

State's organic farms growing fast

Bellingham Herald 9/19

AGRICULTURE: Growers debate need for a commission dedicated to organic practices.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

YAKIMA — In the five years between 1997 and 2001, the number of acres in Washington planted for organic farming more than tripled, from 12,000 to 40,000.

"The markets in organics have been growing in leaps and bounds, and the marketing efforts have lagged far behind," Mariah Cornwoman of Wenatchee, who grows shitake mushrooms and medicinal herbs on 42 acres in north-central Washington, said Wednesday.

Next week, a work group will meet in Ellensburg to consider the possibility of forming a state commission to develop and promote

organic food.

"I think it's a good idea," said Glen Johnson, who with his wife, Charlotte, has the 20-acre Mother Flight Farm near Conway in Skagit County.

He'd like to see a commission that would provide matching funds for grants that are available for sustainable agriculture research.

Cornwoman said the commission idea has been a contentious one over the years.

"I think it will ultimately serve the growers," she said. "I think there will be heated debate on how to implement it."

\$47 million industry

Organic farming is now a \$47 million industry in the state. The number of certified organic farmers increased from 300 to 535 between 1997-2001, the state Depart-

ment of Agriculture said.

There are about 15 agricultural commodity commissions in Washington, but as times got tough on the farm, some of the commissions have also struggled to maintain support.

Earlier this year, the state's asparagus growers rejected an attempt to disband their commission. But two small commissions, one for farmed salmon and another for eggs, have disbanded in the last two or three years.

The commissions are typically formed to monitor trader and market issues, promote the industry and advance research. Growers support the commissions with mandatory assessments based on production. In several states, the courts have been asked to rule on the constitutionality of forced assessments.

While some organic farmers are

part of commodity commissions for a particular type of produce, such as apples, they might prefer more focus on the organic aspect of their fruit. When organic farms are diversified, they don't fit well into any one commission, Cornwoman said.

"There has been a problem with organic growers feeling like they were not getting good service," she said.

Different opinions

The state Department of Agriculture has conducted two surveys on the subject of an organic food commission. Some people favor having an organic program within existing commissions, while others are interested in redirecting their assessments to an organic commission. Some don't want either a commission or to pay assessments.

The Johnsons grow about 40 different types of fruits and vegetables on their Skagit County farm, from berries and lettuce to kohlrabi and plums.

"We don't have any problem selling our produce," said Charlotte Johnson.

But organics are still "a drop in the bucket as far as overall food production," Glen Johnson said, adding that in addition to research and promotion of the industry, he'd like to see a commission that might do such things as sponsor scholarships.

In Washington, certified organic farmers must follow good organic farming practices for at least three years — they can't use synthetic fertilizer or pesticides; they must maintain or improve the quality of the soil, and they must use preventive measures such as crop rotation and cover crops to discourage pests.