

# Organic sector looking to a bright future

## Association uses funding to plan for the future

Kate Storey, president of Manitoba Organic Alliance



When you hear the word “organic” do you think of vegetables, meat, grain or something else?

The diversity of Manitoba’s organic sector makes communicating with and serving its members a challenge for industry organizations, one the sector is well prepared to accept thanks to a recent planning session that left them invigorated and with a solid plan for the future.

Kate Storey, president of Manitoba’s Organic Alliance (MOA), and organic cattle and grain farmer, was one of the participants in the session along with members of Organic Producers Association of Manitoba (OPAM) and the Organic Food Council of Manitoba (OFCM). MOA received funding through *Growing Forward 2’s* Growing Visions program for the meeting and to hire a fundraising consultant.

### Defining roles and strengthening the industry

“We needed to sit down together and determine who did what best,” says Storey. “The organic sector is very diverse and complicated. We have to communicate with everyone and figure out how we can best help the sector succeed.”

The three organizations discovered that there were divides between their focuses and visions and they each served the sector in a different way. The session helped them communicate those differences and identify gaps in service.

“It has really helped in making things more efficient,” says Storey. “Now we can buckle down and each do what we do best.”

Janine Gibson, chairperson at OFCM agrees. She says her organization has a 15-year history of providing education

to organic producers in Manitoba. The planning session affirmed their mission to continue educating producers and Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (MAFRD) facilitators helped her express issues in a constructive, team-building way.

“I think it’s important that we work together,” she says. “I felt that during the meeting all organizations acknowledged OFCM’s role as an educator and didn’t duplicate it.”

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John Finne, president of OPAM, says his organization is most interested in areas of producing and processing organic products. The meeting helped OPAM discuss ways to present a unified front with MOA and OFCM as they worked together to grow the sector.

“There’s a strong demand for organic product and we’re not currently producing enough to meet that demand,” he says. He hopes the planning and collaborating between organizations will help them create a stronger organic sector as a whole.

### Finding fundraising capacity

The second part of the meeting was spent discussing funding options for the sector.

“Fundraising becomes a huge daunting task,” says Storey, pointing out the organics industry organizations are primarily run by volunteers. “I’m a farmer, fundraising isn’t my area of expertise but there’s a huge need for industry organizations to grow and do more. The customers want organic and the farmers want information and for that we need to grow our capacity.”

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With input from a fundraising consultant, MOA hopes to become self-sustaining and build the capacity to hire a permanent staff member. Storey says the help from MAFRD and *Growing Forward 2* was invaluable.

“Admin funding is hard to find for small organizations, and if you want to exist, you have to find the funds,” she says. “Growing Visions is a great tool for getting your organization moving.”

She says the biggest difference the industry will see as a result of the meeting and subsequent planning is a strengthened organic sector and industry organizations that are strong and able to advocate on behalf of members. She anticipates greater capacity to do things like hold events, share information and best practices, speak to media and offer education to consumers and growers.

### Demand for organic higher than ever

“Right now a lot of the growth in the organic industry in Manitoba is being driven by the food processing sector,” says Laura Telford, business development specialist—organic marketing with MAFRD. “Their main challenge is a lack of organic ingredients.”

Transitioning to organic can be difficult for producers. There is a steep learning curve, the process can be expensive and it can take up to three years. Farmers must provide detailed information about their farm and create an organic plan that covers everything from building soil fertility to managing weeds and disease and identifying environmental buffer zones. Demand for organic products is climbing and end users increasingly are looking for organic certification.

“The demand for organic is stronger than it ever was,” says Telford. “There’s an opportunity to bring in new growers.”

She says industry organizations will need to lead the charge, which is why the recent planning session was so valuable and timely. ■