



GROWING ORGANIC COMMUNITY

By Roz Lehman, Executive Director, Iowa Organic Association

Community has been a key factor of success within the growing organic movement – it provides an important source of social connection and a sense of belonging – especially when the nearest organic neighbor is possibly hundreds of miles away. For organic producers, developing a network for sharing organic production methods and resources has been essential to sustaining this niche community that has now become the fastest growing agriculture industry in the United States.

The USDA is committed to expanding this model to deliver greater technical and financial support to extend a range of resources that meet the needs of producers and businesses interested in organic transition and production. As part of the USDA's new Organic Transition Initiative, the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) will prioritize efforts to increase farmer-to-farmer mentoring; improve NRCS organic technical capacity, develop market opportunities (supply chains, processing and distribution for new organic crops) and further strengthen organic communities and partnerships regionally and across the U.S.

Add a little TOPP is a national collaborative effort involving many partners in every state working together, in community, towards a common goal. The TOPP network covers six regions: the Mid-Atlantic/Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Plains, Northwest, and West/Southwest. Organizations in these regions are actively forming partnerships and creating programs to serve transitioning and existing organic farmers. The Midwest Region represents Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

The growing group of the Midwest Region's core partners includes a wide-range of trusted organizations supporting and representing organic communities – each bringing diverse resources, experiences and perspective to the project. The leadership, collaboration, and focus among the Midwest Region's core partners over the last eight months has been essential to building the synergy to meet the major goals and objectives of TOPP.

- Farmer-to-Farmer mentoring: connecting experienced farmers with beginning or transitioning farmers offering first-hand, unmatched, one-of-a-kind technical expertise.
- Technical support: implementing various farmer training, education, and outreach activities for producers, ag advisors and others interested in learning more about organic production.
- Community Building: bridging various partnerships, programs and resources to increase organic production.
- Workforce Development: identifying and creating training and professional development opportunities to increase organic expertise within all sectors of the agriculture industry.

There is an abundance of untapped organic information and expertise in farming communities all across the country. TOPP and its partners are diligently collecting and channeling these resources to inspire and encourage greater interest and success in organic production. Building and strengthening organic community and connections within a region, state and across the country will lead to greater organic practices and production.

To learn more about TOPP or to apply to become a mentor or mentee, visit:
www.organictransition.org