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## **Addressing the Information Needs of Organic Farmers: The Confessions of an ATTRA Specialist**

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### **Introduction**

I work for the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT), a non-profit organization that addresses issues of renewable energy, community development, and sustainable agriculture. NCAT is best-known in the agricultural community for its largest project, ATTRA. ATTRA — the acronym stands for Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas — is the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, which is sustained with funding from the USDA through the Rural Business Cooperative Service.

### **The ATTRA Project**

The ATTRA Project has been active since 1987. During that time, it has provided information on sustainable production systems, specialty crop and livestock enterprises, and alternative marketing strategies to thousands of farmers, teachers, researchers, Extension agents, and agri-business men and women across the country.

We generally call ourselves "secondary researchers." That is, we see our task as collecting primary information and synthesizing it into a farmer-friendly form. The primary information we collect often includes anecdotal information as well as peer-reviewed research. In the earliest years of the Project, anecdotal information was often all that was available on many sustainable farming topics. Fortunately, one of the clear trends we've seen over the years is a generous increase in published research.

ATTRA's information delivery is accomplished mainly through three means: publications, individual case question responses, and seminars and workshop trainings. In this way, we are similar to Cooperative Extension. In fact, we commonly say that we exist to back-up Extension in many non-traditional areas.

Our methods are increasingly successful. At the present time we are logging roughly 5,500 visits each day on our website. In addition, we provide 30,000 to 35,000 "hardcopy" publications or custom case responses annually.

### **NCAT/ATTRA and Organic Agriculture**

Throughout the 18 years that ATTRA has existed, the organic community has always been a major user of our services. Members of the community were among the first to call our office with questions about soil management, pest control, and direct marketing. The volume of interest motivated the development of a growing number of publications that

specifically address organics. At the moment more than one-quarter of our roughly 250 publications are specifically targeted to organic producers. Many more contain information applicable to organic production and marketing.

The kinds of information ATTRA provides to the organic community have changed over the past 18 years. The change is, I feel, a mirror of the changes that organic agriculture is undergoing in the United States. In the first 10 years of ATTRA, from 1987 until about 1997, our approach to organic agriculture was rather simplistic and naïve. Though many of us knew better, we essentially accepted any production system that avoided the use standard commercial pesticides and fertilizers as being "organic." When I say some of us "knew better," I mean that there was recognition of organic farming as a deliberate strategy for sustainable production, and also an awareness of on-going industry efforts to develop standards and certification procedures. The lack of clear definition on our part reflected both public misconceptions about organic agriculture and the lack of size and coherence in the organic marketplace at that time.

The change began with the release of the first draft of the National Standard in late 1997. Those of us at NCAT who reviewed the draft and made comments began to realize two things. First, it was clear that organic agriculture was going to grow rapidly, as would the need for accurate and timely information. And ATTRA, in its unique role as a national program, would be expected to take a leading part. Secondly, we realized we were ill-prepared to assume that role. Our specialists were generally conversant with the biology and technology of organic farming, but not up to speed on what was happening on the regulatory level and its implications. Many of our publications contained information that would soon be dead wrong as far as organic farming and marketing were concerned. We needed to fix that.

The fix began with several specialists taking the initiative to study the industry and how it was evolving. A few trained as organic inspectors, something I would advise anyone to do if you want to understand the Standard and how it is applied at the ground level. We also began monitoring the on-going evolution of the National Standard and its implementation, attending National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) meetings and making frequent lengthy visits to the National Organic Program (NOP) website.

One of the first tasks was to make all existing organic publications, and those containing advice for organic farmers, consistent with the National Standard. Since most ATTRA publications are on a 2-year review cycle, the procedure was fairly straight-forward. Every update was reviewed by at least one staff member who was conversant with the regulations.

A second task involved the development of a new class of materials — checksheets, workbooks, documentation forms — that simplify and clarify regulatory language and provide tools for record keeping. The goal was (and is) to make the process of certification easier for farmers. To assist in this we sought and obtained additional funding from the National SARE and the National Organic Program.

### What We've Learned

This is a very quick overview of where our organization, particularly the ATTRA Project, has been with regard to serving the organic community. So what have we learned that informs us as regards organic research and information needs?

**Increased complexity.** The National Standard has imposed new levels of complexity on organic farming. By extension, this complexity is imposed on those who do research on organic systems, and those professionals, like Extension agents, who advise organic farmers. On occasion we are consulted by researchers about experimental "organic" treatments they

plan to use that involve the use of biosolids, treated seed, and other prohibited materials that not only make the findings less relevant or irrelevant to organic farmers, they lead to decertification of the research site. In some instances, the proposed sites have been working organic farms!

**Increased sophistication.** The need for basic organic production and marketing information continues to arise as more growers continue the transition to organics. However, at the same time we have observed an increase in the number of sophisticated questions. On the production end, this reflects the availability of new knowledge and technologies in recent years, including biopesticides, particle-film pest barriers, soil food-web concepts, compost teas, and so on. On the marketing end, it reflects the influence of the Internet, export opportunities for organics, and expanded demand for less-traditional organic products like meats, for which there is less infrastructure and less industry experience.

**Systems design and management vs. input substitution.** Organic production is defined as:

A production system that ... respond[s] to site-specific conditions by integrating cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. (NOP §205.2)

Despite this enlightened definition in the Regulation and a growing awareness of the value of systems management, the organic community is obsessed with issues surrounding what can and cannot be used in organic production. This creates particular challenges for new organic producers who assume that the key to organic production is product selection, much as it was when they farmed conventionally. While we are, on occasion, asked to advise on improving crop rotations and selecting cover crops and beneficial habitat species, such questions take a backseat to the number of questions about materials.

The roots of input substitution and the general obsession with materials are varied and have a tortuous history. They are reinforced by the Standard itself, which requires three years of decertification wherever a prohibited substance is applied. At the same time a weak crop rotation, poor nutrient management, and lack of biodiversity would rate nothing more than a minor non-compliance, if the organic inspector notes it at all.

On the positive side, the organic research community is really getting a pretty good handle on this. This is reflected in some of the excellent proposals that have been submitted to the USDA-CSREES Integrated Organic Program, for example. The downside is the lack of good farmer-friendly literature that works to illustrate the importance of systems. And I include ATTRA in that criticism. I authored the publications we have on this topic and consider them wanting. So there is more work to be done.

### For More Information

The ATTRA Project is not the only federally-funded entity tasked with developing and delivering sustainable agriculture information. We are one of three. The other two are the Alternative Farming Systems Information Center ([AFSIC](#)) — which is part of the National Agriculture Library — and the Sustainable Agriculture Network ([SAN](#)), which is part of the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education ([SARE](#)) program. We refer to ourselves as the "troika" and do a lot of our work cooperatively.

For more information on the ATTRA Project or the other programs that NCAT works on, visit [www.attra.ncat.org](http://www.attra.ncat.org) or call 800-346-9140.