

Organic Seed in the United States: Challenges and opportunities

Baker, B.¹

Keywords: seed, markets, organic certification

Abstract

Organic seed provides a way to close the loop and support the development of an organic seed sector. Standards require organic farmers to plant organic seed when it is commercially available. Previous surveys suggest that most organic farmers in the United States do not plant organic seed. Organic certifiers are required to collect and review information on organic seed. A survey was conducted of organic certifiers to identify how the regulation requiring organic seed is being implemented and what is needed to grow the market for organic seed.

By many indications, organic seed production has not met the potential demand from organic farmers, given the continued use of nonorganic seed. Organic farmers in the United States are required to plant organic seed except "[w]hen an equivalent organically produced variety is not commercially available." Reliable statistics on the planting of organic seeds are difficult to find. A number of companies have found themselves with unsold inventories of organic seed while organic farmers claim that organic seed is not available. Organic farmers often avoid buying organic seed because of the cost. However, some farmers also say that specific varieties are unavailable, and also give poor quality and low germination rates as reasons to not plant organic seed.

A survey was sent to USDA Accredited Certifying Agents that asked how they determined commercial availability and what data they considered. The survey also asked how crops and varieties were tracked and what criteria were used to determine

¹ Organic Materials Review Institute, P.O. Box 11558, Eugene, OR 97440, USA, e-mail: bb@omri.org, Internet: www.omri.org

if a given or equivalent variety was unavailable. Finally, organic certifiers were asked to identify crops and varieties they most often find to be commercially unavailable.

Results suggest:

- Market research for the organic seed sector is needed to identify which particular varieties are unavailable and what production problems need to be addressed.
- Commercial availability is not clearly defined or consistently implemented.
- While there are several databases that are used to determine organic seed availability, none offer comprehensive market conditions.
- There are no objective measures for "equivalent varieties."
- Seed quality needs to be improved for organic seed to meet its full potential.