



# the **Communicator**

Organic Crop Improvement Association International || Fall 2023

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# President's Message

Hello everyone! Another summer has just about come and gone. As fall approaches it is time for farmers to start focusing on the fruits of their labor. Here is a brief overview of what your OCIA board of directors has been working on this past quarter. Like a farmer sowing a field, we hope our efforts today will yield results in the future.

As you may have noticed our new marketing director, Kelsey Sejkora, has been busy giving OCIA a new look and feel. She's revamped the way our staff collects information from attendees at trade shows, increased communications between OCIA and prospective members, implemented new platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, plus updated our website. If you haven't been to the OCIA website lately, please check it out. I think you will be pleasantly surprised!

The board has also been discussing our upcoming AGMM (Annual General Membership Meeting) scheduled for February 8th, 2024 in Council Bluffs, Iowa. As many of you are aware membership

voting can now be conducted online. We are working on the technology that will allow anyone participating remotely to cast their votes. As stated in our Spring newsletter the board believes this will allow greater participation amongst all our members especially those in Latin America.

The TOPP (Transition to Organic Partnership Program) is now starting to be implemented. Other certifiers have begun hosting organic learning events across the United States. I'm proud to report OCIA has hosted its first TOPP sponsored program at the Brad and Teresa Edelman farm in Kansas on August 14th 2023. Approximately 15-17 farmers attended, both certified and non-certified, to learn how the Edelman's manage their family's certified organic farm. OCIA hopes to host more of these events in the future.

Also, I would encourage anyone who is an organic farmer to consider becoming a mentor through TOPP. To get started, go to our OCIA website and click on the TOPP Plains link. The link gives

a detailed explanation of what the TOPP mentorship program is all about. If you truly believe in organic agriculture, this is a fantastic way to pass on your knowledge to the next generation of farmers. You will also be compensated for your efforts!

Lastly, the OCIA board of directors/staff trip to Huatulco, Mexico is still on track for November 8th - 13th. We have already received a couple of RSVP's from local non-certified operators who are interested in obtaining more information about organic agriculture. Everyone participating in the trip is excited to learn more about our OCIA leaders and farmers in Mexico and the surrounding areas!

In closing I would like to thank our staff for all they do. We truly have an energetic and dedicated group of people who make OCIA a great place to certify your crops!

*Chris Jaworski  
OCIA International  
Board of Directors  
President*

# Executive Director's Report



Greetings OCIA International Membership!

Greetings from Nebraska!

Inspection season is wrapping up. If you have not been inspected or received the notice for your inspection, please know we are continuing to work on assigning inspections. We are busy with inspection reports and final reviews. Our goal is to make a decision on each file within 60 days of receiving the inspection report. We do the best we can to achieve this goal. Please respond to inspectors timely should they need more information to complete your inspection report.

Noncompliances are a continuous part of Organic Certification. Please understand that the process of noncompliances are part of the Organic Regulations. OCIA is required as an accredited body to ensure that all rules and regulations are followed by each operator. OCIA also goes through the process of being audited by Accreditors, and we also receive noncompliances that we are required to address. Please understand it is not our intent to be “nitpicky”; we are required to ensure you are following the standards. Please feel free to contact us about any questions you have during your certification process.

The Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) is a USDA Program investing up to \$100 Million over five years in cooperative agreement with non-profit organizations across the United States who will partner with others to provide technical assistance

and wrap-around activities. OCIA International is the Lead Cooperator for the Plains Region, serving North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Colorado, Kansas, and Oklahoma.

TOPP is a collaborative effort involving many partners working together towards a common goal of providing mentoring services, technical assistance, community building and organic workforce development. If you are interested in becoming a mentor, please see [www.ocia.org/plains-topp](http://www.ocia.org/plains-topp)

Please visit our website at [www.ocia.org](http://www.ocia.org) for upcoming events such as Tradeshows we will be attending and local farm tours.

OCIA International works hard to provide our certified operators with excellent support and customer service. We thank you for your continued support and look forward to serving you in the future. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

I wish you a safe harvest season.

*Amanda Brewster  
OCIA International  
Executive Director*

# Treasurer's Report



Hello everyone,

Harvest is approaching quickly in northeast Nebraska. I've had a warm couple of weeks that pushed my crops to maturity.

Taking a look, at the financial picture of OCIA International, on the income side of the ledger, accounts receivable is up 50% compared to year ago levels. The certification fees are currently down 6% due to lower file numbers for the year.

On a positive note, secondary inspections and testing expenses are down almost \$15,000 compared to a year ago.

The net income for the year is still slightly above budget at the present time.

Hope everyone has a safe harvest.

*Randy Mosel  
OCIA International  
Board of Directors  
Treasurer*

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**OCIA International Members are welcome to submit items for inclusion in the quarterly issue of the Communicator.**

Please direct submissions, article ideas, letters, address changes, advertisements, inquiries, and/or comments to Marketing Director, Kelsey Sejkora, at ksejkora@ocia.org.

Articles and advertisement deadline for the Winter 2024 Communicator is December 1, 2023.




# Share your story!

Your hard work, dedication, and success are truly inspiring. OCIA International would love to share your story on our website and social media accounts to help inspire others who are just beginning the organic certification process.

**This quarter, we want to know why you decided to pursue organic certification and why you chose to certify with OCIA International.**

To be featured, email your story to Marketing Director Kelsey Sejkora, at [ksejkora@ocia.org](mailto:ksejkora@ocia.org) with the subject, "Why I pursued organic certification with OCIA".



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# A Passion for Sustainable Farming

Edelman Certified Organic Farm inspires others to adopt sustainable practices

## A passion for sustainable agriculture

Sustainable farming is Brad Edelman's passion. The Kansas farmer, who began farming full time with his father in the 1980s, hasn't used chemicals on crops since he was a teenager.

"When Brad was around 14 years old, he sprayed corn with 2-4-D," his wife, Teresa Edelman, said. The year's wet conditions prevented cultivation, and using the synthetic herbicide to help the crops grow seemed like the best option at the time.

Although limited exposure to 2-4-D is typically safe for humans, some people can have adverse reactions like headaches, confusion, and vomiting. Long term exposure can lead to permanent kidney and liver damage and even cancer.

"I got very sick," Brad recalled. "I decided I would never use chemicals like that again if I could help it."

Brad and his father committed to farming without the use of synthetic inputs. To ensure the health of the soil and the viability of their crops, the men implemented a crop rotation cycle that included corn, beans, oats, wheat, alfalfa, clover, sweet clover, and barley.

"We continue to use crop rotation," Brad said, noting that the only crop they no longer plant is barley. "And we have added in cover crops."

In addition to crops, the Edelman farm also includes a beef cow herd and flock of ewes that contribute to soil fertility through green manure. The family also has an assortment of other animals. Dogs and cats help with predator control, and chickens provide meat, eggs, and insect control.

"We also have horses, maybe a goat and pig or two depending on our children's current interests," Teresa said.

Brad's commitment to farming sustainably extends beyond his family's operation. He is also committed to helping other farmers understand the benefits of organic farming and what it takes to operate a successful organic farm.

## Farm events allow the sharing of a passion

On August 14, the Edelmanns hosted a farm-start event meant to encourage others in the area to adopt organic farming practices. Plains TOPP (Transition to Organic Partnership Program) sponsored the event, and nearly twenty individuals from Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota attended.

The event began with a farm tour. Attendees--some transitioning to organic, some already certified--observed field layouts, storage of on-farm equipment and supplies, and how the Edelmanns use cover crops to combat weeds.

"On farm events benefit everyone that comes," Brad said.

Attendees largely agreed, leaving not only with firsthand observations of a successful organic farm, but with additional

insights thanks to presentations that covered TOPP, cover cropping, and the use of natural inputs.

Although the focus of the event was individuals transitioning to organic, experienced organic farmers also benefited from the on-farm event—including the event hosts.

"We benefited by caring individuals giving us ideas to try on existing problematic areas," Brad reflected. Changes in weather patterns, the availability of seeds and natural inputs, and updates to organic regulations can give rise to problems for certified operators. But the organic community is strong and supportive. "We were encouraged knowing there are other like-minded farmers out there dealing with some of the same struggles that we have, but [they] still keep going!"

Attending on-farm events helps the Edelmanns continue growing in their knowledge of organic agriculture and refining their practices.

"We've always come home with ideas, resources and encouragement to help us keep trying to improve our practices," Brad said.

The Edelmanns are confident that the August 14 event provided the same positive impact for attendees.

## Hard work rewarded

The on-farm event also included an informal award ceremony during the organic lunch. Brad and Teresa were one of two recipients of the John Vogelsberg Sustainable Agriculture Award. The other recipient was Paul Conway, who gave a presentation on cover crops at the event.

Unlike many awards which are given out annually, the John Vogelsberg Sustainable Agriculture Award is not given annually. It is only awarded to individuals who truly embody the spirit of John Vogelsberg: a deep and unfailing commitment to sustainable agricultural practices. The Edelmanns' deep commitment and passion for sustainability embodies the spirit of the award.

"Our farm has been in the family for three generations," Brad said, reflecting on his deep commitment to both the land and his family's tradition of ecological stewardship.

Teresa added, "Farming sustainably means caring for the land and all of its organisms to keep it balanced so the land can provide for us."

The Edelmanns don't farm sustainably just for themselves. They farm sustainably for future generations as well.

"Good stewardship is not only profitable, but also commanded by the Creator," Brad said. "We feel blessed to have the privilege to care for this farm while we're living on this earth and working with our children to instill the same values so when we're gone, they can carry on to the next generation. That's sustainability."





# Healthy Soil

*The foundation of  
organic agriculture rests  
under your feet.*

One of organic agriculture's main goals is to improve the health of soil. Doing so requires establishing ecological balance and increasing biological diversity—a cycle that is disrupted, and sometimes destroyed, by synthetic inputs.

For this reason, organic farmers abstain from the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides used frequently in conventional farming and instead use non-synthetic inputs and mechanical interventions to help control pests, weeds, and disease. Focusing on non-synthetic solutions allows helpful organisms to find homes within the soil.

## Improving soil health

Healthy, productive soil has between 3 and 6% organic matter. Applying synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides can kill this organic matter. However, soil has the capacity to heal and build new organic matter over time. Transitioning, new, and experienced organic farmers can combat loss of organic matter through the application of non-synthetic inputs like green manure, the strategic use of cover crops, and more. As organic matter increases, soil health improves.

Increasing organic life inevitably leads to a natural increase in organic material within the soil as organisms progress through their life cycle. As biological diversity increases, the health of soil increases. This is in part because healthy soil exists in a constant state of decomposition and revitalization, and this cycle eventually allows plant life and organisms to operate in a mutually beneficial system:

- Plant root systems provide food and habitats for diverse organic life
- Organisms living in soil help relieve soil compaction by creating pathways for better water and oxygen filtration





- Biological waste deposited by organisms provides nutrients for growing plants
- Decomposing root systems in turn provide nutrients and shelter for organisms

#### What are the benefits of healthy soil?

Soil provides necessary nutrients to crops, but healthy soil provides additional ecological benefits. Healthy soil that contains between 3 and 6% organic matter leads to better:

- **Water regulation:** Soil that is healthy is better able to absorb water because the diverse organisms living within it relieve soil compaction by creating pathways that allow water to seep deep into the soil. This means that healthy soil is better able to sustain plant life during extreme weather conditions, like droughts.
- **Soil retention:** The strong root systems found in healthy soil prevent valuable topsoil from being stripped away by strong winds, water runoff, and other mechanical forces.
- **Nutrient cycling:** Because of better soil retention and water regulation, healthy soil is better able to retain these nutrients which are used and replaced by organic life within the soil. This leads to soil that is

rich in carbon, nitrogen, phosphorous, and other life sustaining minerals and nutrients.

#### How can operators manage soil in a way that increases health and biodiversity?

Improving the health of soil requires intentional soil management practices. Research shows that some strategies are more successful than others in maintaining the health of soil. Farmers who wish to increase or maintain their soils health should:

- Ensure that soil is covered as much as possible. Avoid having exposed soil to prevent stripping of organic matter and healthy topsoil.
- Maximize the presence of living roots in soil. Utilize cover crops and other plants to keep live roots in the ground year-round.
- Minimize disturbance of soil. Mechanical management such as tilling should be used as little as possible to allow nutrients and organic life to remain in soil.
- Add biodiversity. Use natural inputs, like green manure, to add nutrients to the soil that will lead to increased organic life.

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## OCIA Field Signs for Sale

Aluminum "No Spray Zone" signs are currently for sale at \$18 each plus shipping/handling. There are three convenient ways to order:

- Visit [ocia.org](http://ocia.org)
- Call us at 402-477-2323
- Email [info@ocia.org](mailto:info@ocia.org)



# MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

## Transition to Organic Partnership Program

*In 2022, the USDA announced plans to invest up to \$100 million to build partnership networks in six regions across the United States. The Plains Transition to Organic Partnership Program (Plains TOPP) is a coalition of organizations providing technical assistance and wrap-around support for transitioning and existing organic farmers.*

**The goal of TOPP is to make the transition from conventional farming to organic farming easier and more accessible. To that end, a robust mentorship program has been developed. The mentorship program will:**

- Connect transitioning operators with an experienced organic operator who will provide guidance throughout the transition process.
- Mentors will receive training, guidance, and support to ensure a successful relationship.
- Transitioning operators will set goals with mentors, and mentors will actively assist transitioning operators in working toward their goals.

### **Mentors will:**

- Receive training prior to beginning mentorship
- Have at least 4 years experience with organic production and certification.
- Understand organic rules and certification requirements
- Meet with mentee at least 45 hours/year
- Communicate challenges and benefits of organic certification to mentees

*Stipend of \$3,000/year provided to mentors (multi-lingual mentors and mentors with more than one mentee may be eligible for additional compensation)*

**For more information, or to become a mentor, visit [www.ocia.org/plains-topp](http://www.ocia.org/plains-topp), or email Brandon Hill at [bhill@ocia.org](mailto:bhill@ocia.org).**



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