

MOFGA and MOFGA Certification Services Become Core Partners in USDA's Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP)

by Chris Grigsby, MCS Director

MOFGA and MOFGA Certification Services (MCS) are pleased to announce that we have been chosen as a core partner and the state lead for Maine through USDA's Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP). TOPP is one of three focus areas by USDA to transition more agriculture to organic (generally known as the Organic Transition Initiative), as part of their larger climate-smart goals. The USDA National Organic Program (NOP) received \$100 million dollars to administer TOPP, and chose six regional leads throughout the country to facilitate cooperative agreements and organize strategies. MOFGA and MCS are part of the Northeast region, which includes 13 states and the District of Columbia, and is led by Pennsylvania Certified Organic (PCO). The states are Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland and Delaware.

USDA's NOP describes the goals of TOPP to include "investing up to \$100 million over five years in cooperative agreements with non-profit organizations who will partner with others to provide technical assistance and wrap-around support for transitioning and existing organic farmers." According to the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) website, partner organizations will:

- Connect farmers transitioning to organic with mentors for at least one year after certification.
- Build paid mentoring networks to share practical insights and advice.
- Provide community-building opportunities including train-the-mentor support, technical assistance, and workshops and field days covering such topics as organic production practices, certification, conservation planning, and business development including navigating the supply chain, regulations and marketing.
- Help transitioning producers overcome technical, cultural and

financial shifts during and following organic certification.

- Engage educational and training institutions (including crop advisors and extension agents) on workforce training and education related to organic.

Mentors require certain criteria to participate. They must have at least three years of organic production experience; be a certified organic producer in good standing (or three years of experience with organic certification); and be able to commit to 45 hours per year working with a mentee farmer. Compensation for mentors is \$3,000 per year, which includes travel and incidental expenses. Mentees wishing to participate in the program do not pay at all.

We are excited to further develop relationships with existing partners in the state as well as create and foster new ones, and encourage interested parties to contact us to discuss opportunities. We're hopeful that existing technical service providers (TSPs) are willing to participate and submit Requests for Proposals (RFPs) to include or add organic-specific tracks into their existing programming. MCS and MOFGA's farmer programs team will be training and supporting TSPs in this work.

The participation in TOPP comes on the heels of MCS' participation in USDA's Human Capital initiative and cooperative agreement in 2022, working with a similar group in the Northeast to create curriculum and training for institutions that wish to offer organic inspector and reviewer training within their sustainable agriculture programming. Certifiers included MCS, Vermont Organic Farmers (VOF) and NOFA-NY, along with other NOFA state chapters in the region, and Rutgers, Delaware Valley College and Vermont Technical College. The results were a robust curriculum with assessment criteria, as well as an inspector

manual. The NOP is planning to develop this into courses in the Organic Integrity Learning Center, and we hope that local institutions will add these courses to their offerings moving forward.

For more information about the Transition to Organic Partnership Program please visit this webpage: ams.usda.gov/services/organic-certification/topp. If you are interested in becoming a mentor, mentee or technical assistance provider in Maine, please contact MCS at 207-568-6030 or certification@mofga.org, and we will direct you accordingly. Mentors and mentees should be able to officially sign up this summer, with technical assistance opportunities later this year.



Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP)

TOPP is one of three focus areas by USDA to transition more agriculture to organic (generally known as the Organic Transition Initiative), and is administered by USDA's National Organic Program (NOP).

Core Partners in the Northeast Region.

MOFGA and MOFGA Certification Services are core partners in USDA's Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) for Maine.

What are the Benefits?

Connects transitioning farmers with farmer mentors, hosts community building opportunities, creates technical assistance resources, supports the organic workforce through training and education, promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion in the organic sector.

Become a Mentor or Mentee.

Interested in becoming a mentor, mentee or technical assistance provider in Maine? Mentors will be paid an annual stipend, and have the opportunity to sign up for summer/fall 2023. Technical assistance providers can submit RFPs to cover costs associated with participation.

Contact Us!

For more information about TOPP visit: ams.usda.gov/services/organic-certification/topp. Contact MCS at 207-568-6030 or certification@mofga.org.



FARMER PROGRAMS AT MOFGA

The MOFGA farmer programs team is here to help. Farmer technical assistance is available and free to any producer in Maine, regardless of organic certification, that is committed to growing commercially or for wider community impact beyond a homestead. Technical assistance can come in many forms, including in-person or Zoom farm visits, phone calls, emails, fact sheets, and even texting photos to some members of our team.

As a team, we can help answer questions and provide resources for many kinds of concerns: business planning and management, marketing, financial and legal resources, crop and livestock management, pest and disease identification and management, soil health, and more. Read below to learn more about our team and our areas of expertise. To ask for our help now, fill out our intake form (see below for more information).

Beginning Farmer Programs: Are you interested in working on a farm in Maine or starting your own? Let us support you in your next step.

Bo Dennis, Beginning Farmer Specialist. Areas of expertise: Connecting beginning farmers to resources including financial supports, mentors, events and programs, and peer learning spaces.

Email: bdennis@mofga.org. Phone: 207-568-6016.

Business and Marketing: We can assist in strengthening one's understanding of specific markets and effective business strategies like branding, logos, pricing, packaging, labeling and more.

Nicolas Lindholm, Organic Marketing and Business Specialist.

Areas of expertise: Farm financials, enterprise budgets, cash flow projections, marketing, market feasibility, farm planning, profitability, economic impact, financing, loans, grants, pricing.

Email: nlindholm@mofga.org. Phone: 207-505-5752. [\(continued on Page 15\)](#)

