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NJDA Reinventing its Approach for Supporting Organic Agriculture in NJ

When one door closes, another is opened: Organic and regenerative farmers throughout New Jersey are eagerly anticipating a much-needed increase in support from the New Jersey Department of Agriculture as it transitions from its Organic Certification Program in May 2022 to a new direction. The NJDA became the state's sole Accredited Certification Agency (ACA) in 2007 after the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey (NOFA NJ) had performed the duties in cooperation with the Department since 2003.

Moving forward, the NJDA plans to focus on organic education, marketing and development to growers throughout the state. Organic foods continue to be the fastest-growing sector of local, national, and international agriculture, showing an increase in growth equal to 20 percent per year. Recently, several NJ organic farmers and associated nonprofit organizations attended the March State Board of Agriculture meeting in Trenton to express their support for increased NJDA resources offered to the organic farming community.

NOFA NJ Board President, Michael Rassweiler, and Executive Director, Devin Cornia, both presented public comments at the March 23, 2022 meeting, welcoming the NJDA to further collaborate with NOFA NJ to develop their updated offerings to organic and regenerative growers. "I am excited to cultivate a more consistent relationship with the NJDA and the State Board of Agriculture", says Cornia. For over 35 years, NOFA NJ has been the driving force behind organic agriculture in New Jersey, offering support, training, education, policy advocacy, and connection for the growing ag sector.

It's not just farmers that recognize the importance of regenerative practices, either. Letters written to the NJDA in support of increased resources for organic farming came from NOFA NJ, the Foodshed Alliance, the Watershed Institute, NJ Pinelands Preservation Alliance, New Jersey Conservation Foundation, as well as a group letter signed by over 90 farmers and community advocates organized by Hannah Conner (Ramblin' Sol Farm, Cream Ridge NJ). In receiving such feedback, NJ Secretary of Agriculture Douglas Fisher, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Joe Atchison, and State Board of Agriculture Representatives all earnestly expressed their enthusiasm to work hand-in-hand with and further support the organic farming community.

Farmers everywhere continue to face steep and unique challenges, organic and non-organic alike. Novel pests, erratic weather patterns, loss of land to development, and a lack of labor are constant struggles, and the rapidly rising cost of goods are making it even more difficult for farmers and growers to be profitable. Furthermore, corporate organic operations continue to increase their share of the marketplace, competing with local farms on price and their ability to grow a variety of crops year-round. "I cannot emphasize enough the need for increased partnership and cooperation between everyone within our farming community, starting yesterday", Cornia stated. "If we succumb to the pressures that threaten local farms and local food, we could all lose our livelihood.

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