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Organic farming is one of the fastest growing segments of US agriculture. Some US producers are turning to certified organic farming systems as a potential way to lower input costs, decrease reliance on nonrenewable resources, capture high-value markets and price premiums, and boost farm income. Organic farming systems rely on ecologically-based practices, such as cultural and biological pest management. They virtually exclude the use of synthetic chemicals in crop production and prohibit the use of antibiotics and hormones in livestock production. Many producers, manufacturers, distributors, and retailers specialize in growing, processing, and marketing an ever-widening array of organic food and fiber products.

As consumer demand for organic food and production increases, research and education can help support the sector. However, gaps in research, education, and information exist in all areas of the organic industry. The workshop brought together a wide variety of experts from government and the private sector to identify key obstacles and explore new opportunities for continued growth in the organic sector. Six broad themes were explored and the papers presented here are arranged by theme.

The keynote address by Dobbs presents a strategic look at the initiation of – and innovations promoting — a "second green revolution." He discusses the challenges that remain in the organic sector, including: (i) technology, prices, and markets; (ii) the structure of agriculture; and (iii) public policies.

The next four papers explore producer options and obstacles. Duram presents data from five case studies of organic farmers and identifies barriers and opportunities. Wolf explores organic farming from the conventional grower’s point of view, and discusses his conversations with a grower who transitioned to organic in 1990. He also asks the question "Does organic fit my operation?" Yeager provides an excellent review of the factors that squeeze corn growers, and the technical difficulties in transitioning to organic. He highlights USDA's Conservation Security Program as an opportunity for organic growers. Siemon describes the issues facing the development of a farm cooperative and discusses the technical and policy obstacles facing the
organic dairy industry in particular.

The second group of papers includes three perspectives on market growth in the organic sector. Dimitri and Oberholtzer provide a retrospective of growth in the organic sector by comparing consumers, supply chain players, and growers in the industry in 1997 and 2003. Harris presents a retail perspective on market growth and trends. DuPuis presents a sociological view of the organic market by discussing the set of rules under which the organic market operates and the risks in violating these rules.

Growers and agricultural professionals with training in organic agriculture can play key roles at all levels in the industry, but until recently there have been few programs for training students with interest in this area. The papers in this section provide inspiration for training farmers (Melone), students at land grant universities (Biernbaum), and agricultural professionals (Moynihan).

Measuring and communicating the benefits of organic farming was the focus of the next set of papers. Dabbert evaluates the environmental effects of organic farming and the policy intervention that may be justified. Delate explores the benefits and perceived risks of organic food, while Merrigan explores the complexities of conducting side-by-side comparisons of organic- and conventionally-produced foods.

The established research infrastructure has been criticized for its lack of attention to the organic agriculture industry. The last three papers address this issue and examine recent research conducted on organic production (Reganold), data access (Kuepper), and strategies for building a research base (Bull) within existing research frameworks.

Yeager, whose family has farmed in Indiana for many generations, commented that US farmers are still losing ground financially and openness to organic agriculture has reached “critical mass.” He also echoed other speakers in calling for additional research to help make organic production successful. The papers presented here review pioneering efforts to create and evaluate organic farming and marketing systems — efforts that new research can expand and go beyond to help create a ”second green revolution.”

Acknowledgments

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The views expressed in these articles do not necessarily represent those of the University of Georgia, West Virginia University, or USDA.