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### **OFARM 2020 Fall Meeting Highlighted by SOE Dialog with David Glasgow, NOP**

Like many others during this time of pandemic concerns, Organic Farmers Agency for Relationship Marketing (OFARM), the largest organic grain marketing cooperative in the United States, its leadership and fellow farmer members through Zoom technology “attended” from their kitchen tables earlier this month. It was a new process for many but allowed for active participation from across the 18 state OFARM marketing area. It was a particularly important meeting for several reasons but especially because the three coops saw significant increases in engagement in cooperative marketing both with volume and new membership.

Participants were provided the opportunity to hear David Glasgow, Associate Deputy Administrator for the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) update the meeting about the many provisions being addressed in the recently drafted Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) rule. This rule is currently open for comment until October 5<sup>th</sup>. This long overdue rule does include language intended to close several obvious loopholes in organic production and logistics oversight especially relating to the huge inflow of organic imported grains.

“Some of these shipments have been exposed as fraudulent and others remain suspect given the sheer volume from areas where serious questions arise as to the actual ability to access the organic grain let alone instilling any confidence that certification is authentic”, according to Oren Holle, President of OFARM. “The devastating impact to the profitability of production of domestic grains has been going on now for more than five years and has resulted in the loss of millions of dollars to domestic producers and serious damage to the integrity of the USDA Organic label. These new provisions must be implemented NOW, Holle added.” Glasgow expressed optimism with the increased involvement of other government agencies including Customs and Border Patrol, USDA’s Inspector General and the U.S. Attorney’s Office. He also noted NOP’s increased coordination with law enforcement partners at the border and that a significant number of grain operations in the Black Sea region and South America have surrendered or had their certification revoked over the last two years following increased surveillance and enforcement actions by NOP and its certifiers.

While reviewing the proposed rule during the meeting with our affiliates at the Organic Farmers Association, the National Organic Coalition and the Cornucopia Institute, OFARM attendees

came to understand that NOP enforcement will still remain a challenge to providing the necessary oversight. In the comments that OFARM will be submitting we will point out that the proposed language in the SOE rule appears to fall short. NOP needs greater authority to intervene in suspect activity and to do so in a timely and authoritative manner. Some serious questions remain relating to whether the requirements for documentation, mainly the new requirements for Import Certificates, will be timely enough to provide for a stop to the actual flow of fraudulent product.

Another area of concern is the relatively minuscule level of penalties that may be assessed when fraud is detected. We point out that the penalty should include a significant enough consequence to deter fraudulent activity, including much larger fines, a permanent ban for participation in any organic commerce, and a more direct threat of jail time for illegal activity.

In other agenda items during this meeting, plans were laid out to build on the increasing need for production and marketing education among domestic producers. Of particular concern is the ongoing movement of organic production to model the conventional mindset with significantly less robust rotations and “going it alone” marketing habits. There is only one answer to counter this trend. That is for organic producers to continue the growing interest in a greater level of cooperation in marketing activities. This is the sole purpose of OFARM. Formed as a Marketing Agency in Common it provides for the opportunity for our member cooperatives to collaborate in marketing information activity for the producer member’s benefits.

OFARM’s website: [www.ofarm.org](http://www.ofarm.org)

USDA, NOP website: [www.ams.usda.gov/Organic](http://www.ams.usda.gov/Organic)