On January 28th, the Organic Advisory Council met in the WDATCP board room in Madison. We were able to learn more about Wisconsin’s Working Lands Initiative and how it may fit into organic agriculture situations. Keith Foye and Coreen Fallat from the Ag Resource Management division along with Vicki Elkin from American Farmland Trust &Gathering Waters Land Trust presented the initiative to the council.

Wisconsin is currently losing farmland at the rate of 30,000 acres per year. The working Land’s Initiative is dedicated to preserving and maintaining the state’s working ag land. The high rate of loss of farmland to development and fragmentation is a threat to the state’s 51 Billion dollar per year ag revenue.

As a result of numerous listening sessions, the Working Lands committee has developed a set of recommendations for preserving ag land. Each county in Wisconsin will receive $30,000 to help update county Farmland Preservation Plans.

The recommendations also include three additional types of programs. The first is an overhaul of the existing farmland preservation tax credit program; the second is an agricultural enterprise zone program, and the third is a purchase of development rights program or Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE) program.

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Organic Cost Share Program Rolled Out

1,249 application packets were sent to organic growers throughout the state of Wisconsin in late January for reimbursement of 2008 certification costs. The addresses for these letters were provided by organic certifiers.

Organic certification cost share funds were approved in the 2008 farm bill. The purpose of the program is to help organic farmers and processors pay for the cost of organic certification. The program reimburses organic growers 75% of the expenses incurred for certification up to a maximum of $750 per year. To be certified, an organic grower must annually pay a certification fee, in addition to inspection and user fees.

This is the second farm bill that contains funding for this highly successful program. Wisconsin ran out of funding allocated in the 2002 farm bill in 2005. But based on past participation and the fact that certified organic farm numbers keep rising, there is every reason to believe that the cost share program will have more participation than ever.

The funds from USDA are administered by the Wisconsin DATCP. For more information, contact Laura Paine. All paperwork must be returned to Laura by March 31st, and her office will be responsible for distributing the funds.

Additional funding will be made available in late spring for 2009 certification costs.
OAC Will Comment on Farm Bill Provisions

The 2008 Farm Bill has several programs that can provide support for organic growers. USDA Interagency Team members have expressed interest in having the Council provide recommendations as USDA begins implementing these programs. Pat Murphy of the NRCS has been a supportive, active participant in Organic Advisory activities. Pat will work closely with the Government and Legal Affairs committee as they develop comments on key areas of the new farm bill. In particular, the EQIP program has potential to provide significant benefits especially for farmers transitioning to organic production. Policies for these programs will be set at both the federal and state levels. A state level rule that the council is interested in reviewing is one that limits organic grower eligibility for cost share to $50/acre up to 40 acres. The new farm bill allows a maximum of $20,000 per year or $80,000 over four years. The council would support state adoption of this new policy once questions about the acreage limitations are understood. We will investigate the possibility of creating a statewide pool of funds for organic practices similar to that set up for manure storage. In addition, we’ll consider commenting on the higher rates charged to organic farmers for federally supported crop insurance. We will hold special subcommittee meetings to address these topics by the March comment deadline.

UW College of Agriculture Changes May Affect CIAS

Heidi Zoerg from CALS Dean Molly Jahn’s office spoke to the OAC during the January meeting to explain some of the changes being considered by the college in the coming year. Budget constraints, efficiencies, and new initiatives are at the top of the University’s priority list this year. Heidi explained that CALS may reconfigure or dissolve the 20 year old Center to bring it in line with current needs and financial constraints. At present CIAS hosts the OAC’s web-site, so we plan to stay in close contact with the University to ensure that the Council’s communication needs remain met.

Both Heidi and UW Council Rep Erin Silva assured Council members that organic initiatives will remain an important priority regardless of the changes that are made. Several multi-disciplinary research programs are in progress, suggesting that organic research needs could be met with a broader focus across many departments within CALS.

UW Organic Field Day

The University of Wisconsin will be hosting its second annual organic field day at the Arlington Research Station on August 26, 2009.

Focus areas will include: Food storage and safety, diagnostic production issues, livestock issues, and GAP certification.

Field tours for the day will highlight organic fertility management, organic no-till research, and cover cropping.

More details on the August field day will be coming soon.
The agricultural enterprise zone program elicited a number of comments and questions. This program will allow groups of contiguous farms to work together with local governments to put in place protections for maintaining the agricultural viability of these selected areas within their jurisdictions. This is a key area of opportunity for organics in the state. If organic representation is able to sit on many of these county planning committees we have opportunity to show how an organic market farm or a grazing beef herd may be the perfect neighbor to a more developed area of the county. These kinds of farms may perhaps be a good buffer zone between the urban and agricultural areas.

Currently, the farmland preservation program is only available to farmers with a minimum of 35 acres. Council members expressed interest in seeing this acreage limit reduced to allow inclusion of viable CSA or fresh market organic gardeners who farm smaller acreages.

The Organic Advisory Council has 12 members on 3 year rotating terms. Original members were selected by a committee of the original Organic Task Force after a review of applications and letters of support. Secretary Nilsestuen appointed council members based on their recommendations.

In October, the National Organic Program released its proposed pasture rule revisions for public comment. With the importance of pasture and dairy within the state’s organic community, the council felt it was important for Wisconsin to respond to the proposed changes.

The council supports the general thrust of the changes which create a clear requirement for not only access to pasture but for fresh pasture forage being a significant portion of ruminants’ diets.

However, the council felt that the NOP built into the rule a level of rigidity that would make it difficult for Wisconsin farmers to comply. The Council recommended that the rule be modified to accommodate climatic conditions that preclude pasture growth such as winter or drought. We also encouraged the NOP to allow temporary use of concrete yards or feeding pads for periods when cattle access to pasture would cause significant damage to the sod. While we agree with the intent to require significant access to pasture for ruminant livestock, we felt that the requirement for 365 day/year access was unreasonable under Wisconsin climate conditions.

Review of public comments may take several months and a final rule may not be in place for a year or more.

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Council Submits Comments on Organic Pasture Rule

Serving on the Organic Advisory Council

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This Spring, terms of Council members Jerry McGeorge, David Engel, Bonnie Wideman, and Chris Malek are ending. Since the council is only in its second year, these 4 members have agreed to serve a second three year term.

Council members have expressed the view that the Council will be served best in the long term if new members are encouraged to participate, especially younger farmers. Although most of DATCP’s standing councils do not have formal by-laws, the Government and Legal affairs committee will work with Laura Paine to develop recommendations for promoting healthy turnover of Organic Advisory Council membership, using such tools as term length limitations and nomination guidelines. These recommendations will be approved by the full council and put in place by the time that the next set of terms expire in the spring of 2010.
The USDA has extended the comment period for a GMO contamination rule until 3-17-09. The Organic Issues Committee within the OAC will prepare a statement for review by the council as we feel that Genetically Modified Seed is a crucial issue. Protecting organic growers from the risk of crop contamination by GMOs grown by neighboring farmers is an on-going issue for Wisconsin’s organic community.

National Organic Summit: Many countries have a national organic plan, but the US does not. So nationwide discussion will be focused on this possibility February 25 –26 at the Radisson in La-Crosse, the two days preceeding the annual MOSES organic conference. The goal of the summit is to have 40 items with specific time-lines by the end of the meeting. In addition to several Advisory Council members, Perry Brown and Laura Paine from the WDATCP will be in attendance.

Organic Directory in the works: On the paperwork that a grower fills out to participate in the Organic Cost Share program, there is a box that he can mark if he would like his farm listed in a state wide organic directory. As a council, we think this may be one of the greatest successes of the cost share program as there are many beneficial reasons to have a state organic directory. This directory could be used for coordinating buyers to sellers, for state-wide marketing, as well as service to conventional custom applicators as an additional safe-guard to avoid certified organic land. It is just a start, but we are enthusiastic about the possibilities!

The Organic Advisory Council expressed interest in working with other State Organic Councils to further regional goals of promoting organics. Erin Silva volunteered to write a grant proposal requesting funds for a regional conference of Organic Councils from WI, MN, IL, and IA.

The Council discussed ways that organic programs could be coordinated in light of the cooperative agreement between Wisconsin and Minnesota state governments. One idea was to expand MN’s successful organic farm business management program to include Wisconsin farmers. Laura has been talking with her counterpart in Minnesota on the possibilities.

Next Organic Advisory Council meeting is March 18th. The public is welcome to attend. For more information, contact Laura Paine at 608-224-5120.