Minutes: Meeting of the Wisconsin Organic Advisory Council  
February 6, 2007

Members Present:  Bob Wills, Bonnie Wideman, David Engel, Harriet Behar, Jerry McGeorge, Jim Munch, Tricia Bross, Mike Hansen, Margaret Bert-Middelstadt, Christine Mason, Rich Lange

Members Absent: Paulette Bradley, represented by Mike Peters, WOMA President

Interagency team present: Pat Murphy, Russ Raeder, Molly Jahn, Carla Wright, Irv Possin, Kevin Shelley, Jim Gibson, Jennifer Heaton-Amrhein, Laura Paine, Erin Silva

I. Council members shared introductions.

II. Introductions and Roles of Inter-Agency Members
    Interagency members introduced themselves and described how their positions relate to the advisory council.

A. Kevin Shelly (UW-Cooperative Extension Representative)  
    Kevin works with the Nutrient and Pest Management Program at University Wisconsin and is serving as the UW-Cooperative Extension Representative.  Kevin is involved with several organic research projects at the UW.  He also farms organically just east of Madison.

B. Pat Murphy (NRCS Representative)  
    NRCS is responsible for providing technical and financial assistance to private landowners who are interested in planning and implementing conservation practices.  WI NRCS recognized organic agriculture producers as partners who have an interest in environmental protection.  Pat’s role with the council will be to learn more about organic production techniques and to integrate this information into NRCS technical standards, guidance and programs.

    An example of an issue that NRCS must address is organic producers have often utilized tillage as weed control strategy.  NRCS has encountered situations where soil productivity and/or soil health under an organic production system was being damaged by excessive levels of tillage.  It is his goal to provide our conservation planners the information they need to be able to offer an organic producer options that will reduce soil disturbance and weed pressure while remaining within the organic production protocols.

C. Irv Possin (WI Department of Commerce)  
    The Wisconsin Department of Commerce Dairy 2020 Program was started in the early 1900's to grow Wisconsin's dairy industry in responds to several years of decline.  The Dairy 2020 Council like the Organic Advisory Council evaluated what the industry needed to do to be more viable, competitive and profitable.  Business planning was identified as a critical need and Commerce offered their existing Early Planning Grant Program for manufacturing businesses to dairy producers as the Dairy
2020 Early Planning Grant Program. This has assisted over 900 dairy producers with cost sharing dollars to hire a consultant to develop business plans and feasibility studies for new start-ups, modernization, or changing the type of dairy operation. The Milk Volume Production (MVP) loan program started in 2003 offering equity gap financing with favorable terms to assist in the purchase of cows for new dairy start-ups and herd expansions. Today, these loans are made to qualifying dairy producers that increase their herd from 40 to 400 cows. Commerce's goal is to create jobs thru the growth of cow numbers and generating value added dairy products such as in organic milk.

D. Carla Wright (WI DNR)
Carla Wright is an Agriculture Specialist with the Cooperative Environmental Assistance Bureau at the WI-DNR. At the DNR she manages the department’s Environmental Damage Compensation Awards program and is the facilitator for the Department’s statewide Land Use Team. Also, she works with the DNR’s “Green Tier” Program, a program that creates co-benefits for businesses aspiring to differentiate themselves by systematically delivering superior environmental performance. Carla owns and manages a 76-acre farm in northern Dane County, Wisconsin. The farm includes cropland, a pine plantation, woods, and numerous prairie remnants. All of the farm’s 35 acres of cropland are classified as highly erodible and are no longer being cropped; instead, it is being restored to its native prairie ecosystem.

E. Russ Raeder (FMA)
Russ is a State Agricultural Program Specialist with USDA's Farm Service Agency. FSA administers Federal farm programs such the Noninsured Assistance Program. This program provides catastrophic level crop insurance for crops not covered by the standard Federal Crop Insurance which includes a number of organic crops produced in the state. FSA administers the Farm Loan Program that provides direct and guaranteed loans to producers to cover farm purchases and operating expenses. FSA provides beginning farmer loans, rural youth loans and emergency assistance loans. The agency also administers such programs as the Conservation Reserve Program, Direct and Countercyclical Program, Commodity Loans, Market Loan Assistance, Loan Deficiency Payments, and Farm Storage Facility Loan program.

F. Molly Jahn (UW-CALS)
Molly Jahn arrived in August 2006 as the new dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) at UW-Madison. Dean Jahn has a strong history in organic research. As a plant breeder, she has worked in the Northeast on issues concerning organic variety development, farmer participatory breeder programs, and organic seed. Dean Jahn has spearheaded projects such as the Public Seed Initiative and the Organic Seed Partnership, projects that focus on bringing high quality, regionally specific varieties to organic growers.

G. Jim Gibson (WI Technical College System)
Jim Gibson is the Educational Director of the Agriculture and Natural Resource Programs of the Wisconsin Technical College System. The WI Technical College System has a strong interest in organic agriculture education as an increasing number of people from across the state have requested coursework in this area.

H. Jennifer Heaton-Amrhein
Jennifer Heaton Amrhein is the agency liaison for the agricultural resource management division, which includes the land and water conservation, agrichemical management, and plant industry programs. She provides policy and budget support to the division's senior management, and serves on the agency's policy team. Her role as an advisor to the council is to help the Council members connect to the right people at DATCP so they can address issues of mutual concern.

I. Erin Silva (co-coordinator for council, UW-CALS)
Erin Silva is an Organic Production Specialist with UW-CALS. She arrived in Wisconsin in August 2006 with a joint appointment in the Agronomy Department and Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems. Her research programs focus on organic production of agronomic crops. In addition, she is responsible for coordinating organic research and education programs in the college.

J. Laura Paine (Co-coordinator for council, WI DATCP)
Laura Paine is Grazing and Organic Agriculture Specialist for the DATCP Division of Agricultural Development. In addition to coordinating council activities, it is her responsibility to work with the organic sector on business development and farmer support. She coordinates the federal organic certification cost-share program when these funds are available.

III. Laura Paine gave a brief history of the Advisory Council
The Organic Advisory Council was one of four recommendations of the Governor's Organic Agriculture Task Force, which met in 2004 and 2005. The four recommendations of the task force were the establishment of organic agriculture specialists at DATCP and UW and the establishment of a permanent private sector organic advisory council and an interagency working group.

IV. Statement from Secretary Nilsestuen
Secretary Nilsestuen welcomed the council and interagency team and talked about two initiatives the Department is working on: changing the ban on interstate meat sales from state inspected plants and his Working Lands Initiative.

V. Discussion of Council Administration
a. Term limits for council members – members discussed the possibility of the three year term limits to begin subsequent to the first year of the council in order to jump-start the council’s activities
1. it was agreed that the three-year terms would begin in 2008
b. Election of chair and vice-chair
   1. Mike Hansen and Harriet Behar were nominated for the position of chair. It was agreed that they would serve in the position of co-chairs.
   1. Christine Mason agreed to serve as council secretary
c. Freedom to email other council members and share information via email was discussed. It was agreed that agendas for upcoming meetings would be shared via email.
d. Members discussed that delegates from the interagency groups should attend all council meetings to ensure that ideas from the council would reach the appropriate agency
   1. Jerry McGeorge suggested that a report from the interagency team should be a standing agenda item for the council meetings
   2. Mike Hansen suggested that the agency reps should make an effort to attend the UMOFC to better understand the industry
e. Laura Paine shared some results of her 2006 survey of organic growers
   1. Integrity issues listed as a top priority for organic growers
f. Discussion of Council website
   1. Need for website for Council
      a. Links to new information
      b. Who should maintain website?
         1. Laura Paine is working with Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems on website for organic agriculture
   2. Website development could be supported by council’s small budget
g. Council Communication
   1. Mike Hansen—get information from council to greater organic community
      a. website, subcommittees, publicity (news releases)
VI. Discussion of previously identified issues for the council
1. Consumers do not adequately understand what the term organic means or why they should consider buying organic products. The task of educating the public is insurmountable for individual WI farmers or processors. Efforts are necessary to educate consumers about the definition, value, and benefits of certified organic products. Information should focus on the benefits to the environment, human health, and rural communities
2. Smaller organic farmers, particularly those who are growing fresh produce, have difficulty getting their products to market and finding markets for non-vegetable crops grown in rotation. Smaller grain/corn/soybean farmers have difficulty putting together semiloads so they can ship to the best markets.
3. The institutions of higher education in Wisconsin do not adequately support students in their endeavor to learn about organic agriculture and processing. The same institutions do not provide the research support required to significantly grow the organic industry within the state.
4. Wisconsin processing regulations make it difficult for medium-sized processing plants, especially specialty products, to exist because the regulations the regulatory needs of large processing plants.
5. There is inadequate small processing capacity dairy, meat, vegetables and fruit.
6. There is inadequate exchange of information among existing organic farmers, and between transitioning or aspiring organic farmers and existing farmers.
7. Transitioning to organic requires the new organic farmer to have a substantial and different knowledge base than is required in conventional farming. Established farmers also find that some part of their operations is often in some stage of transition, requiring continuous learning.
8. GMOs in neighboring fields contaminate organic crops, resulting in the loss of the organic premium.
9. Products are being labeled or sold as organic in Wisconsin that are not certified organic, or inappropriate procedures are being followed that may decertify the product.
10. Farmers are sometimes confused as to whether specific materials are allowed in certified organic production.
11. Processors, contemplating organic certification, experience difficulty finding the information they need to determine the requirements for certification; and existing organic processors have difficulty keeping apprised of changes in the organic regulations.
12. The complexities of organic marketing are difficult for producers or processors wishing to market organically.
   A. All these issues were still identified as pertinent to the industry in 2007.

VII. Current issues for the council
   A. Mike Hansen– Interstate meat sales
      1. Would it help the Secretary if the council developed a coordinated effort?
   B. Harriet Behar– it would benefit the council to have a better understanding of the policy “cycles”
      1. example- NRCS program priorities and decisions, state budgets, federal earmarks
   C. Pat Murphy agreed to look more into county land conservation programs on a state-specific level and to make a request for a seat to be made available on the State Technical Committee for an Organic Advisory Council member.
   D. Discussion of how documentation of impacts of interagency team would be crucial
   E. Issue of Integrity in Organic Labeling
      1. training of other food inspectors (meat inspectors, etc) to be aware of what is organic”
         a. educate people doing enforcement
      2. State oversight of organic label and state’s legal ability to pursue mislabeling
         a. suggested that a speaker from DATCP be brought in to discuss issues (Jim Rabbitt)
   F. Discussion of strengthening “WI Organic”
      1. “Buy Local” campaign
      2. CA- registers everyone that is active, puts that money toward enforcement
         a. should we initiate registration program for compliance?
      3. “Organic Plus” labeling to include other practices beyond organic
G. Earmarked funds
   1. Discussed possibility of obtaining earmarked funds for research grants, 
education programs (networks), technical assistance program 
   a. Need to start contacting appropriate individuals
H. Jim Munch discussed the need to consider the organic consumer as the driver 
of the market
   1. Must have a consumer component woven through our activities
I. Jerry McGeorge inquired as to the council’s boundaries on the discussion of 
certain issues
   a. Pat Murphy – do we need to have a consistent message as council 
      members, or can individuals speak out?
   b. Jen – parameters of the council’s collective voice – the group is an 
      advising group to the secretary
J. Harriet Behar – in order to have most impact and efficiency, should look for 
linkages
   a. collaborators to get things done (ie local foods initiative, etc)
K. Carla – recommendations from the advisory council should be carefully crafted 
for specific audiences to whom the suggestions are being made 
   a. Who is responsible for drafting these suggestions? Council or 
      interagency members?
L. Discussion of how to hear voice of greater organic community
   1. Links to website 
   2. Post minutes on in order to generate discussion
M. Margaret Bert offered possibility of providing records of owner-shopper 
surveys from Outpost in order to obtain better picture of what the consumer 
has in mind regarding organic
N. Harriet Behar discussed the development of an organic network in WI
   1. Involvement of experiment stations – host of field days 
   2. Separate networks by types of operation - recognize different sectors 
      of the industry
O. Obtain data from certification agencies to get better picture of industry
   1. Effort to register all certifiers in the state 
   2. Capture the full scale of organic sales
P. Recruitment of “almost organic” to certification

Minutes submitted by E. Silva