://www.kitchentableconsultants.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/herdmodeltemp.xlsx)**

## 5 STEP 5: HAVE A VISION FOR YOUR DAIRY

Develop a comprehensive vision for your dairy by setting short, medium, and long-term goals. Engage key stakeholders, including your family and staff, to collectively envision the future of your farm. This shared vision becomes a guiding force for your dairy's growth and success.

## 6 STEP 6: KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

Understanding and satisfying your customers are crucial for business growth. Utilize customer surveys, conduct competitive analysis, implement marketing initiatives, and define a value proposition to better serve your customers and increase both profits and business.

## 7 STEP 7: DETERMINE YOUR FINANCIAL FUTURE

Transform your dairy vision into actionable goals through budgeting. Develop a comprehensive 3-year budget, identify key metrics, and establish measurable goals. This process allows for strategic planning and ensures accountability for achieving financial objectives.

## 8 STEP 8: OPTIMIZE YOUR HERD

Once you've identified key herd metrics and set goals, optimize your herd accordingly. Evaluate metrics' evolution needed to meet goals, and take prompt action, such as culling unproductive cows, to enhance overall herd performance.

**Example:** *Kitchen Table Consultants worked with a small dairy that had been selling their milk through a distributor, but had recently ceased to sell to this distributor and shifted to direct-to-consumer sales. The farm was losing significant profits and was not financially sustainable. We found that the farm was still maintaining a herd size optimized for distributor sales, and not for direct-to-consumer sales, which had considerably less milk volume needed. Ultimately, only 20%*

*continued on page 17*



# Northeast/Mid-Atlantic Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) Mentorship Success Stories

The second Northeast/ Mid-Atlantic TOPP mentorship cohort, matched in spring 2024 is well underway. There are currently 100 active mentor/mentee pairs across the region! Below are two mentorship success stories from our region.

## ■ CONNECTING WITH BLACK FARMERS IN VIRGINIA

### ***TOPP Partner: Black Farmer Index***

Stephanie Miller describes herself as a “returning farmer,” meaning her ancestors left the agrarian south for Philadelphia during the Great Migration. As a 30-something adult, she left corporate America for the farm where she discovered a niche growing heirloom, indigenous heritage crops. Mystic Pine Farm, located in Altavista, Virginia, utilizes Afro-indigenous methods, particularly in the production of medicinal herbs and other specialty crops. She is currently pursuing USDA organic certification of the indigenous varieties of corn to make and sell organic popcorn.



Stephanie Miller in her greenhouse at Mystic Pine Farms.  
Top: Food Connects receives organic certification,

Stephanie’s journey into organic farming started during her time as a registered dietitian. She noticed that patients in long-term care got healthier faster when they had access to good, high-quality food. That observation led her to start teaching about health education and in her words, “[I] realized that there was a need for more knowledge about good farming and access to good food.”

As a TOPP participant in the mentorship program, Stephanie was able to connect to a nearby mentor who is also interested in heirloom crops and traditional methods and who has connections to markets in southern Virginia that Miller can use to sell her organic, heirloom popcorn. These new market connections will support Stephanie’s mission of spreading knowledge about the benefits of organic food and to provide high quality, organic food to communities. Stephanie’s talks with her mentor have helped her better understand the transition process, including land eligibility requirements and market development.

## ■ VERMONT’S FOOD HUBS ACHIEVE ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

### ***TOPP Partner: NOFA Vermont***

Northeast/ Mid-Atlantic TOPP’s largest mentorship group is a cohort of seven food hubs in Vermont. These food hubs have been passionate supporters of local, organic food for years and were enthusiastic about updating their certification status under Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE). Their collective mentor, PCO Board Vice President Joe Dickson, worked in organic certified distribution and processing for 20 years for a wide range of regional distributors including direct-to-processor and direct-to-retail operations. Joe has been enthusiastic about serving as a mentor from the beginning. In his words: “I’m thrilled to be working on this mentorship project as a way to share my perspectives on organic systems and certification requirements, but I’m equally excited to get to know these vitally important regional food hubs in Vermont and

*continued on page 13*

# WORDS FROM THE WISE:

## NODPA Field Day Highlights Six Soil Health Principles for Profitability

TAMARA SCULLY, FREELANCE AGRICULTURAL WRITER

**S**ometimes positive change happens when a few brave souls are willing to step out of the stall, ruminate over the business at hand, and implement a plan to grow greener – and more profitable – pastures. By recognizing that business as usual might be the very thing preventing success, these innovators seek to better understand where they are at – and how and why they are there – and to chart an improved path by changing the manner in which business is conducted.

In the case of organic dairy farming, Roman Stoltzfoos, of Springwood Organic Farm in Kinzers, Pennsylvania, put his organic farming philosophy into practice in 1987, and was one of the first four organic dairy producers in the United States. He's been learning, growing, innovating and sharing his trials and successes ever since. Roman spoke at the recent NODPA 2023 Field Days, presenting "The Six Principles of Soil Health: Where profit comes from and how to increase it every year."

Also focusing on profit was Alvin Peachey, of Saddlers Run Farm in Allensville, Pennsylvania, whose farm was also open for Field Day tours. Alvin and his wife Marianne made numerous changes on the family dairy about ten years ago, leading to enhanced profitability and growth of their dairy operation. Alvin shared their journey towards profitability over two sessions, focused on the foundations of profitability and putting those foundations into place.

### EXPERT EXPERIENCE

Roman believes fully in organic farming, and organic farmers. "We have a future and it's a good one," he said. "If you have the privilege of growing up around your children and grandchildren you shouldn't be complaining about anything."

Whether organic or not, Roman emphasized that all farmers need to focus on the six principles of soil health in order to succeed. By doing so, the life of the soil won't be depleted by farming practices. Because the soil is the key to farming success, enhancing soil health will increase profitability, too.

"Your soil will never argue with you. It's going to play the last card. But if you don't treat it right, you're going to be in trouble. None of us would survive on our farms without some application of the six principles of soil health," Roman said.

Roman encouraged farmers to change the way they think. The energy, soil, water and mineral cycles, as well as ecosystem



Roman Stoltzfoos

diversity, are four key cycles which farmers must understand in order to apply the six principles of soil health: context, minimize disturbance, living roots, soil cover, and diversity. Millions of live critters are working for you in each handful of soil. Abiding by these six principles will keep soil life thriving.

Roman learned a lot at a soil health seminar held on a large, conventional 2500 head dairy farm. The farmer was doing a lot

of things right, like having an anaerobic manure digester, no-till farming and planting cover crops. The dairy farmer was planting rye cover crops via no-till drilling immediately after harvesting corn for silage or grain. He injected manure into the soil with a hose dragline, avoiding compaction and disturbance. He used very little nitrogen (N) on his corn crop. "The less N you can use the better you are taking care of your soil. N burns organic matter," Roman said.

This conventional dairy farm's soil profile on the Haney test was in the 99th percentile and "higher than mine. The water infiltration rate was amazing," Roman said. It all led him to wonder "why this guy can have better soil than me?"

Despite those enviable soil health profiles, Roman realized that the conventional dairy farmer was not doing the one thing that would improve his soils and profitability even more if only he would implement it. But he wouldn't, and therefore he couldn't take the next step and optimize soil health – and therefore his profit – by grazing his 1200 cow herd.

"A herd of cows is an amazing thing if you can use them out there. And he wasn't using them," Roman said. If he had been willing to do so, compaction would have been reduced on his soils. The benefit of adding grazing animals to land is enormous." But within the context of that large, conventional dairy farm, grazing wasn't considered.

"You are your own farm. You have your own unique opportunities," Roman said. "You're going to take that and make something out of it and if you understand the six principles that is going to help you a lot."

Keeping the soil undisturbed will allow more forage to grow. Keeping the soil covered at all times is crucial. Weeds are just plants we don't know what to do with, and thinking of them as forbs will help, rather than focusing on tearing up the ground and reseeding. Diversity is key, and having a dozen or more common grasses in the pastures will help with milk quality.

"Seed is not the key to success. Eliminate or cut down your seed bill," Roman said, by working with what is in the pasture by following the six principles of soil health and by managing your grazing to get the best resiliency through animal action.

### GETTING RESTED

"Growing healthy animals and plants together is a cinch. It's almost automatic with your management," Roman said. "You need to learn how to leverage your advantages." On his own

farm, which he operates with his partner and son, Dwight, resilience meant learning to properly rest pastures, and not disturb soils. An example of how effective proper rest periods and avoiding soil disturbance can be was illustrated by success they've had overcoming different challenges.

One February, the cows were grazing, and several days of rain left the fields damaged. They decided to no-till drill festulolium, meadow fescue, oats, a bit of alfalfa to try to correct damage, Roman explained. They also left a non-seeded test strip, allowing what seeds were already in the pasture to grow back naturally. The entire field was not grazed, to provide it time to recover. They lightly grazed the second year, and by the fifth year, the field was fully recovered, and "has been amazing ever since. It happens sometimes and if you don't re-abuse it with a disc or plow, it will be okay."

"There is some real advantage in giving it the proper rest. And that is completely missing from a soil problem on a conventional farm," where fields are continually plowed or disced, he said. "Out West, they understand what rest does to soil. It's much more critical than you think. Rest soils, and you will see seeds come that you've never seen before and will be palatable. A plant that is grown on your soil, and drops seed in your soil, has more nutrients in that plant than if you bought it."

In rested areas, the grasses grow thicker and the pastures are much more diverse. Even thistle has no chance to take over in fields that they've properly rested. They don't normally pull thistle or other weeds on the farm, and they also don't worry about them, and have no concerns. A well-rested field, filled with diversity allows beneficial plants to set seeds, and keep thistle or other weeds in control. "The unwanted plants' species there are trying to fix something in your soil. I think grazing and rest is going to be the key to making it into something you want," Roman said.

Fields that have yielded poorly despite being well-drained and fertile have also benefitted from a rest. Removing cows for a year when pastures are over-grazed or just not producing, can give a field a rest it needs to regenerate itself. "Now this is a tool you can use without spending any money," Roman said of not grazing a field so it can have an extended rest period.



Photo: Leslie Saunders

"What would it cost you to not have the feed from this plot?"

Roman gave another example of positive results obtained by resting fields. He planned to winter graze a field, and stopped taking hay off of it in August. Then, after allowing the cows to graze on March 1st and May 1st, he still took a "massive cutting of hay" off the field, owing to the rest period the field had between the last hay cutting and the winter grazing.

Their cows have grazed through the snow to get to the grass underneath. They've winter grazed without having to feed hay at all in January, and then feed hay along with the grass in February.

"It looks lazy... but the power of disruption and diversity and compounding all in one fell swoop," is powerful, and rest accomplishes that, Roman said. "Disruption, diversity and compounding are all key to making this work. I want to have you see that our approach to soil is something that will work on your farm."

## PEACHEY OUTLOOK

Alvin Peachey's "Peachey Lean Model" to dairy farm success values efficiency, and relies on effective practices which optimize and maximize a farm's resources. To be profitable, farmers must focus on some core principles.

Alvin advises that farmers start small when trying out a new concept, and if it works, to build on it to optimize results. Each farm is unique, and implementing practices with your own particular circumstances and goals in mind is crucial.

"It's a good idea to ask "what is causing us stress?" and be willing to adapt in our context to decrease that stress," Alvin said. Usually, there is a resource out there to help with whatever is needed.

There are consequences to making changes, and each decision has compound effects, never one single one. When making a decision, Alvin said, farmers need to think about what the ripple effect could be. For example, when improving genetics, it isn't simply about one trait.

Maximizing and optimizing outcomes involve making the most of your resources, whether labor, equipment or natural resources such as water and pasture. Planting high production fields to high quality grasses is an example of maximizing pastures, and keeping soil covered at all times maximizes solar and water capacity. Genetics can help maximize milk production. Measuring outcomes and tracking finances are essential. Production needs to be tracked and record keeping needs to be done, and to be utilized in decision-making. Milk checks are a cash resource, and getting a bigger milk check without having higher costs is the goal.

"Our time is worth something," Alvin said, and farm chores can be made more efficient.

## GROUNDWORK FOR PROFIT

Soil health is required for resiliency and profitability and successful farmers must give back to the soil, and not simply take from it. Partnering with nature provides a better chance to be profitable. Increasing carbon in soil, attracting more insects, birds and predators to the farm, and improving grass, soil and animal health and nutrition all go hand-in-hand, the way nature

*continued on page 12*

## Words from the Wise: NODPA Field Days

*continued from page 11*

was designed, he said.

Alvin believes that 70 percent of success is rooted in pasture management and understanding regenerative agriculture. Another 20 percent is the impact of Mother Nature, and fertilizing or other means of boosting production account for a mere 10 percent.

Although Alvin also sells fertilizer, he won't sell to a grazer unless they are willing to enhance their grazing management to increase yields. Fertilizing fields without focusing on management is quickest way to financial ruin, he said. Resting paddocks is a key to soil health and fertility. For the first five years, he didn't understand the importance of rest.

Saddlers Run Farm, established in 2010, switched to no-grain feeding in 2018, and has increased their herd size. As a result, they are milking more cows, fed 100 percent grass, for the same overhead. They've focused on their grazing management to maximize dry matter production per acre, and they exclusively graze all of their fields, purchasing in any supplemental forages needed. And by purchasing only high quality organic baleage, they have increased herd health and productivity.

In 2016, when he was still growing corn, alfalfa and summer annuals using minimal tillage, the organic matter on the farm was at 3.63 percent. He tried adding fertilizer, and even irrigating fields to increase yields, without success. In 2019, they began to practice tall grazing, with longer rest periods

prior to re-entry. "I do believe that pasture management will have the biggest impact on the financial progress on our farm," Alvin said. "That gives us a huge responsibility of managing our pastures"

Increasing rotations from the 21 days they had been using to the 45 -50 days they now use resulted in organic matter increases. In 2021, the soil test average for organic matter across the entire farm was 4.95. The highest level was 7.92, representing "a huge increase in the entire farm in two years," he said.

"I know one thing. If you extend your rotation from 21 days, like we were the first six or seven years of farming, up to about 45 days and even 50 days rotation, you get a dramatic increase in yield. The biggest challenge is what about quality. Can we maintain our quality?" Alvin said. "All these things are things we have to think about when we want to think about improving our pasture production."

Financial gains due to higher yields on pasture are one of the key components of success. If a producer can increase their dry matter per acre yield by one ton, then they can raise 10 more cows for 210 day on 100 percent grass on the same acreage, all due to the yield increase, effectively cutting cost per cow while increasing that milk check.

"We had a total of 88 cows, all milking, and down to 65 grazing acres," with the rest of the fields being rested, he said. "Our purchased feed cost per cow is same as it was when we had 20 cows on this farm."

Alvin's general philosophy of tall grazing is to graze 50 or 60

*continued on page 18*



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# Board Corner

## Message from the President

JOE MILLER, BOARD PRESIDENT



In the past months, the PCO Board has been focused on supporting the leadership team at PCO as they ensure we stay strong financially and positioned ready for what is coming next. We are having robust conversations during our board meetings regarding what PCO's role is in our community and the service

we provide for our customers. Throughout the past year, our board members have been part of and have interacted extensively with the greater organic community. Always on our mind is the question, what is the future for organic products? How will PCO be ready to support our family farms and processors in the future?

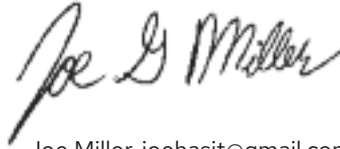
During times of change we make a choice, do we lean into change or pull back and wait in fear? As the PCO Board, we challenge each other and the leadership of PCO to lean into the changes our industry is experiencing. Over the past year, the PCO team has grown in team members and team member education to support you and your efforts. Changes like SOE, OLPS, and other regulatory changes will continually challenge us. These changes are focused on improving the industry and holding everyone to a better standard. We applaud the USDA's efforts towards transparency and improvement within the USDA Organic Certification. If you have any questions or need additional support, PCO wants to be a partner for your operation.

One of the areas PCO has been able to significantly increase our support of farms and businesses new to Organic Certifications has been through the TOPP program. PCO is now in the third year as part of this program. As one of the six national leads for the TOPP program, we are impacting organic agriculture throughout the Northeast & Mid-Atlantic. Today we have 110 mentors signed to the program. If you are considering Organic Certification and would appreciate a mentor to help you with the journey, reach out and we'll help you sign up. We are also still taking applications for mentors that would be willing to support others in their organic certification process. The tremendous aspect of this program is its impact on new organic acres and support for farmers and brands that are recently considering organic certification. This impact will be felt in our communities for decades to come!

Canadian Philosopher, Marshall McLuhan said, "There are

no passengers on spaceship Earth. We are all crew." As we look at the future of Organic products, there is much to be excited about the difference each one of us can make. Organic production methods are making a difference. In any standard that is written for a wide spectrum of operations, there will be differences of opinion, but together, we are making a difference where it matters.

Keep pressing on,



Joe Miller, joehasit@gmail.com

717-385-4610

Managing Partner at Kalona Organics LLC

## TOPP Mentorship Success Stories

*continued from page 9*

lend my support to the work they do to nurture the diverse foodshed in which we all live and eat." The seven mentees distribute everything from meat to maple syrup across Vermont and are a keystone in the local and organic food markets of Vermont.

As of April, multiple food hubs in the Vermont Food Hub mentee cohort have achieved organic certification. Their certification provides stable markets for 71 organic farms with nearly 6,400 acres in certified organic production. We have heard from multiple producers across the northeast region that one of the largest barriers to organic transition concerns the lack of consistent markets available for organic products. Through the TOPP mentorship program assisting these seven food hubs get their organic handler's certification, we are ensuring that farmers have a consistent market for their organic goods without having to worry about their products losing the organic label due to uncertified processing. In addition, consumers in Vermont can be assured that these local food hubs are up to date with organic practices and regulations and that their local food system will be strong in years to come.



Joe Dickson at CAE Farm Connex.

## Standards & Policy Update

Kyla Smith, Certification Policy Advisor  
NOSB Chair, USDA Accredited  
Certifying Agent Seat, 2021–2026



### ORGANIC LIVESTOCK AND POULTRY STANDARDS (OLPS) FINAL RULE UPDATE

We've adapted the popular adage in thinking of final rule implementations this year – "when one final rule implementation door closes, another final rule implementation window opens". The Strengthening Organic Enforcement final rule implementation date is now behind us so we are able to shift some of our attention to the implementation of OLPS final rule. As a reminder this rule has the following staggered implementation dates. **All organic operations must comply with the requirements by January 2, 2025** except:

(1) Currently certified organic layer operations and layer operations that are certified before January 2, 2025, must comply with the §§205.241(c)(2), (c)(4), and (c)(5), concerning outdoor stocking density requirements and soil and vegetation requirements, by **January 2, 2029**.

(2) Currently certified organic broiler operations and broiler operations that are certified before January 2, 2025, must comply with §§205.241(b)(10), (c)(2), and (c)(6), concerning indoor and outdoor stocking density requirements and soil and vegetation requirements, by **January 2, 2029**.

(3) Currently certified organic poultry operations and poultry operations that are certified before January 2, 2025 must comply with §205.241(b)(4), concerning poultry house exit area requirements, by **January 2, 2029**.

Over the summer we will be developing an OLPS webpage and will also develop and share training resources for clients including videos and a self-assessment evaluation worksheet. We look forward to sharing these training and resources with you shortly. In the meantime, please visit NOP's Organic Livestock and Poultry Standards webpage.

### MUSHROOM POLICY UPDATES

As some of you may be aware there have recently been some situations that have caused PCO to reevaluate our policies and material review criteria that apply to organic mushroom production as well as to spent mushroom substrates (a by-product of mushroom production used as a soil amendment by organic farmers). First, the National Organic Program published a proposed rule on organic mushroom production. Second, PCO became more aware of the inclusion of certain ingredients in spawn and spent mushroom substrate and their questionable compliance with the organic regulations.

PCO has been in direct contact with organic producers that are being impacted by these changes. As a result, we've

received tremendous feedback from both crop farmers and mushroom growers. We are so grateful for this dialogue and mutual learning. With it, PCO has quickly enacted policy revisions and a streamlined approach to the way we obtain information. Your responsive engagement has supported our goal of continuing to adapt to evolving technology and regulations while ensuring integrity and alignment across the organic sector.

Our updated policies are described in more detail below.

#### ■ PCO's Mushroom Substrate

**Applicable for:** Mushroom Production

**Effective Date:** 6.7.2024

**Implementation Date:** 6.7.2024

**Policy Details: All ingredients** in multi-ingredient mushroom substrates must be reviewed and meet PCO review criteria for crop production aids (i.e. Nonsynthetic ingredients are allowed unless prohibited or restricted at §205.602; Synthetic ingredients are allowed if listed at §205.601 and meet applicable annotations; Must not contain sewage sludge; Microbial ingredients must be non-GMO). Single ingredient substrates may need further review if they have undergone further processing (e.g. milling, screening, pasteurization, or sterilization). Spawns, nutritional additives, crop production aids, irrigation additives, sanitizers, and pest control inputs used in the production of mushroom substrates need to be reviewed separately. The application of a prohibited input on the compost, casing layer, logs, or bags would render the spent mushroom substrate as prohibited

Organic mushroom producers are required to provide all ingredients used in, or applied to, their organic mushroom substrate as part of their Organic System Plan.

#### ■ PCO's Mushroom Spawn

**Applicable for:** Mushroom Production

**Effective Date:** 1.1.2025

**Implementation Date:** 7.1.2025

**Policy Details:** PCO's Mushroom Spawn policy will be undergoing changes effective January 1, 2025, meaning that PCO will begin reviewing spawn according to the above criteria beginning January 1, 2025. The implementation or compliance date is July 1, 2025. This means that operations must demonstrate the spawn they are using is compliant by July 1, 2025. This may include submitting new spawn sources to PCO for review.

Until the effective date of January 1, 2025, mushroom spawns that were previously reviewed by PCO will revert back to their prior material review status.

The new policy requires that mushroom spawn be **organic unless commercially unavailable**. When organic spawn is not commercially available, producers may use non-organic spawn, but must document the lack of commercial availability in recordkeeping that will be audited by PCO. All ingredients in spawn, including the spawn media, must be





Photo: Mari-Liis Link

disclosed and reviewed by PCO. In addition, any treatments applied to the spawn or spawn media by either the spawn producer or certified operator, must be disclosed and reviewed by PCO. All spawn ingredients and treatments must meet PCO's review criteria for crop production aids (i.e. Nonsynthetic ingredients are allowed unless prohibited or restricted at §205.602; Synthetic ingredients are allowed if listed at §205.601 and meet applicable annotations; Must not contain sewage sludge; Microbial ingredients must be non-GMO).

Ready-to-Use (RTU) spawn logs (e.g. shiitake logs) must be organic. Commercial availability does not apply to RTU spawn logs.

Mushroom spawn producers will be required to complete and submit to PCO the Ingredient Declaration Request Form and Non-GMO Form for each strain of mushroom spawn you are sourcing or producing yourself. These forms can be requested from PCO. These forms must be submitted by January 1, 2025.

#### ■ PCO's Spent Mushroom Substrate

**Applicable for:** Manufacturers (e.g. mushroom producers) of spent mushroom substrate and uses of spent mushroom substrate

**Effective Date:** 6.7.2024

**Implementation Date:** 6.7.2024

**Policy Details:** Spent mushroom substrate may be used as a compost feedstock, fertilizer, or soil amendment and is not required to be sourced from an organic mushroom house. The policy requires that **all ingredients** added to the mushroom substrate prior to, during and after mushroom production must be nonsynthetic or on the National List for

the applicable use. The policy states that time interval restrictions will apply if the substrate contains raw manure. It prohibits spent mushroom substrate from containing synthetic ingredients not on the National List (including those that are further composted). Prohibited ingredients include urea, fly-control insecticides, fungicides, synthetic lime, synthetic gypsum, and formaldehyde.

In order to simplify, PCO revised the forms we use to collect ingredient information from the manufacturer (e.g. mushroom producer). We now have two forms: one for spent mushroom producers that are PCO clients and one for spent mushroom producers that are not PCO clients. One of these forms must be submitted to PCO by the manufacturer of the spent mushroom substrate (e.g. mushroom producer) in order for PCO to perform the material review of the spent mushroom substrate. If this information is not provided then the spent mushroom substrate will receive a status of Prohibited due to Insufficient Information.

We've also updated our policies to no longer require information related to transport of the spent mushroom substrate from the mushroom producer to the farm. However, the farmer that is sourcing the spent mushroom substrate will need a receipt or invoice with the following information available at their inspection:

- Name of Product
- Product manufacturer (mushroom producer source)
- How much was purchased
- Date of purchase

We expect this information with any input used on a certified organic operation. This may be provided by the manufacturer (e.g. mushroom producer) or may be provided by the distributor (if applicable). An organic certificate for the production of organic mushrooms is not sufficient verification because the end product on the certificate is mushrooms not the spent compost.

We appreciate all of your patience as we revise our policies to keep pace with the industry and align with other certifiers to ensure compliance with the organic regulations.

## Certification Update

Sarah Brown  
Certification Director



The Certification Review Team is deep into our annual process of completing initial reviews for all the annual updates that have come in. The initial review is when our team assesses all of your responses and any changes to your operation, or products. As part of this process we might find we need

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additional information from you. **Please remember: the more quickly you're able to respond, the better we're able to stay on track and maximize inspection coordination to save you time and money.**

Once this initial review is complete, we'll move your file forward for inspection scheduling. That is the summer time focus that we juggle in tandem with final certification reviews. Our goal is to have this cycle complete within the calendar year. For some of you this may mean that you have an inspection in Spring and don't receive a final decision until the Fall. Please know this does not disrupt your use of the organic label. We're systematically working through the annual workflow while also navigating the needs and priorities of over 1,600 organic operations. We want to ensure uninterrupted supply chains and sales for you all.

One important thing to note is that with the completion of the new OSPs, we're finding these reviews to be more involved than years passed. We need to give these forms the attention they deserve. That, coupled with the continued, heightened number of applicants, has led us to pause all **Expedited Services**. Please keep this in mind if you have upcoming needs related to new product or scope additions, or export certificates. Currently we're alerting new clients that the certification process can take between 20-24 weeks from when an application is complete to when a final decision is made. Currently, new products and export certificates are reviewed within 10 days.

## IMPORT CERTIFICATES

The USDA NOP has announced September 18th, 2024 as the final date that importers who are not yet certified will be able to receive imported organic shipments. As of September 19th, 2024 this regulatory discretion period will be over and shipments with organic HTS codes without an NOP Import Certificate will not be allowed to enter the US unless they are sold as conventional. **US importers MUST be certified by September 19th, 2024 and in-progress certification will no longer be allowed.**

## Legislative Update

### USDA PROPOSES REVISING THE SECTION 8E IMPORT INSPECTION FEE STRUCTURE FOR FRESH FRUITS, VEGETABLES AND OTHER PRODUCTS

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is proposing revisions to the regulations governing the inspection and certification of fresh fruits, vegetables, and other products. These proposed changes include a per-pound fee structure for certain Section 8e import inspections, a minimum fee equivalent to a 2-hour charge computed at the current established hourly rate, whichever is greater, and a 50 percent reduction to the subplot fee.

The current measurement, a *carlot*, is defined as "any number of containers which contain a product of the same kind located on or unloaded from the same conveyance and available for inspection at the same time and location..." (7 CFR 51.2). Modern shipping methods, such as bulk shipping containers, air freight, railcars, etc., can vary in size and therefore also vary in weight. A per-pound based fee schedule will ensure AMS Specialty Crops Program (SCP) Specialty Crop Inspection (SCI) recovers costs for the actual time and resources needed to inspect the product and will allow shippers to assess the actual costs of inspections more accurately.

Customers with loads currently subject to additional subplot fees would see a significant decrease in these fees by 50 percent. A *subplot* is generated when "the product differs markedly as to quality and/or condition, and such differences are definitely associated with certain brands, varieties, sizes or container markings." These changes would more equitably and accurately assess fees based on actual volume inspected.

The proposed rule was published in the Federal Register on June 20, 2024. Written comments must be received by August 19, 2024. Comments should be submitted online at [regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov), faxed to (540) 361-1199, or mailed to the USDA, Specialty Crops Inspection Division, 100 Riverside Parkway, Suite 101, Fredericksburg, VA 22406.

For additional information, contact Brian E. Griffin at (202) 748-2155 or [Brian.Griffin@usda.gov](mailto:Brian.Griffin@usda.gov).



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## 11 Steps for Dairy Success

continued from page 8

of the herd was actively milking, and the other 80% were support animals. We made a plan for this farm to shrink their herd considerably and raise their % Herd Milking rate to 55%, which would raise their Net Margin by 16%.

### 9 STEP 9: HOLD YOURSELF ACCOUNTABLE

Don't let your budget gather dust—use it as a guidepost. Regularly review financial statements, share them with your staff, and analyze them to identify real-time issues and opportunities. This proactive approach keeps your dairy on track to achieve financial goals.

### 10 STEP 10: GET KNOWLEDGEABLE SUPPORT

Building a successful dairy requires a supportive network. Surround yourself with experts, including nutritionists, agronomists, veterinarians, and financial advisors, to fill knowledge gaps and ensure a well-rounded approach to dairy management.

**Example:** *It takes a village to raise a farm. One of Kitchen Table Consultants' grass-fed dairy clients utilizes our team for bookkeeping and financial advisory services, Understanding Ag1 for their agronomic expertise, Keystone Bio-Ag2 for nutrition and crop health, and has a CPA and Attorney for ongoing tax and legal needs—in addition to a whole community of growers and producers they regularly reach out to for trading tips and knowledge. Having a deep bench of experts and practitioners to draw from allows them to tackle a variety of issues and opportunities as they arise. This farm's profitability has been strong since 2019 and continues to improve.*

### 11 STEP 11: VALUE YOUR PEOPLE

Recognize that people drive your budget and plans. Cultivate a team that shares your vision, foster a positive work environment, and be transparent about financial matters to build trust and deepen the 'why' behind your business. Embrace the 5 E's:

- **Engage:** Understand individual motivations, foster open communication, and encourage collaborative thinking.
- **Educate:** Cultivate a learning environment, visit diverse perspectives, and maintain a two-way sharing process.
- **Energize:** Infuse passion into the workplace, know and appreciate team members, and celebrate small victories.
- **Empower:** Encourage risk-taking, provide autonomy with guidance, and foster purposeful decision-making.
- **Enrich:** Offer competitive compensation, recognize performance, and express gratitude regularly.

The journey to a thriving dairy business involves a multi-faceted approach encompassing financial diligence, strategic planning, and a deep understanding of your operation's key profit drivers. By following these 11 steps, you'll not only cultivate a financially resilient dairy but also foster a positive, engaged team that shares your vision for success. Each step is interconnected, contributing to the holistic and sustainable growth of your dairy enterprise.

### About Kitchen Table Consultants & Taste Profit Marketing

Kitchen Table Consultants<sup>3</sup> and Taste Profit Marketing<sup>4</sup> are sister companies on a mission to help farm and food businesses become profitable for good. Drawing on years of experience as farmers and food business owners, our team of experts has offered support in accounting, marketing, and management to more than 700 businesses in the past 15 years. Our goal is to foster the growth of a better, stronger food system that honors people, soil, animals, and the planet, now and for future generations.

### ADDITIONAL INFO

■ **Kitchen Table Consultants:**

[www.kitchentableconsultants.com](http://www.kitchentableconsultants.com)

■ **Taste Profit Marketing:** <https://tasteprofit.com>

■ **Understanding Ag:** <https://understandingag.com>

■ **Keystone Bio-Ag:** [www.keystonebioag.com](http://www.keystonebioag.com)



The advertisement features the Metzler logo at the top, which consists of a stylized red 'M' with two green pine trees inside. Below the logo, the text 'METZLER' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Underneath, a red rectangular box contains the text 'METZLER BIOCHAR' in white, followed by a bulleted list of product features: 'High Carbon Biochar', 'Pennsylvania produced', 'Quantities available', 'USDA Bio Preferred Certified', and 'The Biochar material line verified as compliant with the National Organic Program'. A note in parentheses says '(Letters available upon request to Metzler)'. Below the red box, the contact information is listed: '(717) 667-2924', '26 Timber Lane • Reedsville, PA 17084', 'Website: [www.metzlerforestproducts.com](http://www.metzlerforestproducts.com)', and 'Email: [info@metzlerforestproducts.com](mailto:info@metzlerforestproducts.com)'. At the bottom left is the USDA Certified Bio-based Product logo, and at the bottom right is the PA Preferred logo.

## Words from the Wise: NODPA Field Days

continued from page 12

percent of the grass, and trample the rest, but it varies depending on growing conditions.

"Taking the best and trampling the rest," depends on time of year, he said. "You can't do the same every grazing throughout the summer."

Microbes in the soil cycle nutrients, and in the process they aerate the soil. Healthy, aerated soil "exhales" in the evening, and carbon dioxide is released as an end-product of this metabolism. Grazing enhances nutrient cycling.

"Carbon dioxide is the biggest limiting factor to increasing yield or production," Alvin said. Enhancing soil microbial health through grazing management will enhance nutrient cycling and pasture yields.

Mature grasses with seed heads are not the enemy, and can play a beneficial role in pasture nutrition.

"When did we get smarter than nature? Why till up and seed again? Use these seed heads to your advantage. The thicker the sward, the less seed heads," Alvin said. "The next generation grass is higher in quality than what you planted, and the seeds dropped by the grasses already adapted to your farm's unique soil epigenetics will enhance the quality of the pastures."

With a focus on pasture management, they have significantly increased yields and increased the farm's milk output without adding costs. Grazing all of their pastures and purchasing in all their feeds is a means of maximizing and optimizing. Their purchased feed cost is not more than the cost of harvesting. By investing in animals, not equipment, they've been able to become more efficient, and reduce costs per hundredweight of milk shipped.

Management affects profitability, Alvin said. Making choices to maximize efficiency, such as purchasing a bale roller, which allows them to feed hay in about five minutes, was a worthy investment. They move round bales with a forklift, which is also used to bed the free stall barn. Manure gets exported off farm, not spread. "We're not seeing a huge yield increase where we spread the manure and where we don't," but they plan to keep watching this, Alvin said.

The Peachey Lean Model acknowledges that "nature always wins," and working with nature is the path to profitability. "I'm

just proposing to you to think about some of these steps when you go about your daily farm life."

Adapting within your own context, working with nature, focusing on soil health, and the willingness to try something different are all tools dairy grazers can utilize to continually improve their profitability. Sustaining the dairy requires that soil stewardship – and the improved yields and nutrient content that result – remains the focus, and grazing management is the key that unlocks that door to dairy farming profitability.

### Roman Stoltzfoos

Springwood Organic Dairy,  
Kinzers, PA

romanstoltzfoos@gmail.com or 610-593-2415.

### Alvin Peachey

Saddlers Run Farm  
Allensville, PA  
717-935-2413

Originally published in the Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (NODPA) November 2023 newsletter.

Originally Posted to *Organic Production* on Wed, Nov 15, 2023, Updated: Thu, Nov 16, 2023.

## New Faces



### EDY PENN HR Director

Edy joined the PCO team as the HR Director in July 2024. With over two decades in the People space, she brings extensive knowledge and expertise in all things HR. Edy holds a J.D. and a B.A. both from Temple University. In her spare time, Edy is a fierce community advocate, a mom, and a budding author.



### LAURA WIES Inspection Program Manager

Over the past twenty years, Laura has been dedicated to promoting sustainable food and farming practices. Her experience includes roles such as Education Director at OEFFA (Ohio Ecological Food & Farm Association), Preservation Farmer with Seed Savers Exchange in Iowa, and manager of the farm business incubator for the Lansing Michigan Food Bank. With a decade-long background in organic inspections, she is deeply committed to upholding integrity, quality, and inclusion in the organic and sustainable food movement. For the past seven years, she has been managing inspections and overseeing inspectors at CCOF (California Certified Organic Farmers). Beyond work, she finds joy in gardening, tending to her chickens, and collaborating with her local land preservation group on biodiversity and conservation efforts in Columbus, Ohio.

## Marketplace

**Certified organic large square bales of meadow grass hay.** \$100 each. Call 717-476-1220. York County

**Organic Wheat Straw, Dry Alfalfa, Dried Grass, and Wrapped Baleage.** Call 717-860-3504. Franklin County.

**John Deere 725 front mount 30" cultivator,** fits 10-55 series tractors. Rolling shields 3. rear rigs to take out wheel tracks. Great condition! \$4500 call 717-940-3561 Lancaster County

# Event Calendar

All times listed are Eastern Time Zone unless otherwise indicated.

\* Notes a TOPP Core Partner Regional Event

## JULY

### Maximizing Your Farm Operation With Silvopasture

July 18

Pasa Sustainable Agriculture  
Springwood Organic Farm: Kinzers, PA  
<https://pasafarming.org/event/maximizing-your-farm-operation-with-silvopasture/>

### Weed Management and Cover Cropping

July 18

Pasa Sustainable Agriculture  
Pennypack Farm & Education Center:  
Emmaus, PA  
<https://pasafarming.org/event/weed-management-cover-cropping/>

### Rodale Institute Annual Organic Field Day

July 19

Rodale Institute: Kutztown, PA  
<https://rodaleinstitute.org/events/annual-organic-field-day-2024/>

### Bouquets for Beginners

July 20

Pasa Sustainable Agriculture  
The Seed Farm: Emmaus, PA  
<https://pasafarming.org/event/bouquet-design-for-beginners/>

### Flower School

July 24

Grow Pittsburgh  
Churchview Farms: Pittsburgh, PA  
[www.growpittsburgh.org/event/flower-school/](http://www.growpittsburgh.org/event/flower-school/)

### Manure Management

July 24

Penn State Extension: Red Lion, PA  
<https://extension.psu.edu/manure-management>

### Application of Biosecurity Practices for Small Flocks

July 24

Penn State Extension: Gettysburg, PA  
<https://extension.psu.edu/application-of-biosecurity-practices-for-small-flocks>

### Organic Farmer Track at the 17th Annual Kneading Conference

July 25-26

Featuring TOPP Workshop: Heritage Grain Seed Restoration  
Skowhegan, ME  
[www.eventbrite.com/e/the-kneading-conference-tickets-](http://www.eventbrite.com/e/the-kneading-conference-tickets-)

767719167697?aff=oddtcreator

### Eat Your Weeds

July 30

Grow Pittsburgh  
Shiloh Farm: Pittsburgh, PA  
[www.growpittsburgh.org/event/eat-your-garden-weeds-2/](http://www.growpittsburgh.org/event/eat-your-garden-weeds-2/)

### Manure Management

July 30

Penn State Extension: Huntingdon, PA  
<https://extension.psu.edu/manure-management>

### Private Water Supply Education and Water Testing

July 30

Penn State Extension: Stroudsburg, PA  
<https://extension.psu.edu/private-water-supply-education-and-water-testing-workshop>

### Private Water Supply Education and Water Testing

July 30

Penn State Extension: York, PA  
<https://extension.psu.edu/private-water-supply-education-and-water-testing-workshop>

## AUGUST

### Farming for Success

August 1

PennState Extension  
Manheim, PA  
<https://extension.psu.edu/farming-for-success>

### Field Day at Troyer Farms: Organic Potato Production

August 20

Join Troyer Farms Agronomist, Zach Troyer, and Northeast/Mid-Atlantic TOPP! Come learn about the growing market for organic potatoes and contract growing opportunities with Folkland Organic French Fries! Admission is FREE  
Troyer Farms: Waterford, PA  
<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeJvR7uDNuHI7zum4FZNWvjN7aHgKjWFjAc7NRdSbVnI7hljQ/viewform>

### Designing an Efficient Wash-Pack Up Set

August 21

Pasa Sustainable Agriculture  
Who Cooks For You Farm: New Bethlehem, PA

<https://pasafarming.org/event/designing-an-efficient-wash-pack-setup/>

### Tomato School

August 28

Grow Pittsburgh  
Shiloh Farm: Pittsburgh, PA  
[www.growpittsburgh.org/event/tomato-school-2/](http://www.growpittsburgh.org/event/tomato-school-2/)

## SEPTEMBER

### Regenerative Healthcare

#### Conference

September 9-12

Rodale Institute: Kutztown, PA  
<https://rodaleinstitute.org/events/regenerative-healthcare-conference/>

### TOPP Virtual Round Table Discussion Series— Round Table and Final QA

September 10

Virtual

<https://wvfarmers.org/2024/03/11/transition-to-organic-partnership-program-2/>

### All Things Dahlias

September 16

Pasa Sustainable Agriculture  
Goose Creek Farms: Cowansville, PA  
<https://pasafarming.org/event/all-things-dahlias/>

### Preventive Controls for Human Foods Certification Workshop

September 17

PennState Extension  
Pittsburgh, PA  
<https://extension.psu.edu/preventive-controls-for-human-foods-certification>

## OCTOBER

### Preventive Controls for Human Foods Certification Workshop

October 22

PennState Extension  
Harrisburg, PA  
<https://extension.psu.edu/preventive-controls-for-human-foods-certification>

### National Organic Standards Board – Fall Meeting 2024

October 22-24

Portland, OR  
[www.ams.usda.gov/event/national-organic-standards-board-nosb-meeting-portland-or](http://www.ams.usda.gov/event/national-organic-standards-board-nosb-meeting-portland-or)

# New Members

PCO Welcomes 1st and 2nd Quarter  
New Members!

## NEWLY CERTIFIED ORGANIC

**Denis Beachel**  
New Oxford, PA

**David Hoover**  
Liberty, KY

**Wilmer Sensenig Farm**  
Monroe, NH

**Copper Sales, Co., Inc.**  
West End, NC

**Field Farms Marketing  
LTD**  
Petrolia, Ontario

**Green Hollow Farm, LLC**  
New Oxford, PA

**Steve Reigel**  
Lititz, PA

**Vernon Nolt**  
Tamaqua, PA

**Lamar Zimmerman**  
New York, NY

**Samuel F. King**  
Lancaster, PA

**Chris Bailey**  
Farmington, ME

**Paul Stoltzfus**  
Telford, PA

**Josh Renninger**  
McLure, PA

**Quality Beef Comp.**  
Providence, RI

**David Yoder**  
Craig, OK

**Ephraim Peachy**  
Lititz, PA

**Harold Burkholder**  
Fort Covington, NY

**Food Specialties Trading,  
LLC**  
Totowa, NJ

**Baar Products, Inc.**  
Downingtown, PA

**JBL Foods, LLC**  
Manchester, VT

**Ninzong Yang**  
Afton, OK

**Clay Miller**  
Lancaster, PA

**Fallon Trading Co., Inc.**  
Bethlehem, PA

**Keith Musser**  
McVeytown, PA

**Daniel K. Kauffman**  
Hegins, PA

**Caturra Coffee  
Corporation**  
Elmsford, NY

**Gurrentz International  
Corporation**  
Pittsburgh, PA

**Donald Boyer & Sons**  
East Berlin, PA

**Kalona Organics, LLC DBA  
Provision Ingredients**  
Kalona, IA

**Wedderspoon Organic  
USA, LLC**  
Malvern, PA

**Kenton Stelfox**  
York Springs, PA

**Creek Hollow Farm LLC**  
Greencastle, PA

**BP Shirey Turkey Farm  
Inc.**  
Douglassville, PA

**Amos L. Beiler dba  
Harmony Ridge Produce**  
Drumore, PA

**Daryl Leid**  
Shiloh, OH

**Scott Reilly**  
Norwalk, OH

**Echo Lake Farms, LLC**  
Greene, NY

**Robert Detrick**  
Nichols, NY

**Daniel Glick**  
Lancaster, PA

**Wooden Hill Farms**  
Duncannon, PA

**Marlin Kilmer**  
El Dorado Springs, MO

**Hidden Hollow Poultry**  
Sugarcreek, OH

**Jacob Byler**  
Grovespring, MO

**Phil High**  
Mount Joy, PA

**Tobias Savage**  
Warfordsburg, PA

**Oliver's Path LLC**  
Warriors Mark, PA

**ML Value Added LLC dba  
Moonlight East**  
Hanover, MD

**Pete and Gerry's  
Organics LLC**  
Monroe, NH

**Canterberry LLC dba  
Fragrant Tales**  
Lebanon, NJ

**Jason DeSalvo**  
Oldwick, NJ

**The Heritage Peak LLC**  
Brooklyn, NY

**Clinton Sauder**  
Branchport, NY

**Larry Zimmerman**  
Dundee, NY

**Firman Miller**  
Chazy, NY

**Steven M. Stoltzfus**  
Farnham, VA

**Cleason Hurst**  
Telford, PA

**Ernest Nolt Farm**  
Monroe, NH

**Lavern D. Kauffman**  
Annville, PA

**Amapharm LLC**  
Drums, PA

**TFC Poultry Winchester,  
LLC dba TFC Poultry**  
Ashby, MN

**K&J Poultry**  
Colcord, OK

**Misty Denny**  
Jay, OK

**Derstine's Inc.**  
Sellersville, PA

**Commodity Blenders,  
LLC**  
Warren, IN

**Purity Coffee Inc**  
Greenville, SC

**Soom Foods LLC**  
Philadelphia, PA

**MG Alimentos, Inc.**  
Houston, TX

**Samuel Miller**  
Lancaster, PA

**Bacco Wine & Spirit, LLC**  
Lancaster, PA

**Burton Family Farms,  
LLC**  
Milton, DE

**Justin Oberholtzer**  
Annville, PA

**Basciani Foods, Inc**  
Avondale, PA

**Andy Miller**  
Owingsville, KY

# WHAT IS PA PREFERRED ORGANIC™?

The PA Department of Agriculture is leading Preferred Organic™ by:



- Administering the Organic Certification Cost-Share Program (OCCSP) to offset a portion of annual organic certification costs.
- Sponsoring free or low-cost technical assistance for farmers and processors to start or transition to USDA certified organic operations.

- Establishing the first-of-its-kind Organic Center of Excellence to empower and support organic farmers and businesses.



- Supporting networking opportunities between organic farmers.
- Funding PA-specific organic research on a variety of topics.



## SUPPORT PA FARMS!

Scan the QR code for more information on the PA Preferred Organic Initiative



For more information, please contact:

Kristen Markley  
Program Manager  
717-787-6006  
kmarkley@pa.gov





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