

Organic Producers Gather At Annual Meeting

DAVE LEFEVER
Lancaster Farming Staff

MILLERSTOWN (Perry Co.) — Going organic is a good move for farmers, according to Cheryl Cook, deputy secretary with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

"Getting certified is a very smart business step," Cook told guests at the recent annual meeting of Pennsylvania Certified Organic (PCO), the state's main certifying agency.

The Dec. 10 meeting and banquet took place at Perry Valley Grange Hall, Millerstown.

Cook joined PDA this year as deputy secretary for marketing, promotions, and program services. In her previous job, she served as executive director of the Keystone Development Center, a nonprofit organization fo-

cused on building cooperatives to address challenges in rural areas of the state. She has also served as Pennsylvania director for USDA's economic and community development programs.

Organic acreage in Pennsylvania increased threefold from 1997-2001, according to Cook. Although that amount of land is still relatively small, the growth reflects the U.S. as a whole, where annual organic sales rose from \$3.5 billion to \$7 billion during the same period.

Cook wants to see the state's farmland preservation program revamped so that land is put to its most productive use. One of her goals is to help increase the number of working farms, in part by dividing larger plots of land not being used for intensive production and turning them into small farm operations.

Even cities have great potential for production agriculture, Cook said, giving the example of a half-acre plot in Philadelphia which produced \$26,000 worth of organic crops in a year.

Cook said she will promote a "carbon credit" system in which farmers would be rewarded for practices that help reduce greenhouse gases in the atmosphere — with funds coming from the state's major polluters. According to research conducted and recently published by Rodale Institute, Kutztown, organic farming methods help reduce global warming.

A carbon credit system would provide "another source of income for what you're already doing," Cook said, noting that it would also be "another quiver in the arrow of farmland preservation."

Cook is also working on in-state marketing initiatives, including talking to public institutions about buying Pennsylvania-grown food and developing a "Pennsylvania Preferred" food-branding program.

Cook said she first learned the meaning of food security from her grandmother.

"She grew her own food," Cook said. "She had food security."

During the meeting, PCO presented awards to outstanding organic farmers. They included Tim and Anne Bock, Wills Daal Farm, Kutztown, best record-keeping; Randy and Chris Treichler of Star Hollow Farm, Three Springs, neatest farm plan and field records; and Mike and Terra Brownback of Spiral Path Farm, Loysville, for sharing knowledge and expertise.

Bob Vernon and Tom Carey received outstanding volunteer awards, along with about 35 other volunteers who were recognized for their help throughout the year.

Tim Hihn and David Griffiths were honored for completing five years as PCO directors/officers.

On hand at the meeting were PCO Executive Director Leslie Zuck and PCO inspectors to answer farmer questions about organic standards.

To a question about the required buffer width between organic fields and neighbor's conventional fields to protect against chemical drift onto organic crops, certification inspector Brian Magaro said that the right buffer width depends on the situation. For example, he noted that a thick, 10-foot-wide hedgerow is a more effective buffer than 50 feet



Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Cheryl Cook, left, receives a bag full of Pennsylvania certified organic products as a gesture of appreciation from Leslie Zuck, PCO executive director.



Outstanding organic farmers are, from left, Mike Brownback, Tim and Anne Bock, and Randy and Chris Treichler. Joining them is Leslie Zuck, PCO executive director, right.

of open field. Spray drift from neighbors also needs to be monitored to help make the decision.

"There is no set rule," Magaro said. "It's what is needed to protect the organic integrity."

A certified organic dairy farmer interested in marketing organic calves asked if he needed to update his certification to do so. Penny Sandoval, PCO certification director, said he would need to file a request to add the calves, but at no extra cost.

The group discussed a number of other topics, including compost standards, organic seed requirements, the use of chlorine as a sanitizing agent, regulations for buying used trailers to haul grain, and the availability of untreated fenceposts.

For more information about organic certification, contact PCO at (814) 364-1344.

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