

Groups welcome USDA investment in organic

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

USDA will spend up to \$300 million to support organic and transitioning farmers and address organic market challenges.

The Organic Transition Initiative aims at providing opportunities for new and beginning organic farmers and reversing the declining trend in farmers transitioning to organic, which has dropped by nearly 71% since 2008, according to USDA.

- The initiative will invest:
- Up to \$100 million through the Agricultural Marketing Service to build partnership networks in six regions across the U.S. to connect transitioning farmers with mentors to share practical insights and advice.
 - Up to \$100 million to help improve organic supply chains

in targeted markets, such as feed, legumes and other edible rotational crops, livestock and dairy.

- \$75 million through the Natural Resources Conservation Service to develop organic management conservation standards and offer financial and technical assistance to producers.

- \$25 million through the Risk Management Agency to support transitioning and certain certified organic producers' participation in crop insurance, including coverage of a portion of their insurance premium.

The Organic Farming Research Foundation said the initiative is a crucial investment that will support producers' adoption of organic management and build a resilient and equitable food system.



"Organic farming brings environmental and economic benefits to communities across the country but has historically been under-invested in," said Brise Tencer, the foundation's executive director.

"This is a meaningful investment in key programs to support organic and transitioning farmers. We have advocated for these goals for many years, and it is exciting to see them come to fruition," she said.

Tom Chapman, CEO and executive director of the Organic Trade Foundation, said the initiative is a big step in the right direction.

"For too long, organic agriculture has been underrepresented in government programs and support, and farmers wanting to transition to organic face steep hurdles in accessing tai-

lored organic-appropriate programs and resources at USDA," he said. It takes three years to transition from conventional to organic farming.

"This initiative will have lasting positive impacts on organic agriculture. And that will mean an expansion of climate-smart agriculture practices, more economically sound rural communities, more help for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and increased access to organic foods for consumers," he said.

Mike Lavender, interim policy director for the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, said USDA's commitment will support organic producers and the growing market demand for organic products.

"Overall, these investments help address the mounting need

to assist farmers learning and adopting organic production systems if they are to meet growing consumer demand for organic and adopt practices that mitigate and build resilience to climate change," he said.

The National Organic Coalition applauded USDA's commitment and its recognition that organic farming is critical to building a more resilient food system.

"The National Organic Coalition is thrilled to see USDA embracing ideas that have been promoted by our members, including farmer-to-farmer mentorship programs, new technical assistance resources and changes in crop insurance programs to help expand domestic organic production in a sensible manner," said Abby Youngblood, the coalition's executive director.

Hungry pigeons ravage Oregon farm's blueberry crop

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SILETZ, Ore. — An unpredictable chain of events has turned a blessing into a curse for the blueberry crop at Gibson Farms this year.

Cool, wet weather in spring seemed to bode well for the farm's irrigation season, which depends on rainfall in Oregon's Coast Range Mountains.

"Water's been the concern of late, so when we had the wet spring, it was a big relief," said Brenton Gibson, whose family runs the farm.

However, high moisture and low temperatures had other consequences as well: Delayed ripening and poor fruit set in wild berries, on which local band-tailed pigeons depend.

Desperate for an alternative source of food, hundreds of birds swarmed the farm's 20-acre blueberry operation. The family wasn't prepared for such an early onslaught.

"We weren't oriented



Alan Fujishin speaks about the crop loss caused by an influx of pigeons this year at Gibson Farms near Siletz, Ore. With him is his wife, Lorissa.

toward bird damage because the fruit wasn't even ripe yet," said Alan Fujishin, who's married to Gibson's sister, Lorissa. "When they

hit our early varieties, they started cleaning them out remarkably quickly."

The farm began hazing the birds with propane can-

nons, pyrotechnics, lasers and other methods, while seeking help from state and federal wildlife experts.

"It became clear the



Brenton Gibson examines blueberry bushes damaged by pigeons that caused severe crop loss at the family's farm.

problem was bigger than the tools we have combined," Fujishin said.

By late July, though, up to 700 pigeons were feasting on the blueberry crop, ultimately erasing roughly \$80,000 from the farm's expected revenues.

"The birds have effectively taken the first and second picks," Gibson said.

Apart from the direct loss of blueberries, the bushes were damaged by so many relatively heavy birds sitting on their branches.

"Those pigeons aren't a graceful bird when they land or take off," Gibson said. "They sort of thrash around."

Federal authorities decided against allowing lethal removal of any birds, since their population isn't considered robust in the area.

"Maybe they're just not looking for them in the right places," joked Brooke Gibson, Brenton's wife.

It's rare for the federal government to approve lethal bird removal, but the method isn't particularly effective anyway, said Jason Kirchner, a wildlife biologist with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Unlike other animals, birds will still tend to come back even if members of their flock are killed, Kirchner said. "It would be detrimental to the population to keep killing them."

Crop damage from pigeons is common in Oregon but the concentration at the Gibson's farm was unusual for the Coast Range, he said. "At this intensity level, it was a crazy year. It's a hundred times worse when the wild berries aren't there."

Fujishin said he should have called in biologists from ODFW and USDA's Wildlife Services a couple weeks earlier to forestall the invasion.

"Growers should move quickly so they're not playing catch-up," he said. "It's easier to prevent them from getting established than to haze out an established flock."

The pigeons ultimately ate most of the blueberry crop after the farm had already invested in the necessary inputs and spent additional money on hazing the intruders.

Fujishin jokes that he could still try to "throw dollar bills at the birds," but the financial toll they've taken is serious. The farm will be forced to cut back on fungicides and fertilizer next year, adversely affecting future yields.

"Things will be tight next year," said Lorissa Fujishin.

While this year's crop loss is the worst experienced by its current operators, they know earlier generations survived similarly devastating setbacks from bird damage and freezing temperatures.

The farm is also diversified, growing hay and raising cattle, so the blueberry crop isn't its sole source of income.

"You don't expect all the enterprises to do well all the time," Alan Fujishin said.

Wild berries have finally been maturing in the forests surrounding the farm, so most of the pigeons have now moved on to other food sources.

The family hopes enough blueberries remain for a machine harvest to be worthwhile, and it's also opened the farm's U-pick operation to the public.

Pickers have been warned they'll have a tougher time filling buckets with an abundance of fruit for their freezers.

"We didn't want them to come unprepared for what they're going to see," Lorissa Fujishin said.

"It sort of feels like a salvage operation at this point," added Alan, her husband.

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