

## USDA Moves Forward with Finalizing Dairy Origin of Livestock Rule

by Sarah Alexander, Executive Director, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association

**W**e have some positive news to report on our work to fight for organic integrity—the USDA is taking action to finalize the Dairy Origin of Livestock rule. This rule is a critical step in ensuring that all organic dairy producers play by the same rules, and once the rule is implemented it will ensure that conventional dairy herds can only be transitioned to organic one time, rather than the continuous transition that some certifiers currently allow.

We strive to certify to the highest standards, and the original intention of the organic program, and MOFGA certification services has always enforced this rule as it was originally intended. However there's been confusion almost as long as this rule has been around. The USDA tried to fix this in 2015 through a rulemaking process, but under Secretary Perdue in 2016, the rule was shelved, and was never finalized.

Since this rule was shelved, organic dairy has been struggling with over-supply, primarily from a number of large western dairies that have come online in the last few years. Some of these dairies are continuously transitioning conventional cows, spending up to \$1,200 less per calf to raise it conventionally vs. organically. The organic community has been pressuring Secretary Perdue to take urgent

action since 2017, but it took getting Congress involved to get them to finally act.

**M**aine's congressional delegation played an incredibly important role in getting the USDA to finally take action. Congresswoman Pingree, an organic farmer herself, has been a tremendous ally of the organic community, and works closely with MOFGA on policy initiatives that impact our farmers. This year she was the lead sponsor of bill language that she was able to get into the appropriations bill that mandates that the USDA must finalize the Origin of Livestock rule.

I met with Maine's full congressional delegation in D.C. in April, and asked them all to include this bill language in their appropriations request. Due to the work that MOFGA and all of you have done over the years, our congressional delegation, which includes Rep. Pingree, Rep. Golden, Senator King and Senator Collins, all included this Origin of Livestock language as part of appropriations request.

The bill language passed through the house early in the summer, but it seemed uncertain it would get through the Senate. Senator Collins sits on the Appropriations Committee, and we knew if we could show her how important this was to Maine dairies, that we

would have a good chance of getting the language in the Senate Appropriations bill.

With your help, MOFGA collected more than 475 petitions to Senator Collins on this issue. We worked with Organic Valley, and the Maine Organic Milk Producers to get Senator Collins to visit Rainbow Valley Farm in Sidney, owned by the Bragg family. They gave her an excellent tour and education about organic dairies, and we delivered the petitions to Senator Collins. She was very receptive, and took our message back to D.C.

This fall, with Senator Collins' help, the Senate has included this bill language in the Appropriations bill, although it has yet to pass. But the pressure from Congress has been enough to get the USDA to finally start to finish this rule. The USDA has opened a 60-day comment period on the Origin of Livestock rule that closes December 2nd. MOFGA is collecting comments, and will be submitting them. We hope you'll continue to take action on this issue by signing onto our petition at [bit.ly/OOLpetition](http://bit.ly/OOLpetition).

While sometimes it feels like progress can be slow, we know that if we keep working together in Maine, and in coalition with our allied groups nationally, that we can continue to keep the organic standards strong.



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into the online update system. This will create a mostly paperless updating process—something producers in this category have been asking for. We are pleased to be finally moving forward on this.

- **Farm Supplies**—After hearing continued requests by MCS

certified producers for MOFGA-branded farm supplies, we piloted a branded twist tie last spring. As a result of that successful pilot program, MOFGA will be moving forward with additional offerings aimed at elevating the recognition of the MOFGA Certified Organic label in the marketplace. These new items will be available for the 2020 growing season through the MOFGA Country Store.

We continue to focus on increasing the value of certifying with MOFGA, promoting and elevating the MOFGA Certified brand in the marketplace, and a renewed approach to telling the great stories of MOFGA certified producers. It's our goal that these efforts, along with the positive momentum that MCS organic producers bring, will propel our food system into a resilient future for Maine. Let's keep growing together!

