

NEWSLETTER

MIDWEST TOPP NEWS

SUPPORTING ORGANIC PRODUCERS TO ADVANCE FOOD SYSTEM RESILIENCE



MIDWEST
TRANSITION TO ORGANIC
PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

YEAR IN REVIEW

By Allison Walent
Program Director, MW TOPP



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It was just one year ago that MOSA announced it was named by the National Organic Program to lead the Midwest Region's Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP). The past year has been filled with learning moments, programming, systems development, relationship building, and more learning moments.

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If you are wondering what some of your Deliverables may look like for your TOPP projects, particularly in Workforce Development (WFD), you may derive some inspiration from the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) "[Human Capital Capacity Building Initiative](#)," launched as a national program in 2021 and 2022 to "support the long-term growth of the organic industry by expanding the pool of well qualified organic professionals who ensure consistency, fairness, and integrity.

ORGANIC WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

By Kathleen Delate
Iowa State University



TOPP PRIORITIES

»»» MENTORSHIP

Our Mentorship Program connects producers transitioning to organic practices with experienced organic producers who serve as mentors.

These mentors guide them through the transition process and offer valuable insights into their journey into organic farming.

»»» TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

TOPP offers a variety of workshops, field days, and educational events in the region to provide technical assistance, training, and advising on organic-specific resources.

»»» COMMUNITY BUILDING

To foster connections within the organic agricultural community, we will organize conferences, workshops, field days, and round table discussions to facilitate networking and collaboration.

»»» WORKFORCE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

TOPP provides targeted training and education for the organic workforce, including the entire supply chain. Workforce development is key to our mission.

APPLY TO BE A MENTOR OR MENTEE

»»» Visit: www.organictransition.org to complete the online form

PARTNER FEATURE:

A Q&A WITH HEATHER FRIEDRICH FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS CENTER FOR ARKANSAS FARMS AND FOODS (CAFF)

»»» TELL US ABOUT YOUR ORGANIZATION'S MISSION

The Center for Arkansas Farms and Food (CAFF) (caff.uark.edu) is focused on training aspiring, new and established specialty crop farmers in sustainable production and business methods for regional food markets. We have two co-hort based, experiential learning programs, our Farm School and our On-farm Apprenticeship Program, along with an online beginning farmer class series and intensive short courses. And we also support our farm community network through formal and informal networking activities throughout the year.

»»» WHAT TOPP RELATED PROGRAMMING ARE YOU CREATING?

We have a new podcast, Arkansas Organic Chronicles, and a new video series on Instagram and YouTube that will for the first time in Arkansas deliver structured, consistent organic information over the long term. I'm looking forward to seeing how these bite size and portable modes of information will reach broad audiences. I'm also really excited about working with new partners in the effort to increase organic production across Arkansas. We are a diverse state - geographically, culturally and agriculturally which underscores the importance of working with partners that focus their efforts in other parts of the state, in different crops and that reach different audiences. And finally, in January, we will be launching the Arkansas Organic Network as a platform for those working in the organic industry in Arkansas - farmers, buyers, suppliers, educators, service providers and others, to come together, share resources, strategize approaches to solve problems and to create momentum for the organic industry in Arkansas.



farmandfoodsystem.uada.edu

»»» WHICH TOPP PRIORITY AREA ARE YOU MOST EXCITED ABOUT AS IT RELATES TO THE WORK OF YOUR ORGANIZATION AND THE NEEDS OF YOUR REGION?

I appreciate each of the priorities because it's quite a holistic approach - from very targeted assistance to transitioning farmers; building up the broader organic community and filling education gaps; to increasing knowledge and confidence among farmer educators/advisors. This is an important approach for meaningful impact. I think the piece that is most exciting for our organization that will have the most impact for Arkansas is building community and providing broader educational opportunities. I see it as a way to bring the people (farmers, educators, etc) who are working in organic ag and are scattered throughout the state together to build critical mass and recognize that there are others working in organic agriculture too. In regards to education, there has not been any consistent, educational programming in organic agriculture offered by the University of Arkansas (or any other organization that I'm aware of) so I feel that is an important gap to fill and it's important to represent the University of Arkansas in that role.

➤➤➤ WHAT IS A RECENT SUCCESS STORY RELATED TO YOUR TOPP PROGRAMMING?

We are still in the building phases of launching our program so our success aren't that flashy - yet! We have built a strong team at CAFF and are starting to release some important content through our new website, podcast and videos. And we also are working on developing strong partnerships with the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) land grant), Winrock International, National Center for Appropriate Technology and Black Women in Agriculture.

➤➤➤ WHAT UNIQUE CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE IN YOUR REGION IN TERMS OF GROWING ORGANIC ACREAGE?

MENTORSHIP TRAINING MATERIALS

In collaboration, the six regional TOPP leads developed training materials for all partners to utilize in the execution of their mentorship programs. Find a mentor and mentee video training series, a mentor position description, technical assistance resources and more at www.organictransition.org.

For agronomic crops which are grown in the Delta, central Arkansas and River Valley, the main challenges are Dicamba drift, lack of transition and organic markets that are accessible in Arkansas, and the (lack of) willingness among farmers to change to something new. This leads to issues with developing markets and having enough supply for a buyer to work in Arkansas. Most large scale, agronomic farmers we've talked with changed to certified production out of a dire situation, financially, and stuck with it because they were able to carve out markets, and understand and overcome production challenges.

For specialty crops which are mostly grown on small acreage across the state, these crops are primarily sold directly to consumers so the value in certification is limited unless the farmer is really committed to it. Wholesale markets are increasing, however, so this dynamic may change.

But production-wise there are some legit challenges - Arkansas has a long growing season which means we have different weed issues throughout the year and multiple generations of insect pests and, we get a lot of rain and high humidity which creates wonderful conditions for disease. And we lack Arkansas based research to overcome these issues.

➤➤➤ IF YOU COULD FAST FORWARD TO 2027 AND THE END OF THE FIVE YEAR TOPP PROGRAM, WHAT DO YOU ENVISION? WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO HAVE ACCOMPLISHED?

By 2027, I hope we have transitioned 10-20 Arkansas farmers to organic production in a variety of agronomic and specialty crops, which would be a 40% - 80% increase in organic crop farmers in the state. I envision building a critical mass in our organic community that is well connected, and that we have educated Arkansas farmers and those supporting farmers on market opportunities, production practices and certification steps through various channels.

UPCOMING CONFERENCES THROUGHOUT THE MIDWEST TOPP REGION

GREAT LAKES EXPO - FRUIT, VEGETABLE, AND FARM MARKET

December 5 - 7

Grand Rapids, MI

IOWA ORGANIC ASSOCIATION ANNUAL MEETING

December 5

Boone, IA

2024 KENTUCKY FRUIT AND VEGETABLE CONFERENCE

January 2 - 4

Bowling Green, KY

ORGANIC GRAIN CONFERENCE

January 4 - 5

Oregon, OH

MINNESOTA ORGANIC CONFERENCE

January 11 - 12

St. Cloud, MN

ORGANIC ASSOCIATION OF KENTUCKY (OAK) ORGANIC FARMING CONFERENCE

January 25 - 27

Frankfort, KY

OGRAIN WINTER CONFERENCE

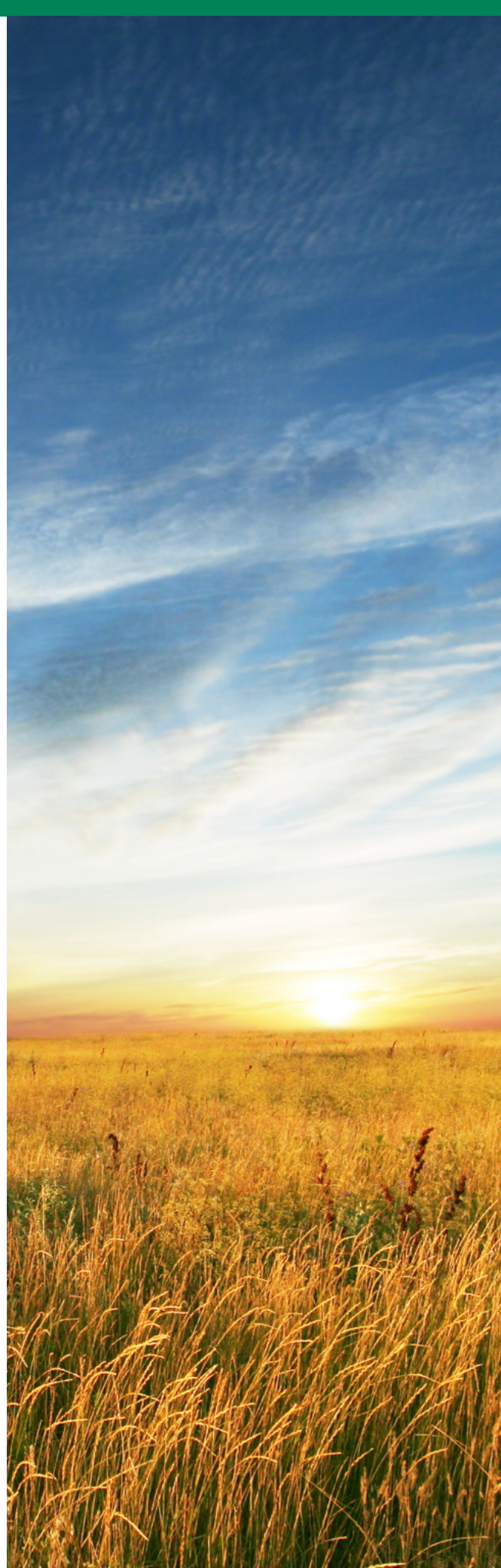
February 2 - 3

Madison, WI

MARBLESEED'S 35TH ORGANIC FARMING CONFERENCE

February 22 - 24

La Crosse, WI





UW Organic Collaborative
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
Extension and Outreach



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

