Editorials are written by or approved by members of the Capital Press Editorial Board.

All other commentary pieces are the opinions of the authors but not necessarily this newspaper.

Opinion

Our View

Organic's great divide scuttles checkoff plan

The great divide among organic growers appears to be getting bigger.

The USDA recently canceled a planned organic checkoff that would have paid for marketing and research.

In its announcement, the agency said it dropped the idea because of a lack of consensus among organic growers and processors.

The USDA's decision particularly outraged the Organic Trade Association, whose 8,500 members supported the checkoff.

"USDA unilaterally making the decision on behalf of the 26,000-plus certified organic growers, ranchers, processors, handlers and business owners to not advance the process is stunning," OTA said in a prepared statement. "The $50 billion organic sector offers opportunities for U.S. organic farmers and businesses. It makes no sense that the agency is continuing to take steps to cut it off at the knees."

On the flip side was the No Organic Checkoff Coalition, representing about 6,000 growers who opposed the checkoff.

"I don't know a single farmer that would voluntarily take part in a checkoff program, especially the half-baked proposal from OTA," said Jim Gerritsen, president of the Organic Seed and Trade Association, which was an early member of NOCC.

Such statements don't leave any middle ground.

However, abandoning the checkoff will have a big impact on organics. According to the USDA, 22 federal checkoffs — called research and promotion programs — are funded by producers and processors. The department estimates that every $1 collected through a checkoff results in a return on investment as high as $18. The checkoffs are governed by boards consisting of producers, importers and other stakeholders who decide how to allocate the money. Producers of milk, beef, eggs, cotton — even popcorn and watermelon — have benefited from their checkoffs.

But the less-public benefit of checkoffs is funding for research. Between 50 and 75 percent of the $30 million the organic checkoff would have raised each year would have gone to much-needed research.

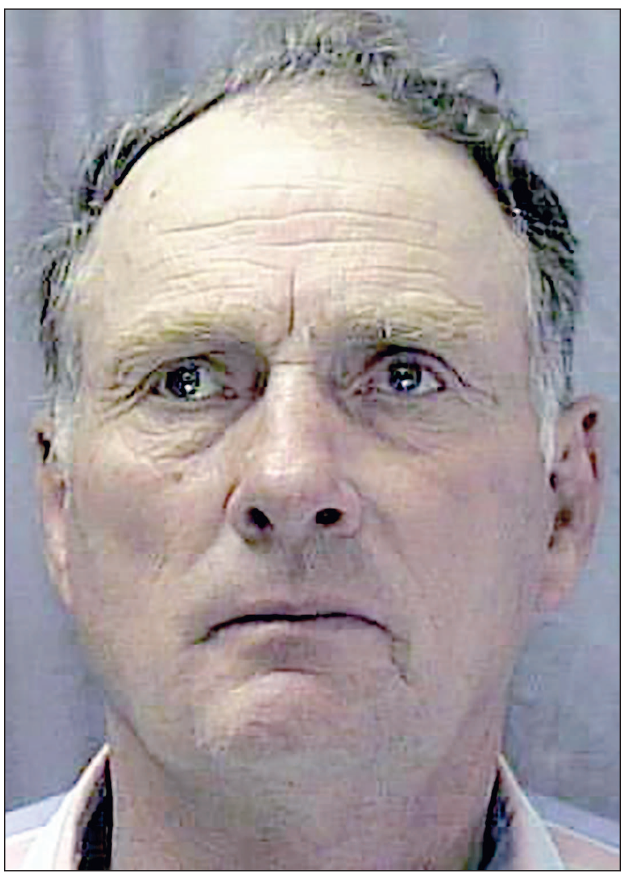
Farmers with sales of less than $250,000 — about 60 percent of all organic farmers — would have been exempted from the assessment of one-tenth of 1 percent of organic sales.

Even so, opponents complained that only farmers who pay the checkoff would have been able to vote on how it was spent. They also chafed at the requirement that all organic producers, even those exempt from paying the checkoff, report their revenue.

Such arguments among organic producers reveal a deep distrust, and we're not sure why. It appears organic producers have much to work through before they can work together.

Our View

Steven Hammond



Dwight Hammond

It's time to free the Hammonds

We are hearing renewed rumblings that action in the clemency cases of Dwight and Steven Hammond is imminent.

President Trump should commute the sentences of the father and son and allow them to return to their Oregon ranch.

Ranchers in Oregon's Harney County, the Hammonds have a long history of disputes with the Bureau of Land Management over grazing allotments. Dwight Hammond was convicted of one count related to a fire that burned 139 acres of BLM land in 2006. Steven Hammond was convicted of one count related to the 2006 fire, and a separate count related to a fire in 2001.

The Hammonds received a fair trial and were found guilty. Many believe they had just cause to start the fires and deserved no punishment even if they had technically broken the law. The jury found otherwise, and the original trial court handed down fair, and lenient, sentences.

In addition to lengthy probation, Dwight Hammond received six months in prison, his son one year. The original prison sentences were served.

But the government appealed those sentences because the judge ignored the minimum mandatory five-year sentence prescribed by the federal arson statute. The appeals court overturned the original sentence and the trial court ordered the Hammonds to report to a federal prison in California to serve out the remainder of new five-year sentences.

Their case, mostly unnoticed in urban America, drew a lot of attention in the western ranching community where they received a lot of positive support. And some that was less than helpful.

Before taking over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, the militia group led by the Bundy clan conducted a rally in Burns, Ore., in their support. The armed group urged the ranchers to refuse to return to prison and offered them "protection."

To their credit, the Hammonds chose not to make a bad situation worse and to instead follow the rule of law.

They went quietly to prison where they have sat since January 2016.

We are not fans of mandatory sentencing guidelines that deny judges discretion in considering circumstances when fixing punishment. Sometimes, the cause of justice is served by leniency.

The original judge in the Hammonds' case found a mandatory five-year sentence overly punitive given the circumstances of their crimes.

So do we.

Ordering the Hammonds to serve the five-year mandatory sentence, though unquestionably legal under statute, was an injustice.

The Hammonds have been in prison too long. The president should commute their sentences to time served and send them home.

Readers' views

Farm bill amendment takes aim at states' rights

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, has proposed an amendment to the Farm Bill that is designed to destroy state laws protecting food safety, animal welfare and the environment. It is best known for the provision called Protect Interstate Commerce Act, PICA, aka the King amendment.

PICA would force states to authorize the sale of "any agricultural product" not prohibited under federal law. If any one state tolerates the production or manufacture of a particular agricultural product, under PICA the other 49 must do so as well, thus completely ignoring the 10th Amendment's guarantee of state sovereign rights. "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." This amendment would upend the constitutional balance between state and federal government.

According to the Harvard Law School Animal Law & Policy Program Report, PICA could potentially overturn hundreds of established state and local laws regarding food quality and safety, infectious diseases, animal welfare, invasive species, fishing regulations, product labeling requirements and pesticide management, among others. If passed, it could have far reaching impacts beyond traditional agricultural commodities.

Please call your congressmen and say "No" to PICA.

Karin Kraft
Olympia, Wash.

Letters policy

Write to us: Capital Press welcomes letters to the editor on issues of interest to farmers, ranchers and the agribusiness community.

Letters policy: Please limit letters to 300 words and include your home address and a daytime telephone number with your submission. Longer pieces, 500-750 words, may be considered as guest commentary pieces for use on the opinion pages. Guest commentary submissions should also include a photograph of the author.

Farmers facing serious challenges — We can help

By JOHN SORBELLO
For the Capital Press

Guest comment
John Sorbello

Farming is a real struggle for many of us these days. Not a day goes by that I don't hear of a fellow farmer who is thinking of leaving the business or choosing to sell his or her dairy cattle herd. Prices are low across the board in New York state, from dairy and beef to grains and grapes.

Things are so challenging that a large dairy cooperative included suicide prevention information with its monthly milk check earlier this year. That spurred a lot of talk and raised some questions about the sensitivity of the letter, but in the end, it was important to get the information out. Help is available for farmers.

New York Farm Bureau took it to heart. We are lucky in this state to have several partners we regularly work with who have the health and safety of our farmers as part of their core mission. The collaboration led to NYFB co-hosting stress management seminars across the state with NY FarmNet, an organization that offers free, confidential support on a host of issues, including personal struggles, family disagreements and business planning. The idea behind the gatherings was to give farmers and agri-service providers information on the signs of stress, burnout and depression, and how best to cope.

Erica Leubner, a NY FarmNet family consultant, is unfortunately in high demand right now. Her core client base is struggling farm families that often turn to her as a last resort. She spoke at a recent stress management seminar.

"The number one thing we hear from farmers across the board is the inability to sleep through the night," said Leubner.

As a result, she said, they will get out of bed and go to work in the middle of the night. Working when under high stress and with little sleep makes for a dangerous combination on the farm. Leubner emphasized the importance of eating a healthy diet, working on a sleep routine, exercising, setting boundaries, and finding time to do something that you enjoy. All of these things can help clear the mind and allow you to focus better on the problems at hand.

"Our head is like a snow globe. You need to settle it down," she said. "The only way to get through a situation is with a clear mind."

Workshop attendees also learned about signs that indicate someone is facing burnout. These include preoccupation with work, increasing irritability, turning to alcohol and drugs, and showing signs of resentment or a lack of compassion toward others.

Leubner's workshop also emphasized the importance of listening and acknowledging the pain and extreme emotions farmers may be feeling. She recounted one client who was near the end of his rope and so consumed with stress that he refused to even look at his finances. However, once they sat down and examined his records, he found that his financial challenges were way more manageable than he had estimated.

"Farmers are so resourceful. They walk out the door and fix something in the moment, but this they can't fix so easily. A phone call is doing something," said Leubner.

All of us can take the time to listen to the people we care about. The simple act of lending an ear acknowledges the pain a fellow farmer may be going through. It allows the person to release emotions and gives some comfort, if only for a moment. No one can solve all of someone's problems, but you can provide a safe space that may be desperately needed.

Farmers give all of themselves every day. There is a great sense of pride in carrying on the family tradition of food production. All of this compounds the stress and worry when things aren't going well. However, farmers are also there for each other like no other community. We quickly jump in to help in a crisis, offering to house a neighbor's cows because of a barn fire or hauling feed across state lines after a natural disaster.

The current state of the ag economy is also a crisis. It may not be as noticeable in some ways, but it could be far more damaging. I encourage you to check on your neighbors, be on the lookout for signs of distress, and above all make sure your friends and family know that help exists.

John Sorbello is a director on the New York Farm Bureau and NY FarmNet boards. He farms in Palmyra, N.Y., where he grows nursery stock for the landscape industry and fresh market sweet corn and vegetables for roadside stands as well as the wholesale market.