

The Organic Trade Association: 25 Years of Moving the Organic Industry Forward

Past and Present OTA Leaders Celebrate Victories and Discuss Future Challenges and Opportunities

In 1985, when a small group of passionate, determined organic farmers, manufacturers, academics and certifiers formed the Organic Foods Production Association of North America (OFPANA), they probably never dreamed that 25 years later the organic movement they were pioneering would eventually grow into a more than \$25 billion industry.



First meeting of organizers in 1984



Since then, OFPANA has shortened its name to the Organic Trade Association (OTA) and has become a respected voice for North America's organic community, reaching out to educate lawmakers and the public about organic. OTA continues to work closely with other organizations to spread the word about the importance of organic production and to safeguard the integrity of what organic stands for through industry guidelines and standards. Most recently, OTA announced the opening of a new office right in the heart of Washington, D.C., where it can more effectively work with the USDA and legislators to protect and foster the interests of the organic industry.

To commemorate the association's 25th anniversary, *Organic Processing Magazine* brought together several leaders of OTA to give a bit of oral history about the hurdles they overcame and the victories they won, as well as offer their insights into the challenges and opportunities they see for OTA and the organic community as we head into the future. For more on the history of OTA, visit its website at www.ota.com/25years.



OTA Board of Directors (serving through June 2009) at this past year's All Things Organic Conference



Thomas Harding, Jr.
President of Agrisystems International
First President of the OTA (then OFPANA) Board, 1985–1987

What drove the creation of OFPANA?

OFPANA was created to be an umbrella organization where we could all work together to get the message out about organic. At that time, standards were all over the place and we needed a common voice for the industry as a whole. We also needed to clearly define organic foods and create a system consumers could trust. They needed to know the difference between organic and conventional, as well as organic and natural. We not only had to educate the consumer on how organic food was different—what it did for the land and people—but we had to educate the government too. We had no political recognition. The guys in D.C. thought “organic” was just some magazine from Rodale. It was thought of as more of a counter movement than a legitimate agricultural food production system.

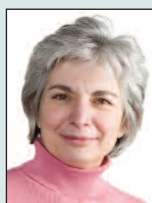
What were some of the biggest victories during your time leading OFPANA?

For me, it was being able to have everybody around the table, regardless of their political leanings, talking about the common problem we had in front of us. We had knock-down battles but we all ended up coming together to develop a common standard in the end. One major accomplishment that helped define organic was a position paper stating that organic food is a production system, not a pesticide-residue-free system. In other words, we didn’t want organic foods to be determined by analytical laboratory testing, we wanted to be proven by the land stewardship, the quality of the food and the type of farming. This helped us get the government’s attention as well. Toward the end of my term, I met with Senator Leahy (D-VT) and talked about the importance of having a common definition of organics. I stressed that his Farm Bill really should include organic agriculture and have a provision for a common, recognizable label in the marketplace. OFPANA had defined all these principles in two pages, so we gave those to him and he actually adopted those principles. This eventually led to the Organic Foods Production Act. OFPANA’s voice was starting to be heard on the Hill and we were ready to have a labeling rule. Many didn’t want to see the authorities get involved and the industry didn’t agree on everything, but it would give us a common,

regulated standard—and that was a huge accomplishment.

Looking back on your original goals, do you have any insight for OTA today?

It’s just as important today as it was 25 years ago that we have a forum where all voices can be heard. OTA should also never become representative of one group versus another and the size of company should never be the common denominator. We as an industry need to raise the bar on sustainability as well, and make sure that sustainable strategies—whether it’s water quality, sustainable packaging, energy conservation, soil quality or taking care of the community—are all really engaged in all aspects of organic from seed to shelf.



Katherine DiMatteo
IFOAM President and Senior Associate, Wolf, DiMatteo + Associates
First Executive Director of OTA, 1990–2006

What are the biggest opportunities and challenges for OTA and the organic industry?

The biggest opportunity is placing organic within legislation wherever appropriate—research, rural development, conservation, climate change, food safety, etc.—and providing comment on regulations that advance and protect the organic sector. Kathleen Merrigan, Deputy Secretary of USDA, announced her goal to integrate organic into all the departments within USDA. OTA should help in this effort by providing information and resources and building strong relationships with key agency leaders.

One of the biggest challenges for the future of organic is the self-appointed watchdog organizations that undermine consumer confidence in the NOP and, by extension, the credibility of the organic brand. Another challenge is the growing support for “almost” organic standards, systems and seals that are promoted as sustainable and are drawing consumer and retailer interest away from organic. OTA’s promote-and-protect mission must continue by providing a consistent and persistent counterpoint, and possibly by undertaking an aggressive campaign to discredit both the unregulated and misguided claims. Through OTA, the industry should discuss such challenges and develop strategies for action, then participate actively in support of these actions.

What are some of your best memories of your years with OTA?

There are so many positive memories, but two really stick out: one was the press conference OTA held after the first proposed rule was published in 1997. Because of the intense investment OTA had made to work with NOSB, NOP, the members and other stakeholders, as well as the press, OTA organized a press conference almost immediately that informed the industry, the community and the public that the proposed rule was flawed. OTA launched a public comment campaign that helped generate 180,000 comments. The second was the press conference in October 2002 with NOP and NOSB to announce the implementation of the NOP. It was held at Whole Foods Market in D.C. and was a joyous celebration of the many hours of work by OTA members. OTA’s role was important because it was a representative organization that had built consensus among its members and with the larger stakeholder community in order to support a meaningful and effective NOP. During these two press conferences, OTA was clearly recognized as the voice of the organic sector.



Bill Wolf
President,
Wolf, DiMatteo +
Associates
Board President,
1993–1994

What are the opportunities and challenges as OTA heads into the future?

One of the biggest things we need to focus on as we go forward is to educate the public about the nutritional density of organic and the connection between food quality and healthy soil. Organic should be at the table as part of the health care debate. We should have nutritional experts discussing the health benefits on TV and radio shows. Focusing on the lack of pesticides is an easy sell, and is important, but it is not the only benefit.

As part of this, OTA also needs to maintain an institutional history of why the rules were originally written in certain ways. For example, the original reason why there needed to be a three-year transition period was based on decades of observation and research about how long it takes for a biological system to restart and produce a healthy crop based on improving the soil with green manures and cover crops. Today, that has been forgotten. Institutionally, the three years are viewed as a waiting period where you don't do anything and the pesticides will just go away, but that is not what Sir Albert Howard observed in the '40s or what J.R. Rodale wrote about 50 years ago. It takes three years to proactively build soil fertility. The rules are in place because they align with nature's perfect systems. Continuous improvement is built into the system and we need to train the industry on this and educate the public on it as well.

It is also important for OTA to

push to better align the regulations so that we can reduce the compliance quagmire. The organic regulations are still maturing and difficult to understand, which is leading to different interpretations. It's not a stable regulatory environment for those thinking about getting involved. Let's get it straight. I think that is what Miles McEvoy, the new director of the National Organic Program (NOP), is trying to do. I am very excited about the direction he is taking as far as creating a manual and clarifying the program regulations.

The third challenge and opportunity for OTA is to encourage an increase in domestic acreage by identifying barriers and educating farmers about the difference in regulations so domestic production can export. OTA has always led the efforts to try to harmonize the regulations and encourage equivalency, but that is not an easy thing to do. If we don't pay attention to effective domestic production, more and more production is going to go overseas.



Joe Smillie
Senior Vice President of Quality Assurance International
OTA Founding Member and Board President, 1995–1996

What were the biggest challenges and victories for OTA?

In the beginning, there were some key decisions OFPANA made that helped the organic industry grow over the last 25 years. First, the board decided early in the game that we would base organic on third-party, independent certification. This created the foundation for the industry. Natural foods, nutrition supplements, the American Herbal Product Association—none of these industries moved until just recently to have a third-party verification system.

There are two other decisions that are still discussed today. When we first started writing the standard, we tried to include social justice and fair trade and finally decided that organic was tough enough to define by itself. We agreed that the focus needed to be on organic agriculture. That's what organic means—how something is grown. The other decision was about processing and whether or not we should allow more processed items like white sugar to be certified. People thought that if it was organic it had to be healthy, but once again, the focus for organic was on planetary health, not always personal health. We also realized that defining "minimal processing" was an impossible task. Organic cookies may not really be good for you, but you have that choice and no matter what, the organic option is better for the planet that we all live on. From a historical perspective, it was important to focus on agriculture—not healthy food, not social justice. These issues are all important, but they need their own standards and sets of metrics.

What is important to keep in mind as we move forward?

With the office in D.C., OTA is now well positioned. They are also doing a fabulous job educating consumers through social media. The old media model is expensive, but now through Twitter and Facebook, we can get the word out. Everything is changing and OTA is poised to take advantage of those changes. Organic businesses need to get behind these programs and support OTA. People need to pay their fair share, not as a charity but as an investment in OTA. There are lots of people riding the wave of organic that are benefiting but not putting back into it, either in terms of money or volunteering their time.



Mark Rezloff
Chairman,
Aurora Dairy

OTA Board President, 1996–1999

You were president of the OTA during the first proposed rule and the final rule. What was this like?

When I became president, we decided to start having meetings across the U.S.—bringing in all the people interested in organic to decide what the organic regulation should include. At the same time, we visited overseas to talk to the Europeans about what kind of reciprocity and similarities we had in our standards to try to make sure that there was consistency. That’s how we came up with the American Organic Standard, which was used as a blueprint for the NOP.

But when the government finally put out the first proposed rule, it did not prohibit irradiation, GMOs or sewage sludge, and there was a huge outcry in the organic community. OTA worked with consumer and environmental groups to get the word out and because of that hundreds of thousands of people wrote letters in opposition to the rule and the USDA ended up changing it.

In creating the standard, there was a lot of frustration and it took a long time, but it was completely volunteer. Not only were we trying to grow our businesses, but we were spending every spare minute volunteering to put this standard together. There was a lot of excitement and passion. We were taking a movement and turning it into something that had the power to make legislative change.

One of your roles was to build relationships in D.C.—can you tell us about this?

Even before I was president, I was always on the Governmental Affairs Board for OTA and spent a lot of time in D.C.

At one point in time, I was probably there every month or so going from trade group to trade group—the American Meat Institute, the dairy groups and so on—to make sure they understood what organic meant and who we were. We spent a lot of time neutralizing. We would go to these organizations and say, “We’re not asking you to support us, but we don’t want you to be against us.” Also, the environmental community and the public interest groups came to our assistance.

I also spent a lot of time working with the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) administrator, who was certainly more on the conventional side, but I was able to befriend him.

Building these kinds of relationships with government officials along the way has been really important for OTA.

Bob Anderson
President of Sustainable Strategies
OTA Board President, 1994–1995

“One need only look to the recent U.S.–Canada Organic Trade Agreement to know that OTA plays a pivotal role in fostering international organic trade. OTA’s extraordinary efforts in this landmark agreement assured the free flow of trade between the world’s two largest agricultural trading partners. Bravo, OTA! Promoting international trade and facilitating trade agreements is one of the most important arenas where OTA can work to encourage and make it possible for OTA members, producers and processors to continue to enjoy access to, and ingredients from, the global marketplace.”

What do you think the organic industry needs to keep in mind for the future?

One thing I wish is that those in the organic industry would truly understand the value of a trade association. People have a tendency to judge a trade association by what it does for them, but trade associations should really be evaluated by the collective impact that they could have—the more people who participate, the stronger the collective

energy, which results in a trade association that can make a bigger impact. So many other industries already understand that. Some, like the soy and dairy industries, have very strong trade associations and therefore they have a very strong lobbying presence and resources to promote their products. One challenge OTA has is the fact that we include all types of products, which makes it hard to focus on one goal. Also, OTA is still continually fighting the battle to protect what organic really means out there. The biggest problem is that OTA doesn’t have enough money. We’re now close to a \$25 billion industry and yet OTA has a budget that is not much greater than where it’s been over the past 10 years. While some purists may not want to take part because it is not perfect, the fact is that even with our differences, we are stronger together.



Phil Margolis
Founder/President,
Neshaminy Valley, Organic and Natural Foods Distributor

OTA Board President, 2003–2006

You were president of OTA during the implementation of the NOP and the Harvey vs. USDA lawsuit. What was OTA’s key role?

With the implementation of the NOP, we were really focusing on the promo-

tion aspect—educating consumers about the meaning of organic, verifiable label claims and the environmental benefits. But with any regulation, there are going to be a few speed bumps. Harvey actually served with me on the standards committee and helped draft OTA’s response to the first rule. But sometimes people aren’t accepting of the consensus. I’ve always said that reasonable minds will differ on issues. We need to be able to accept that and work things out. In this particular instance, it wasn’t getting worked out to Harvey’s satisfaction so he filed his first lawsuit against the USDA. This particular conflict took a tremendous amount of resources, and resulted in an unfortunate amount of disconnectedness between different parts of the industry.

One of the drivers for OTA is serving the greater good. At times, OTA may be on the other side of an issue, and people have to accept that with-

Caren Wilcox
Caren Wilcox & Associates, LLC
 OTA’s Executive Director, 2006–2008

“With the 2008 Farm Bill, OTA’s hard work paid off as the U.S. Congress quintupled the amount of mandatory spending on organic programs, authorizing additional spending if appropriated. OTA was fortunate to have a team in D.C. working with me to help deliver this bill. OTA led the coalition of the organic community that advocated for organic farmers, and was instrumental in convening the panel that testified at the first organic hearing in Congressional history. Among the biggest winners were research, crop insurance, organic conversion, and certification cost share programs. In addition, the inclusion of additional funding for the NOP provides the program with the resources to fulfill its mission.”

“So is this a case of the perfect killing the good?” to which I responded, “I believe so.”

So what are the biggest challenges and opportunities for OTA in the years ahead?

With the “emerging sectors,” including personal care and fiber, we need to

learn from the Harvey case and be willing to listen and be respectful of other points of view. With food, the law passed in 1990 and here we are 20 years later with things we still need to sort out. I can’t imagine somebody within the community who feels that we’re done in terms of getting things where we want them to be in the public policy arena—we’ll continue to have that work to do. Because of this, people really need to be actively involved with OTA. It’s the most important thing if you’re in the organic business. We need to have a strong trade association to ensure that other opposing interests are not successful in doing anything that would hurt what we’ve worked so hard to develop.

Also, for many of us within OTA who have worked to build organic to this point, we have the opportunity and the challenge of passing the torch to others in the community to lead the effort going forward. The same important issues that drove us to build this industry need to be



Christine Bushway
 OTA Executive Director, 2008–present

What are the greatest opportunities as OTA heads into the future?

That is an exciting question to answer. OTA’s new offices in D.C. will provide a wealth of wonderful new opportunities. Located within sight of the U.S. Capitol and Union Station in the landmark Hall of the States building, the D.C. office will provide a wonderful location and a broad range of new services such as a full-service library, 11 conference rooms and state-of-the-art telecommunications. A large percentage of the issues that OTA tackles are directly or indirectly related to legislation and regulation. In its ongoing quest to make the trade association valuable to its membership, the OTA board of directors chose policy and the work in Washington as OTA’s top priority going forward. In response to that directive, I am thrilled that we will begin 2010 with our first-ever D.C. office. Although OTA has always worked diligently and effectively on policy issues, having a physical presence just blocks from the U.S. Capitol will greatly enhance our visibility and provide greater access to key staff at the various regulatory agencies we work with—and, of course, to the members and staff of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

What are some of the biggest challenges?

Like most trade associations, we are feeling the effects of the recession and its impact on our members. While enjoying an amazing 22 percent growth rate for a number of years, the organic industry is riding out this challenge and looking to innovation and belt-tightening. We at the trade association have done the same and sought efficiencies that help us make our limited resources stretch as far as possible while still getting the job done.

spearheaded by today's leaders. We need to continue to work to build healthy soil to sequester carbon, ensure more nutrient-rich food, and prevent the use of toxic and persistent chemical pesticides, which show up in our bodies, our water supplies, and even the Arctic, where they have never been used. As OTA goes forward, it's important that today's new leaders step forward to carry this "organic torch" and pass it on to others to do the same.



Julia Sabin

Vice President, Smucker Natural Foods

OTA Board President, 2008 to present

What have been some of the biggest victories for OTA and what are some of the challenges and opportunities in the future?

The big victory is the amazing growth in organic consistently over the years both in distribution and consumer awareness.

In the past, it was a grassroots effort, so it was hard to find organic. Now you see it everywhere. You mention organic and people have heard about it. They're more educated, they value it and they understand it better. We have a lot of work to do but the train has left the station and it's on its way.

The big challenge right now is the historic economic recession we're having. The organic industry hasn't faced economic challenges to this extent before. The good news is we believe that the organic consumer is very committed and even when times are tough organic is one of the last things they would take off their list. The economy aside, the trends are still very strong for organic. The aging baby boomer population wants to be healthy and go out kicking and screaming, and the younger generation is concerned about the world we live in and what they are feeding their children. As these trends converge, there are great opportunities for growth.

Another opportunity is the major marketing effort we launched this year called "Organic: It's Worth It," which has reached over 30 million consumers already. I've never seen such excitement and commitment to the promotion side of our mission. Through online outreach, we're connecting with consumers and answering questions of: What is organic? Why should I trust it? What are the benefits? The campaign has been very effective. We are also able to poll consumers and have received dynamic feedback which allows us to understand how can we reach out to more consumers.

What do you think has been key to OTAs success and how can we continue the momentum with the next generation of leaders?

There has always been a collaborative effort in OTA's two-pronged mission—to promote and protect organic. One tool which I believe has been really helpful is OTAs task force process. This has been a really powerful and effective way to address issues, get work done and move us forward as an industry. As for the next generation of leaders, there is still a lot of work to be done. Organic still accounts for just 3 percent of the total market, so there is ample opportunity ahead of us for growth. It's like the flywheel concept—it takes a tremendous effort to get it going, but it is just as critical to continue moving it forward with the same passion. Get involved. Get on a task force. We are much more powerful when we work together. □