

By Steven McFadden



# Left Behind



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Promoting agriculture and food systems that build healthy land, people, communities, and quality of life for present and future generations.

## Unraptured by the Transgenic Tsunami

When [Stewart Brand](#) spoke at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in mid-January, he broadcast a vision of a genetically modified (GM) future toward which he felt we should all be charging with bright-eyed enthusiasm.

“Get out there where it’s getting weird,” he exhorted, “and get weird with it.”

As I sat and listened to Brand talk of the future, I was carried in reverie—not forward, but backward to 1964. That’s the year my mom took my sister, my brothers, and me to the New York City World’s Fair where we made a pilgrimage through the most celebrated exhibit of all, “Futurama.” Sponsored by another GM (General Motors), the exhibit offered a glimpse into what life would be like in the future—as GM engineers wanted to conceive of it. Of course, the future materialized its own way, not in accordance with immaculately engineered visions.

Likewise, Brand’s exhilarating vision of a corporately-owned, genetically-modified World of Tomorrow—a world subsisting on a diet of what he calls “Green Ag BioTech”—seems, to me, unlikely and ill advised.

Founder of the famously countercultural [Whole Earth Catalog](#) back in 1968, Brand now styles himself as an “ecopragmatist.” He said that three global dynamics—climate change, ur-

banization, and biotechnology—are causing people like himself to reverse long-held opinions and to embrace nuclear power and genetically modified food.

Brand is vivid and likeable on the stage, and his talk was expansive and entertaining. Because he is such a prominent convert to biotech, his philosophical reincarnation as an ecopragmatist advocate for nuclear power and GM food might well have a measure of influence.

But not with me.

His talk left me unconvinced and unraptured by the whole vast global laboratory experiment on nature and our food that is currently being executed with slam-bam systemic speed. I just don’t hear the call of the land as a plea for more industrially created, corporately owned genes and the petrochemicals necessary to sustain them. What I hear instead is a full-throated call for natural respect. Same as it ever was.

### Special Pleading

Brand told the story of how on his way to Nebraska to speak he had flown over the Sierras. While in the air, he saw that there was no snowpack at all on the mountains this year. This kind of

Continued on page 2...

ominous drought, he said, has not occurred since the 1880s. Climate change is catastrophically real, he then affirmed, saying it was a central motivating force for the work he does in the world.

In the context of our unfolding climate calamity, Brand asked rhetorically, “What is moral and ethical?” He answered his own question in the same breath, saying that nuclear power, genetically modified plants and animals, and geo-engineering are all essential ways to the future, and that we—corporations, universities, governments, and amateurs—ought to go full steam ahead into a more fully nuclear-powered, genetically modified world.

Brand said that at this point in history environmentalists have only hand wringing to contribute to the future. He derided “enviros,” saying they are people caught up in a web of suspicions and superstitions. They are just “sad reactionaries,” he lamented.

A man of signal accomplishments, Brand at one point shifted and began declaiming, aflame with the scripture of material technology, his rap devolving to include a disheartening damnation of unbelievers. In the years to come, Brand warned from his perch on stage, the leading edge of biotech will not be here in America but rather far afield in China, Africa, and the Third World. Those places lack opposition. But in places where there is opposition, he warned, organic and sustainable farmers and supporters will be “left behind.” Organic farming will be more expensive and will yield food with less nutritional value than patented transgenic crops. Organics will become irrelevant.

Brand tossed off several *ad hominem* slams to imply that opposition to a GM future arises not from authentic, evidence- and ethics-based concerns, but rather from irrational fear. In that sense, his presentation was a special pleading: a form of argumentation where a person excludes facts or details that would upend the case they

are attempting to make. Enraptured with his subject, Brand stuck to sweeping generalizations and neither acknowledged nor refuted the substantial body of legitimate [concerns](#) about GM corporate industrial farms and food. This struck me as a disservice to the debate.

Likewise, Brand said nothing about the ramifications of corporate ownership and monopoly over various life forms. He said nothing about informed choice or human free will, absolutely massive aspects of the GM miasma. He said nothing about the mounting studies and literature reviews documenting concern about the impact of GMOs (genetically modified organisms) on human health and the natural world over time. He said nothing of the [Precautionary Principle](#). And he said not a word about the suicides in India of hundreds of thousands of farmers—the largest wave of suicides in human history—in consequence of the debt and suffering incurred by becoming involved with corporate biotech.

These matters—scientific concerns about GMOs, the free will of human beings, and a saddening, stupefying wave of suicides—must be addressed in any discussion of corporate industrial agriculture and GM seeds and food. To ignore them, or to gloss them over, creates a dangerous distortion of reality.

### Sans Spectrum

At one point, Brand showed a Powerpoint slide with a double-headed arrow to illustrate the spectrum of opinion on climate change: from total denial to full acceptance. But he made no allowance for a justifiable spectrum of opinion on GM food. In his view, at least as I heard him express it, there are only two stances: sanguine acceptance of corporate genetic manipulation of the food chain, or pitiful irrational fear of the future.

There are millions of people who, for sound ethical and scientific reasons, oppose GM farms and food. And there is a

mounting library of research that should give any thoughtful person pause.

The health consequences of eating genetically modified organisms are still largely unknown. GMOs just have not been proven to be safe over the long term. Increasingly, studies are suggesting that grave health problems—for plants, animals, and humans—may well be caused by GMOs. We’re all still guinea pigs. Make no mistake: The jury is still out.

Consider that nearly 50 countries—including Brazil, China, South Korea and the European Union—already ban many genetically engineered foods altogether. They also generally require labeling of GMO products, so their people will know what they are eating.

As expressed by University of California-Berkeley Professor of Microbial Ecology, Ignacio Chapela, “[T]he fundamental truth stands that over the decades no real benefit has offset the proven harm caused by GMOs.”

Most Americans, however, are every day ingesting plate loads of lab-created DNA while having absolutely no idea about what they are doing and no choice in the matter. There are no labels. Our free will has been rendered inconsequential, even though [surveys](#) show overwhelmingly (93%) that Americans do want labels. More than half a million people have already signed a [petition](#) to the United States Food and Drug Administration asking for the basic information and protection of labels.

For these and other reasons I have written about, I am altogether at peace with the idea of being left behind by the corporate GM onslaught. I remain unraptured. I’ll take my stand for the future on clean, organic land and food. Same as it ever was.

### A Titanic Transgenic Courtroom Clash

The debate about GM food amps up considerably this year.

The **NSAS Newsletter** is a bimonthly publication of the [Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society](#) (NSAS), a private non-profit organization. Our mission is to promote agriculture and food systems that build healthy land, people, communities, and quality of life for present and future generations. The purpose of this newsletter is to inform our readers on sustainable agricultural issues, resources, and activities. This newsletter is a NSAS [membership benefit](#).

### NSAS Staff

**William Powers**, Ceresco  
Executive Director  
402.525.7794  
[healthyfarms@gmail.com](mailto:healthyfarms@gmail.com)

**Jill Wubben**, Hartington  
Membership Coordinator  
[jillw@hartel.net](mailto:jillw@hartel.net)

Newsletter services provided by Rita Brhel, [rita.brhel@gmail.com](mailto:rita.brhel@gmail.com)

**Ali Clark**, Omaha  
Urban Agriculture Intern  
[a.clark0425@gmail.com](mailto:a.clark0425@gmail.com)

**Sandy Patton**, Brunswick  
Farm2School Coordinator  
[sandyp@conpoint.com](mailto:sandyp@conpoint.com)

It started on January 31. That's the day that the courts held a preliminary hearing on the lawsuit that the Organic Seed Growers and Trade Association ([OSGATA](#)) brought against Monsanto.

Along with 83 family farmers and organic ag groups—a group totaling over 300,000 members—OSGATA challenged Monsanto's patents on genetically modified seed.

The plaintiffs in this landmark case carried a banner in a crucial courtroom

stance for everyone concerned about GM transgenic food.

The plaintiff group had set their case out in opening remarks at the hearing: "Society stands on the precipice of forever being bound to transgenic agriculture and transgenic food. Coexistence between transgenic seed and organic seed is impossible, because transgenic seed contaminates and eventually overcomes organic seed."

The plaintiffs said they were seeking relief from the court because organic, biodynamic, and other farmers need legal protection against contamination by Monsanto's transgenic crops. They presented evidence to show transgenic food does not serve the public interest, nutritionally, environmentally, agronomically, or genetically.

This case is of resounding significance not just for farmers but also for consumers. There are far-reaching potential health consequences of transgenic food, particularly for future generations of plants, animals, and people.

Steven McFadden blogs at [The-CallOfTheLand.wordpress.com](#). He is the author of *The Call of the Land* and director of *Good Medicine Consulting*. He lives in Lincoln.

#### Editor's Note:

The Jan. 31, 2012, hearing for OSGATA vs. Monsanto was dismissed. However, the plaintiffs do have the right to appeal. The judge's ruling can be found at [www.osgata.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/OSGATA-v-Monsanto-MTD-Decision.pdf](http://www.osgata.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/OSGATA-v-Monsanto-MTD-Decision.pdf)

## About NSAS

NSAS is a non-profit, grass-roots membership organization. Initiated more than 30 years ago by farmer members, NSAS has grown into a dynamic organization with members from all across Nebraska. We welcome farmers and non-farmers alike...everyone eats!

**Our mission:** To promote agriculture and food systems that build healthy land, people, communities and quality of life, for present and future generations.

**Our vision and work:** We recognize that there is a strong relationship between a healthy local agriculture and a strong local food system. That relationship requires that much of the food consumed is grown and processed locally. This adds quality and security as well as social and ecological responsibility to the community diet. It is this understanding that motivates NSAS's work to strengthen and enhance these systems together. Our work is across Nebraska in all communities and settings to expand this system for the benefit of local agriculture and local residents.

NSAS is active in collaborative projects that support rural communities and the environment. These projects offer mentoring opportunities for beginning and experienced farmers, and opportunities for on-farm research, demonstration, and education. We offer opportunities for non-farmers to participate in a food system and network with sustainable Nebraska farmers, attend workshops and link with all our projects! Each year, NSAS sponsors a Healthy Farms Conference, workshops, farm tours, and field days. NSAS is a member of the Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group.

**NSAS is not just for farmers.** Our diverse membership includes rural and urban consumers, market gardeners, educators, and of course farmers raising a fantastic array of goods. We welcome anyone who is concerned about family farming, environmental quality, and good, healthy food. We depend on the support of all that are concerned with renewing and enlivening a sustainable food system and sustainable farming in Nebraska!

- **Healthy land...** NSAS promotes farming practices which decrease soil erosion, increase soil fertility, reduce the need for off-farm inputs, protect natural resources and encourage a diverse landscape. NSAS offers a variety of workshops, tours, and projects which demonstrate environmentally and economically sound farming practices.
- **Healthy people...** NSAS works with growers to increase the availability of fresh produce, quality grain products, and farm-fresh beef, pork, poultry, eggs, and other animal products. We link concerned consumers with growers who market these foods. NSAS advocates farming practices which benefit the environment and human health.
- **Healthy communities...** NSAS programs are built on community networks of farmers, ranchers, businesses, technical assistance providers, and consumers. NSAS provides these networks with organizing support, information and education, and opportunities to exchange ideas and experience with other networks across the state.
- **Quality of life....** NSAS works to strengthen the economic and social base of family farms and rural communities by increasing the use of on-farm resources. NSAS recognizes the importance of increasing family farm profitability and strengthening local businesses while brightening the environment.
- **For present and future generations...** NSAS programs focus on the entire family, including opportunities for rural women and children, along side similar opportunities for urban refugees and immigrants. NSAS has a history which continues today of projects providing outreach, education and support to all ages, genders and across cultures.

## Events

Tuesday, March 27

### WEBINAR: Bee Informed Partnership

[www2.gotomeeting.com/register/825237930](http://www2.gotomeeting.com/register/825237930)

starting at 6:00 p.m.

Dennis Van Engelsdorp, director of the Bee Informed Partnership, is discussing the importance of the project in reducing colony losses. All beekeepers are invited to join the meeting.



Tuesday, April 3

### CONFERENCE: UNL Plant Breeding and Genetics Symposium

University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduates have lined up the following speakers for this event:

- Dr. Stephen Baenziger, UNL Agronomy and Horticulture
- Dr. David Habier, Pioneer Hi-Bred
- Dr. Jean-Luc Jannink, USDA-ARS at Cornell University
- Dr. Jode Edwards, USDA-ARS at Iowa State University
- Michael Gore, USDA-ARS in Arizona
- Dr. Joe Keaschall, Pioneer Hi-Bred.

Everyone is invited to attend, at no cost, but seating is limited so registration is required. The symposium will also be offered online via a free webinar; registration is also required for this option. For more information, visit <http://go.unl.edu/pbsymposium>.

Saturday, April 14

### OPEN HOUSE: Spring at the Springs

Darby Springs Farm

Ceresco, Nebraska

Starting at 11:00 a.m., birthday celebration at 5:30 p.m.

Join us for a farm work day, unveiling, celebration, birthday party, chicken scratching, and more! Come for the part or the whole day. We have big plans for the new season. This is a chance to get a sneak peek at where we're going. We'll be working on fencing, gardening, mulching, transplanting trees, constructing an egg mobile, and more. You can lend a hand or just tour the farm. When the work's done, we'll enjoy homemade pizza and beverages for William's 30th birthday.



For more information, contact Crystal Powers at [darbysprings@gmail.com](mailto:darbysprings@gmail.com) or 402.525.6397, or visit us at [www.facebook.com/events/398796486803609](http://www.facebook.com/events/398796486803609).

NSAS provides an extensive list of all workshops, conferences, webinars, and other events designed to educate and support sustainable producers each week through our listserv and [website](http://www.healthyfarms.org). To join the listserv, e-mail [healthyfarms@gmail.com](mailto:healthyfarms@gmail.com).

## NSAS Board of Directors

**Joe Mazour**, Deweese  
*President*

[walnutcreekorganicranch@hotmail.com](mailto:walnutcreekorganicranch@hotmail.com)

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[rita.brhel@gmail.com](mailto:rita.brhel@gmail.com)

**Krista Dittman**, Raymond  
[organicdairy@branchedoakfarm.com](mailto:organicdairy@branchedoakfarm.com)

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[fultonfarms@hotmail.com](mailto:fultonfarms@hotmail.com)

**Martin Kleinschmit**, Hartington  
[martink@hartel.net](mailto:martink@hartel.net)

**Gary Lesoing**, Auburn  
[glesoing2@unlnotes.unl.edu](mailto:glesoing2@unlnotes.unl.edu)

**Ben Schole**, Hooper  
[blschole@yahoo.com](mailto:blschole@yahoo.com)

**Scott Willet**, David City  
[scott.willet@ne.usda.gov](mailto:scott.willet@ne.usda.gov)

**Roger Wilson**, Lincoln  
[rwilson6@unlnotes.unl.edu](mailto:rwilson6@unlnotes.unl.edu)

**Charles Wortmann**, Lincoln  
[cwortman@unlnotes.unl.edu](mailto:cwortman@unlnotes.unl.edu)

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**Laura Demmel**, Grant  
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## NSAS Programs

[Healthy Farms Conference](#), the annual meeting of the NSAS held in February in an Eastern or Central Nebraska community

[Western Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Conference](#), a joint NSAS-University of Nebraska event held annually in the Panhandle

[Farm Beginnings Nebraska](#), a joint NSAS-University of Nebraska 10-week course for beginning farmers and growers

**Nebraska Beginning Farmer Mentorship Program**, connecting beginning/transitioning farmers and growers with mentors knowledgeable in sustainable practices

[Market Nebraska](#), an online interactive map of Nebraska's local foods outlets

[NSAS Memorial Library](#), a collection of books on sustainable practices housed at Ceresco, many of them donated by the family of the late holistic grazing expert Terry Gompert

**Farmer Support Group**, an in-person discussion group for all farmers and growers that meets monthly at Ceresco

**Western Nebraska Fruit and Vegetable Group**, an in-person discussion group for growers in the Panhandle

**Nebraska High Tunnel Project**, workshops and a webinar educating growers on high tunnels

**Farm2School Project**, connecting local foods producers with interested school cafeterias

### PROGRAM UPDATE:

## Nebraska Schools Celebrate Inaugural Farm-to-School Month with NSAS Help

Communities across the country organized a variety of events to celebrate the first National Farm to School Month during October of 2011. The four schools in Nebraska involved in the Nebraska Farm2School pilot project helped promote serving local foods in schools with their own celebrations.

University Of Nebraska Student Coordinators, Micaela Rezac and Amber Carlson, with the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society and University of Nebraska Rural Initiative Farm2School Pilot Project assisted the four pilot schools with their Farm to School Celebrations. Central City Public, Centura Public, Norris Public, and Auburn Public have been serving locally produced fruits and vegetables since school resumed in August of 2011.

Central City and Centura celebrated Farm to School Month by serving up slices of locally grown watermelon, from Helgoths Melons north of Grand Island, to attendees of their respective homecoming football games. Centura also served pumpkin seeds during their elementary school lunch period.

Norris and Auburn served apples to all elementary students for their snack and apple cider to middle and high school students and played apple trivia games. The apples and cider came from Kimmel Orchard in Nebraska City.

Raymond Central Elementary in Ceresco also celebrated National Farm to School month by hosting a Potato Celebration to encourage getting local foods into schools. The elementary classes were treated to a game of Potato Trivia.

Rezac and Carlson held a wrap-up celebration of the Farm2School project with the elementary students at each of the schools by serving cheese from Jisa Cheese near Brainard and summer sausage from Peppers and More Smokehouse of Paxton, along with crackers.

The goal of the Farm2School project is to incorporate local foods into cafeteria meals and food snack programs and to create awareness and education in the classrooms about local foods while creating a new market for small farmers and producers.

The Thompson Company, a foodservice distributor located in Grand Island, is currently offering local cheese from Jisa



### Project Goals:

- To incorporate local foods into cafeteria meals and food snack programs
- To create awareness and education in the classrooms about local foods
- To create a new market for small farmers and producers

Cheese, dairy products from Praireland Dairy near Firth, and Garden Fresh Vegetables from O'Neill to schools and other clientele in their delivery business.

As part of the project, Farm Food Safety Training with Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) was offered in various locations around Nebraska. University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension educators covered topics to help producers enhance worker sanitation, harvesting, handling, packaging, storage, and transportation standards of fresh produce from the farm operation to markets, schools, restaurants, and retail stores

The goal of each GAPs workshop was for participating producers to understand to develop parts of their own farm food safety plan. By completing a farm food safety plan, producers can differentiate themselves in the market place and appeal to many consumers who perceive this training as an added benefit.

Through the course of the project, a toolkit of educational tips and other resources for schools and producers was created and can be found at [http://localfoods.nebraska.edu/nebraska\\_foods/farm2school](http://localfoods.nebraska.edu/nebraska_foods/farm2school).

For more information about Farm2School, contact Patton at [sandyp@conpoint.com](mailto:sandyp@conpoint.com).



Support NSAS!  
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For More Information Contact:

**Kim Mosel: Program Director**

86536 State Spur 45A

Page, NE 68766

402-620-2701

[ociane1@yahoo.com](mailto:ociane1@yahoo.com)

OCIA International: <http://www.ocia.org/>

OCIA Research and Education: <http://www.ociaresearchandeducation.org/>

Contact OCIA R&E to find out more information on micro-grants and scholarships



# OCIA News

Organic Crop Improvement Association  
Nebraska Chapter #1

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402-744-2070

**Joe Roberts**, Axtell  
308-743-2565

## Crop Improvement Committee

**Larry Stanislav**, Linwood  
CHAIR

**Mike Ostry**, Bruno

## Staff

**Kim Mosel**  
PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR  
86536 State Spur 45A  
Page, NE 68766  
402-338-5321  
[ociane1@yahoo.com](mailto:ociane1@yahoo.com)

NEWSLETTER CONTACT:

**Liz Sarno**, Concord  
UNL Extension Educator &  
Organic Project Coordinator  
402-309-0944  
[www.esarno2@unl.edu](mailto:www.esarno2@unl.edu)

## OCIA Research & Education, Inc.

**Angela Tunink**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
1340 N. Cotner Blvd.  
Lincoln, NE 68505  
402-477-2323, Ext. 320  
[atunink@ocia.org](mailto:atunink@ocia.org)  
[www.ocia.org/RE](http://www.ocia.org/RE)

## Thinking of Transitioning to an Organic Farming System? Here's How...

There are many reasons to consider transitioning your farm to organic production.

Marketing organic crops have become easier due to consumer demand continuing to grow for all organic products: meat, milk, grains, vegetables, and packaged foods.

Right now, farmers can take advantage of the good crop prices to help them through the process of transitioning to an organic system. During transition, crops cannot be sold as organic but may qualify as natural products or be sold in non-GMO markets.

Two of the top challenges for farmers considering transitioning are the record-keeping and weed control. However, neither of these should deter you from transitioning if you consider that the cost of off-farm inputs will continue to increase and the development of better equipment for weed management.

Other reasons to consider farming organically are the public's interest in conserving nonrenewable resources, access to high-value markets, and a boost in farm income allowing the possibility of the next generation to continue farming.

### Incentives Available

There are several government programs to help farmers through the transition period.

The Natural Resource Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program, [www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/EQIP\\_Organic\\_Initiative.html](http://www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/EQIP_Organic_Initiative.html), offers support to organic farmers.

The Nebraska Department of Agriculture has funds available to help Nebraska farmers pay for costs associated with National Organic Program (NOP) certification. For information on this program, con-

tact Steve Martin at 800-422-6692 or [steve.martin@nebraska.gov](mailto:steve.martin@nebraska.gov).

### Do You Need to Be Certified?

To sell agricultural products as organic in the United States., farmers must follow the regulations of the United States Department of Agriculture's NOP.

Organic production is a federally regulated program of the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service to assure consumers that the integrity of the organic product has been maintained throughout its production and marketing process, and that the operation was inspected by a neutral third party.

### The Transition Requirement

To start, your land needs to go through a 36-month transition period of not using any prohibited substances listed in the NOP regulations (NOP §205.600-§205.607).

Land that is coming out of the Conservation Reserve Program may qualify immediately for organic production if you can provide an affidavit that no prohibited substances on the NOP list were used.



### Find a Certifier

We recommend that you find a certifier to work with you during the transition period. Your certifier will help you with what is allowed under the NOP standards. Farmers can select and work with a certifying agent of their choice, though it is best to work with a certifier nearby to help keep down the cost of inspections. To find a local certifier, go to [www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0](http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0) and click on "National Organic Program" in the lefthand sidebar, and then scroll down to the list options under "Organic Certification & Accreditation."

In additional to helping you understand

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# OCIA News

## Organic Crop Improvement Association Nebraska Chapter #1

and follow the NOP organic production standards, certifiers inform farmers about the organic certification process and provide a third-party inspector.

Certifying agents are not allowed to directly provide technical information to farmers and are not organic production consultants or marketing agents.

### Transition Time is Learning Time

The three-year transition period is not only for your land, but for you to learn the cultural practices needed to farm organically. Organic farmers must learn to approach agricultural production in a different manner. For example, farmers will need to be more aware of the natural world to monitor for and control pests. To increase soil fertility and organic matter, farmers must use crop rotations, green manure, and livestock manure or plant materials. Farmers must learn to balance profit, as well as practice environmental stewardship.

Because there is no single recommended cultural practice to follow, farmers must adopt a system that fits their eco-region, the amount of available labor, and their own economic goals.

Organic farming is considered a continual learning process.

### The OSP

You must have a plan. During the transition period, you need to keep track of your inputs. This includes seeds; whether you are a market gardener or commodity farmer, you must keep all your seed tags and that includes cover crops. Save these seed tags, as you will be asked for them during your first inspection when you are ready to certify your crops.

Your certifier will provide you with a form to develop a detailed Organic System

Plan (OSP) for your operation, outlining your cultural practices, crop rotations, soil fertility and pest control strategies, planned input usage, and recordkeeping system.

Start working with the OSP right from the start of your transition; that way you will get familiar with using the forms.

Working with a certifier helps you avoid mistakes that may cost you time and money. Ask your certifier about any inputs you are intending to use, and get his or her approval in writing. Recordkeeping helps farmers track their operational expenses

and provides a record for inspectors, certifying agents, and organic consumers to protect the integrity of the organic product.

After the required farm OSP and documentation records are submitted to the certifying agent, along with applicable fees, the operation's file is reviewed. If additional records or documents are needed, the certifier will

notify the farmer.

Once the operation's file is complete and demonstrates the ability to comply, the certifying agent will assign an organic inspector, who will in turn schedule the on-site inspection. The owner or an authorized and knowledgeable representative of the operation must be present at the farm site during the inspection.

### The Inspection

The inspector's role is to act as a neutral party to observe the organic operation and to report their findings to the certifying agent. The inspector will verify that the OSP accurately reflects the practices used, and that prohibited substances are or have not been applied. Inspectors are not allowed to act as an advisor or consultant but can answer questions about the organic standards. They are also bound by confidentiality agreement not to discuss an op-

eration with any other party except the certifying agent or to divulge proprietary information.

The certifying agent's role is to determine each farm's compliance with the NOP organic standards. If the operation is in compliance, a certificate of organic certification is issued to that farm. If the operation is not in compliance, denial may be in order, but usually a notice is sent with a letter of the requirements that must be corrected within a determined time frame.

### Requirements to Stay Certified

Once a farm is granted an organic certificate, products produced under the organic system plan may be marketed and labeled as "organic."

Annually, the certified organic operation must update its OSP, pay the associated fees to the certification agency, and undergo an inspection.

### For More Information

This information should give you an idea of how to start transitioning your farm to an organic farming system.

Remember, you have three years to transition your land and to start to learn how to manage an organic farming system. We recommend that, during this time, you find a mentor—someone who has experience in farming organically in your area—and that you attend as many farm tours and workshops you can about organic farming. The University of Nebraska has various people that can help out with some of your fertility and weed management issues. For more information, go to <http://organic.unl.edu>.

In addition, the university is working on a series of Nebguides with more detailed information on organic production; they will be available this year.

For more information about the organic certification process, organic farming, or locating a mentor or workshop, contact Liz Sarno, UNL Extension organic specialist, at 402-309-0944 or [esarno2@unl.edu](mailto:esarno2@unl.edu).

The three-year transition period is not only for your land, but for you to learn the cultural practices needed to farm organically.

## NSAS Member News



### New Baby in Brhel Family

Nathan Michael was born September 5, 2011, to Rita Brhel of Fairfield. He was welcomed home by dad Mike and sisters, Rachel and Emily. Nathan started off at 8 pounds 1 ounce, and he is now a healthy 18 pounds 4 ounces.

As for the farm, we are getting ready for spring lambing, planting the garden, and selling the influx of eggs that comes with the summer months. We've heard some interest in our vegetables and will be exploring the feasibility of starting a market garden or CSA. We have our hands full as it is, so there's no hurry.

Share what's going on in your lives, your communities, and on your farms. We are especially interested in:

- Happenings on your farm or ranch, such as research/experiments you're trying, new practices, varieties or breeds you're putting into place, fields days, successes and lessons learned.
- Community or family events, such as marriages, graduations, births, community activities, and educational pursuits.

Send contributions to [healthyfarms@gmail.com](mailto:healthyfarms@gmail.com) or by postal mail to: NSAS, 414 CR 15, Ceresco, NE 68017.

## Thank You, NSAS Supporters!

NSAS would like to recognize the following individuals and businesses who donated items or their time to make the NSAS fundraising auction at the 2012 Rural Advantage and Healthy Farms Conference in Nebraska City in February a great success. We raised more than \$5,000, thanks to your support!

Acres USA  
 Bluff Valley Farm (Thiltges Family)  
 Branched Oak Farm  
 Buy Fresh, Buy Local Nebraska  
 Common Good Farm  
 Terry Gompert Family  
 Ingrid Kirst  
 Jim Crandall  
 Matt & Elaine Cranford  
 Chuck & Barb Francis  
 Frontier Cooperative Company  
 Grain Place Foods  
 Bill Hawkins  
 Slow Food Nebraska  
 Jim Hersh  
 Tom Thomas  
 Jo Lowe  
 Bread & Cup  
 Blue River Hybrids  
 Lucky Bucket Brewing (Zac Triemert)  
 Liz Sarno  
 Fulton Farms (Kevin Fulton)  
 ShadowBrook Farm (Kevin & Charuth Loth)  
 The Mary Riepma Ross Media Arts Center  
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 Darby Springs Farm (William & Crystal Powers)  
 Walnut Creek Organic (Rich & Joe Mazour)  
 Nebraska SARE  
 Platte Valley John Deere Implement  
 Adam Schole  
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 Denise Trine  
 Schafer Fisheries  
 Whiskey Run Creek  
 Cortland Ales (Sam Spilker)  
 Ewe and Us  
 Harvest Health & Coffee  
 Martin & Linda Kleinschmit  
 Jessica Jones  
 Whitmer Welding Supplies

# USDA's VAPG Benefits Small Family Farms

United States Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan announced on Feb. 3 that USDA had selected 298 recipients in 44 states and Puerto Rico to receive business development assistance through the Value-Added Producer Grant (VAPG) program.

"In his State of the Union address, President Obama was clear that we need to do more to create jobs and promote economic growth. These projects will provide financial returns and help create jobs for agricultural producers, businesses, and families across the country," Merrigan said. "This funding will promote small business expansion and entrepreneurship opportunities by providing local businesses with access capital, technical assistance and new markets for products and services."

For example, Living Water Farms is a three-year-old family company that focuses on the production of hydroponic greens for specialty markets in the Midwest. Located in Strawn, Ill., three generations of the Kilgus family are part of a group called Stewards of the Land which was organized to market produce from small farms. The hydroponic complex was developed to supply fresh produce year-round. The current market includes Illinois supermarkets, restaurants in Chicago and St. Louis, Mo., and a Midwest college food service program. The grant will help them evaluate their brand and expand distribution to other restaurants, specialty retail and institutional outlets.

One of the examples of how an award can make an impact is

Agriberry, located near Mechanicsville, Va. Agriberry is the dream of Anne and Chuck Geyer whose vision is to establish a consumer supported summer berry farm and become an agricultural training facility for first-time workers. They realized the region's demand for an assortment of fresh, local, seasonal berries and fruits. With the assistance of a working capital value-added grant, Agriberry has now expanded to more than 35 acres of red raspberries and other fruit. They hire a number of local workers each growing season.

Green Mountain Organic Creamery in North Ferrisburgh, Vt., will receive a working capital grant to market certified organic, bottled pasteurized milk, butter, ice cream and other dairy products.

Owners Cheryl and John DeVos founded the dairy to provide local, organic dairy products to the community and throughout the Northeast. Green Mountain was recognized as the Vermont Dairy of the Year in 2011.

The Value-Added Producer Grants announced total more than \$40.2 million. Funds may be used for feasibility studies or business plans, working capital for marketing value-added agricultural products and for farm-based renewable energy projects. Eligible applicants include independent producers, farmer and rancher cooperatives, agricultural producer groups, and majority-controlled producer-based business ventures. Value-added products are created when a producer increases the consumer value of an agricultural commodity in

This funding will promote small business expansion and entrepreneurship opportunities...

## 2012 Nebraska VAPG Awardees

Five Nebraska projects were selected to be funded through USDA's VAPG:

- **Knotted Wood Distillery** of Hickman received \$49,950 for marketing support of locally produced distilled brand whiskey made from locally grown corn, wheat, and milo. The product will be marketed locally in Nebraska to retail outlets, restaurants, and end-users.
- **Robinette Farms** of Martell received \$24,944 to support the marketing of locally produced vegetables to retail food establishments, wholesale food providers, and consumers. The funds will be used to develop an online procurement system for ordering directly from Robinette's.
- **Feather River Vineyards** of North Platte received \$49,998 to assist in the marketing of the winery. Feather River wants to expand its sales in Kearney, Hastings, Grand Island, Omaha, and Lincoln.
- **Nebraska Waters** of Plainview received \$300,000 to promote its locally grown trout throughout Nebraska. The trout are grown on their farm near Plainview.
- **Hollenbeck Farms** near Lincoln received \$258,250 to market locally grown, all-natural beef raised on the farm. Currently, Hollenbeck is selling to local farmers markets and local retail outlets. The funds will help increase its customer base and increase the number of beef processed and delivered to the consumers.

For a complete list of recipients receiving grants, go to [www.rurdev.usda.gov/SupportDocuments/rd-vapq012012.pdf](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/SupportDocuments/rd-vapq012012.pdf).

the production or processing stage.

USDA, through its Rural Development mission area, administers and manages housing, business and community infrastructure and facility programs through a national network of state and local offices. Rural Development has an active portfolio of more than \$155 billion in affordable loans and loan guarantees. These programs are designed to improve the economic stability of rural communities, businesses, residents, farmers and ranchers and improve the quality of life in rural America.

Further information on rural programs is available at a local

USDA Rural Development office or by visiting USDA Rural Development's web site at [www.rurdev.usda.gov](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov).



Select NSAS to raise money for us while you search or shop [online!](#)

By Rita Brhel



## Profitability vs. Affordability

Some consumers like to complain about the cost of farmer-direct products when compared to what they can find at their nearby grocery store, at least those new to buying local foods.

And especially in this economic climate, producers may be tempted to lower their prices in order to “compete” with this mindset.

Big mistake, says Michael Rozyne, executive director of [Red Tomato](#), a Massachusetts-based food broker that works to open up markets for local producers while ensuring them a fair price. His work is part farmer advocacy and part consumer education.

What local foods producers need to remember, Rozyne said, is they aren’t even in the same category as the national brands that sell their food products through grocery chains. Besides doing business differently—local producers skip the middle man to sell their farm-fresh meat, eggs, and produce directly to consumers—their products can’t compare in freshness and quality.

In reality, local producers and big box stores don’t even have the same customers. Consumers of local products are buying the higher quality and freshness, as well as the privilege of knowing where their food comes from and how it was grown. They understand that the higher price tag connotes a different product than that in the store.

“Affordability is largely about price, but not entirely,” Rozyne said. “There’s product choice, location and access, customer

service, marketing language, the culture, cleanliness, and freshness and quality. It’s the overall experience.”

### The Cost-Price Squeeze

The easiest way to define the cost-price squeeze is the pressure producers feel in trying to price their food products in order to glean a profit but yet remain affordable to consumers. Cost refers to the cost of production, and price pertains to the price that consumers are asked to pay for the product.

“The costs are going up faster, sometimes much faster, than the price the grower gets back,” Rozyne said. “Economically, this is called the cost-price squeeze, and the squeeze is sometimes unbearable.”

Rozyne has been farming and selling food products locally since 1982. During this time, he’s learned one thing for sure: “Pennies matter. Pennies per pound matter to growers.”

Take a box of apples. In a big box store, this box of apples might sell for \$20. What consumers don’t realize is that all of the costs that go into that box of apples—from trucking to packaging to advertising and everything in-between—are taken out of that \$20, including what the producer receives.

“We’re left with very little,” said Vermont apple orchard owner Barney Hodges, who works with Red Tomato.

Producers who sell to national brands get a lot of downward pressure from above to lower their prices; producers who try to

sell their product for too much won’t be able to sell. In this business model, the market is ruled by supply and demand, rather than by providing a fair price to producers.

But on a roadside stand or a farmers’ market table, this box might sell for \$58. The difference is, this locally grown apple box pays a producer enough to not only cover the cost of production but to give him a profit margin to provide a living for his family. But consumers can’t be deceived: The local grower might get \$20 of that \$58 price tag, but the rest—the remaining \$38—goes toward the trucking, packaging, etc. And when it comes to the local foods producer, this \$38 is coming out of the producer’s pocket because he is doing it all.

In this business model, the pressure comes up from the bottom—from the consumers who want a quality product but who are accustomed to the grocery store model, where inexpensiveness and convenience trump a fair price to the producer, said Hodges.

“The truth is, everyone works hard for their money,” he said.

### What is a Fair Price?

There are two components that go into calculating a fair price:

1. A fair price exceeds the cost of production.
2. A fair price enables profitability.

Profitability means that there is revenue after taking out the cost of production. Profitability implies that the leftover amount of cash at the end of the season is sizable to more than mere spending change—that it has the ability for a

Affordability is largely about price, but not entirely. It’s the overall experience.

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producer to making a living to provide for his family or to substantially supplement other income.

“As a farm, first and foremost, we want to be around next year,” Hodges said. “If we’re around next year, we can buy a new tractor or we can get more food to the local community. Profitability means different things to different people, but we want to be around year in and year out and pass the business along to our kids. We want to be able to provide more long-term jobs in our town – we need packers, we need truckers, that sort of thing.”

No matter how tempting, Rozyne advises producers to not drop their prices to compete with the grocery store. Demanding a fair price goes beyond even making a profit for the producer—it communicates to the consumer that the locally grown product is better, that it is of higher quality and freshness, than its supermarket counterparts. By lowering the price, consumers can actually take this action to mean that a local product isn’t a quality product and opt to buy at the store instead.

“Having excellent, high quality, really high-quality products—this translates into profitability,” Hodges said. “People do want to buy from us.”

John Fisk, executive director of the National Good Food Network out of Arlington, Va., said that producers need to consider who their customer is. Those who buy local foods are middle to higher income class. This is why local foods systems in Nebraska seem to work better near population centers like Lincoln and Omaha—because this is where the typical consumer of local foods resides.

“Research shows that low income populations won’t buy fresh, healthy foods even if they are more affordable than convenience foods,” Fisk said.

### Keeping It Affordable

Charging a fair price need not mean that affordability has to be compromised. To keep the price low enough to entice consumers, and to still see a profit in both the good but especially the tough years, producers have to become masters of business management, Rozyne said. Efficiency is a

win-win situation for everyone. This means that they are profiting as much as possible from saving money, and not relying solely on the customer price to guarantee cash flow.

“Each year that we started doing more of these things [improving efficiency], we were seeing more gross revenue,” Hodges said. “It was easy to grow the business.”

Here are a few tips to local foods producers in fine-tuning the way they do business:

- **Volume determines business type**

- Low-margin businesses need a larger volume to be profitable. Smaller businesses are more suited for direct sales than trying to get into stores, because the latter requires more infrastructure and therefore more investment. But the more of a market a producer can supply, the more profit potential he has.

- **Plan the volume for the market**

- Small businesses can increase their bargaining power and reduce their waste, which always costs money, by avoiding too much or too little supply for the demand. Producers need to match their supply with their market demand. If they end up with too much supply, they have to reduce their price to get it sold; if they end up with too little supply, they’ll end up with unhappy customers who don’t get what they were promised. The focus should be on moving product, not selling the excess.

- **Customers like long-term relationships**

- Small businesses need to plan to stick with their followers for the long term, even in tough years when weather or disease ruins crops. Producers count on customers for sales, and customers want to be able to count on particular producers. Jumping from one market discourages that relationship. In addition, customers respond best to a producer who is genuinely interested in more than making a buck: Trust, respect, transparency, and good communication go a long

ways in securing and keeping customers.

- **Streamline logistics** – Making the workings on the farm run smoother can save enough money to add a couple to several dollars of profit per case sold. Profit lost in poorly managed logistics is more of a deal for small producers than it is for large-scale operations.

- **Insist on fast payment** – Producers are in the business of growing food, not providing loans, so they need to make sure that payment is received quickly. Large businesses make it a habit to delay payment by three or six months; they’re operating on credit. This is not sustainable for small businesses. No more than a month should go by without payment, shorter if producers are on a shorter cycle of paying for inputs.

- **Sell everything** – Many producers only sell their top choice food products, but they’re losing an opportunity by holding back their second-grade products. For example, Karen Runkel of Lil’ Ladybug Greenhouse and Gardens near Hay Springs sells her cracked tomatoes at a reduced price to people who want to can sauce. By repackaging his smaller apples as “kid-sized” fruit, Hodges was able to capture a whole new market and sell what was once considered a second-rate apple at a first-rate price.

- **Marketing goes beyond the product** – It’s a given that the food product needs to be clean and pretty, but there’s a lot more that goes into marketing than that. Consider the farm, the table at the farmers’ market, the roadside stand, the physical appearance of the producer, the package, the label – each factors into an overall impression of the product. Customers are willing to pay more for a cluster of grapes picked by the producer’s own hand, the one they shake every Saturday across the attractive table display at the farmers’ market.

Join the discussion:

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