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Organic Mentions in Senate Ag Farm Bill Framework

With Annotations

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Background:

Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) has released a 94-page “Framework” for a markup (date unknown) by the full Committee. Each item has a fairly detailed description of the topic, but many specifics are lacking so far. Our interpretations are likewise general regarding the topic. This digest covers every mention of “organic” in the Framework, by each Title.

Title I Commodities - Subpart D (Dairy)

Sec. 1412. Related Provisions

- Directs the Department of Agriculture to improve collection of organic dairy market data.
Important goal for various reasons (supports, risk management, etc.). Specifics of language and funding (if any) TBD.

Title II Conservation

Sec. 2303. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) —Establishment and Administration

- Establishes payment cap parity for the separate competitive pool for organic producers by increasing that cap from \$140,000 to \$450,000 over a five-year period.
Long overdue parity for organic under EQIP. Low organic cap dates back to 2008 Farmbill and resulted in some loss of effectiveness from the start.

Sec. 2313. Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) —Duties of the Secretary

- Clarifies the calculation of payments for income forgone by a producer to include payments for increased economic risk and losses in revenue due to production changes, anticipated reductions in yield, transitioning to an organic resource-conserving system, or acreage converted to conservation uses.
“Foregone Income” calculations as part of conservation program payments will have critical impact on usage of CSP for organic transition. Substance of clarification TBD.
- Authorizes the Secretary to make payments for conservation activities related to organic production systems and transitioning to organic production.
Addresses some lack of clarity about use of CSP for organic operations. Very important to give organic and transitional producers an alternative framework to EQIP.

Sec. 2701. Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) —Establishment and Purposes

- Expands the purposes of the program to include (1) encouraging the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the adaptation to and mitigation of climate change; (2) engaging producers and eligible partners in innovative methods of conservation delivery or leveraging of the Federal investment; (3) establishing or implementing the soil health plan or program of a State or Tribal government; and (4) facilitating the conversion from concentrated

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animal feeding operations to climate-friendly agricultural production systems (including regenerative grazing, agroforestry, organic, and diversified crop and livestock production systems).

Expands the potential for RCPP to support conversion of CAFOs to organic & “regenerative-grazing” systems. (Note, this is the only use of “regenerative” in the entire document.)

Title VII Research

Sec. 7209. Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative

- Extends the authorization of appropriations through fiscal year 2029 for the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative.
- Continues the existing mandatory funding level of \$50 million for each fiscal year.

Status quo for the main competitive program funding organic research and extension.

Sec. 7210. Enhanced Coordination of Organic Agriculture Research

- Requires the Chief Scientist to coordinate all research, extension, education, and economic activities of the Department relating to organic agriculture.
- Establishes an Organic Agriculture Research Coordinator within the Office of the Chief Scientist to coordinate and establish annual strategic priorities on organic agriculture research at USDA, to conduct and publish a survey of USDA research relating to organic agriculture, and to make recommendations to enhance USDA research and coordination on organic agriculture.

Potentially very significant. Addresses a major lack of coordination among the USDA science agencies. Also some risk of unintended consequences. Would open big opportunity for stakeholder impact on a USDA Organic Research Strategic Plan. Raises stakes for appointees to Chief Scientist.

Title X Horticulture

Sec. 10005. Organic Market Development Grant (OMDG)

- Authorizes \$50 million for each of fiscal years 2025 through 2029 for Organic Market Development Grants to increase the capacity of organic producers and businesses and develop new markets for organic products.
Important new program that would provide authority (i.e. if appropriated annually) for continuation on the one-time funding of OMDG currently being disbursed. Funding authority without mandatory \$ would mean the need for annual advocacy in the appropriations process. The potential funding level is lower than organic advocates have sought, but still challenging to max out in annual appropriations bills. Advocates will still be seeking some mandatory (i.e. not needing appropriations) funding allocation.

Sec. 10006. Organic Production and Market Data Initiatives

- Provides \$5 million in mandatory funding for fiscal year 2025, to remain available until expended.
- Extends the authorization of appropriations through fiscal year 2029.
Status Quo for organic data projects. Unclear relationship to new mandate for organic dairy market data.

Sec. 10007. National Organic Program

- Authorizes the National Organic Program to provide technical assistance, education, and outreach to certified organic farmers and farmers transitioning to organic certification, including coordination with other USDA agencies and the ability to enter into cooperative agreements with nonprofit entities, state cooperative extension service, or other qualified entities to provide technical assistance and outreach.

This appears to be an affirmation and perhaps expansion of NOP’s role in managing the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP). Seems to make any actual funding at the discretion of the Secretary. May or may not be the best way to achieve “coordination with USDA agencies”.

- Directs the National Organic Program to solicit public input on the prioritization of organic regulations to be promulgated or revised.
This language marks a major milestone for the campaign to reform the underlying organic regulatory system and reflects HR 5973, the marker bill advocated by Organic Trade Association (also known as CIAO, Continuous Improvement and Accountability in Organic Standards). This would create a significant new step in the organic rule-making process, with unknown effectiveness (for accountability and predictability) or other consequences. Increased public input likely, including consumers and various types of commercial interests.
- Directs the Secretary to publish an annual report regarding recommendations received from the National Organic Standards Board, all regulatory and administrative actions taken, and justifications on why actions were or were not taken on those recommendations.
Would require an annual compilation of information that is already public but not now in one place.
- Directs GAO to conduct a study on the efforts of the National Organic Program to improve organic standards and provide recommendations on how the National Organic Program can ensure that organic program standards evolve in a timely manner to meet consumer expectations and benefit organic producers.
This is related to the CIAO bill and is effectively a compromise attempt to satisfy CIAO advocates and USDA. A GAO study of the NOP’s rule-making performance likely has only marginal impact but also significant upside possibility for driving long-term improvement.
- Increases the authorization of appropriations for the National Organic Program to \$26 million in fiscal year 2025, \$28 million in fiscal year 2026, \$30 million in fiscal year 2027, \$32 million in fiscal year 2028, and \$34 million in fiscal year 2029.
These numbers are less than requested by organic advocacy groups. Would still allow modest expansion of NOP budget but perhaps not commensurate with new NOP tasks assigned elsewhere in the Framework.
- Provides \$5 million in mandatory funding for fiscal year 2025, to remain available until expended, for database and technology upgrades.
Continues what has been a significant part of NOP’s operational growth and technical capacity. Lack of increase from previous allocation diminishes impact. \$5 million just doesn’t go as far as it used to.

Sec. 10008. Assessment of National Organic Program Enforcement Authority

- Directs the National Organic Program to conduct an assessment of fraudulent organic claims for dietary supplements.
Unclear why this is a priority or what NOP could usefully do as an “assessment” other than compiling information on complaints received and results of investigations.

Sec. 10009. National Organic Certification Cost-Share Program (CCS)

- Provides such sums as necessary in mandatory funding for the National Organic Certification Cost-Share Program and increases the maximum payment to a producer or handler to \$1,000.
This is very important to all organic advocates and would produce two essential and permanent upgrades for CCS. “...Sums as necessary in mandatory funding” means that the program would never face a shortfall, whatever level is reached by user demand. CCS has faced chronic uncertainty and actual gaps in funding. Raising the cap to \$1,000 from \$750 (per scope of certification) is less than advocates have been requesting (\$1,500 asked) so this will still be part of the consensus lobbying effort.

Title XII Risk Management

Sec. 11201. Composition of the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation Board

- Updates the structure of the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation (FCIC) Board of Directors (Board) to improve crop insurance options for specialty crops and to provide additional producer perspectives into the consideration and approval of new insurance options, including:
 - Specifies that the second Under Secretary position on the Board will be filled by the Under Secretary of Agriculture responsible for marketing and regulatory programs, with a goal of leveraging their expertise in specialty crop, organic, and livestock production.

These provisions would encourage continued infiltration of the crop insurance system. The FCIC is a relatively unexplored but deeply important part of the system for organic risk-management goals. Any organic expertise on the FCIC Board is helpful at this point.

Sec. 11204. Research and Development of New Crops and Coverages

- Directs research and development on a policy to insure crops on fields that regularly utilize cover crops.
- Directs research and development on ways to increase participation of organic producers in Federal crop insurance.

These provisions express strong policy direction from Congress to the Risk Management Agency for better engagement with the organic sector and soil-health practices in general. The effectiveness of these directives has some big hurdles, including the organic sector rising to the opportunity with creativity and expertise.