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InfoBio special issue

The OFC is ten year old!
**The Feminine Labour Force
behind Organics**

Organic agriculture is about seeding, rotating crops, feeding bees, collecting maple sap, providing outdoor access to birds, growing green manure, preparing organic pizza, and so many other tasks. It is about food production, about what we like to eat and what we stand for.

But organics is also about paperwork, conferences, supporting transition, reviewing standards and launching blogs, tweets, webinars and technical bulletins that will support organic operators, convince operators to transition to organic production and educate consumers.

In fact, fundraising, project management, strategic planning and communication are the daily task of the staff behind the provincial organic associations that are members of OFC – associations that have become essential to the growth of the sector.

OFC is now entering its 11th year of activities. To celebrate OFC's 'sustainability', we present a special InfoBio issue entitled *The Feminine Labour Force behind Organics* based on interviews with the women leading our organic provincial/regional associations.

We asked the women why they work for the organic sector, and what are their projects, their challenges, and their hopes. All put together, these testimonies tell more about the state of the sector than some detailed surveys or analysis. Their vision is acute, they have great objectives and they know what the problems are; we can learn from them and trust that they will continue supporting organic operators with their talent and great skills.

We hope that you will enjoy reading their answers!

The Feminine Labour Force behind Organics

Jen Gamble

Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia

What is your basic academic background or training?

I have a Bachelor's degree in History

How long have you been involved in the organic sector?

I have been involved in the organic sector for 18 years. Starting as a farm worker on an organic vegetable farm, I moved to owning a farm and working for COABC.

Your vision: why organics?

I believe that changing our relationship with food and the food system, has wide reaching societal benefits. This belief has fed my food advocacy passion for more than 15 years.

“As a farmer, I could see the disconnect between farmers, consumers and the food system, it inspired me to become a deeply dedicated member of the organic food movement.”

The projects you want to realize for your organization?

I would like to see our organization successfully complete the online application forms and expand our database capabilities to better support the growth of the sector as a whole.

What is your main challenge?

The main challenge for COABC is organizational capacity

Your organic wish?

I hope that organic practices become the baseline for all of agriculture



<https://www.certifiedorganic.bc.ca/>

Becky Lipton

Organic Alberta

Your basic academic background or training?

I have been working with the organic industry in Alberta since 2008. Originally brought on as a consultant for the Alberta Organic Harmonization Project, I am now the Executive Director of Organic Alberta. I bring my experience in strategic planning, fundraising, community engagement, organizational and industry development, project management, program development, coordination and evaluation and communications to the position.

Your basic academic background or training?

I have a Masters' degree (women and agriculture), a graduate diploma in Environmental Education and a BA in Environment and Development. I have experience in organic vegetable farming. Past work experience includes working with a rural research group; providing business and leadership development training for farmers' markets' vendors and board of directors; founding an agricultural apprenticeship program; providing research on local food, food security, supply chains and sustainable agriculture for municipal and provincial governments; and providing agricultural education to youth at risk.

Since joining Organic Alberta, I have taken the organization from a budget of \$50k to \$1 million, and led the visioning, fundraising and implementation of a number of programs including the Prairie Organic Grain Initiative - a 4 year, \$2.2 million, prairie wide project aimed at increase the stability and resiliency in the organic grain sector. I am also a founder, current board member and on the fundraising team of the Prairie Organic Development Fund and have sat on the steering committee of the Organic Value Chain Round Table since 2015

Your vision: why organics? I am a high-energy person full of determination and passion for a form of agriculture that I believe has the potential to transform and cultivate a healthy food system – a system that is sustainable for our farmers, our eaters, and everyone in between.

The projects you want to realize for your organization

I want to continue to help, support and grow the organic sector in Alberta, and across the Prairies and Canada. In particular, I think we need to focus on soil health and ensuring that all organic farmers are integrating best management practices that lead to long-term soil building. I would also love to see the organic beef and vegetable sectors thrive as much as the grain sectors are in Alberta.



The main challenge

From an organizational perspective, operating without any access to check-off fees or other forms of sustainable funding is challenging, although again the industry continues to find supportive and innovative ways to keep us going!

“I am always in awe of our incredible and innovative organic farmers and businesses who tackle the various challenges we face as a sector head on. It may sound cliché, but one of the key things I have learned from the organic sector is that challenges are always just another form of opportunity.”

Your organic wish!

That we continue to build off of each other’s strengths and work together to have the greatest impact possible, whether it be within our own provinces, across regions, or the whole country.



<http://organicalberta.org/>

Marla Carlson

SaskOrganics

Your basic academic background or training?

I have a Bachelor of Arts with a Major in Anthropology from the University of Lethbridge and an MSc in Policy Studies from the University of Bristol, England.

How long have you been involved in the organic sector?

I have worked in the organic sector in Saskatchewan for 12 years.



Your vision: why organics?

I believe that organic food and farming provide many of the solutions to some of the most pressing issues of our time - human and environmental. I believe that the earth is a reflection of our bodies and our bodies reflect the earth. When we heal one, we heal the other. When we harm one we harm the other. Integrity, transparency, social and environmental justice are all important to me. I have always worked in positions where I feel that I am in service to something larger than myself.

The projects you want to realize for your organization?

Sustained, stable funding! Having a solid financial foundation for the organization that isn't project based makes it possible to do that work that needs to be done rather than doing the work that fits grant criterion. A lot of the time these objectives align, but not always! The Prairie Organic Development Fund is doing some great work to help build this foundation for the organic industry associations on the Prairies.

The main challenge?

For SaskOrganics, our main challenge is keeping up with all of the opportunities that are presenting themselves - what a fantastic challenge to have. As a sector or community, I believe that one of our biggest challenges is how we adapt to our changing environment as we move from a niche to mainstream.

“How do we stay true to the philosophy and values that underpin the organic standards and scale up to meet year-on-year double-digit growth?”

Your organic wish!

In presentations, I quite often joke, that when I put on my rose-tinted glasses, I see the whole world organic. I'm not sure if it is an organic wish - but I do wish for a world where we farm 'without labels'. That doesn't mean a world without certification, but it is a world where we don't create separations or divides based on the way food is grown (certified organic, regenerative agriculture, organic regenerative agriculture, agro-ecology, non-organic). We are all farmers, we all grow food and we are neighbours. We have more in common, than different. If we can identify the common ground

it is more likely we can have meaningful conversations/dialogue about the areas where we differ. At SaskOrganics, we have made a conscious effort over the past three years to tell the good story organics has to tell. In the developed world, consumers will ultimately determine the shape of the food system through their food purchases (or will a changing climate make the decisions for us?). If, as a movement, we consistently educate consumers on benefits of organically grown food, and tell the good story we have to tell, the rest will follow - healthy soil, healthy plants, and healthy people.



<http://saskorganics.org/>

Manitoba Organic Alliance

MOA is looking for an Outreach Coordinator to work to build the capacity of organics in Manitoba.
Contact MOA!



<http://manitobaorganicalliance.com/>

Carolyn Young

Organic Council of Ontario

Your basic academic background or training?

I went to the University of Guelph for Environmental Sciences (major: Ecology, minor: Rural extension). During my time at the University of Guelph, I took the very first (ever) organic agriculture course led by Dr. Ann Clarke.

I also did my Master's of Environmental Studies at York University with a focus on food policy and local food economies under the supervision of Dr. Rod MacRae. There, my major research paper was focused on the growth of farmers' markets in Toronto and the need for a municipal policy.

How long have you been involved in the organic sector?

I have been involved in the organic sector in one way or another for over fifteen years. During my undergraduate degree, I participated in the Willing Workers on Organic Farmers (WWOOF) program at several farms, including one in the Yukon and one in Quebec. Following university, I was an Organic Agriculture Intern at the Falls Brook Centre in New Brunswick where I helped manage the organic gardens and also organized an International Organic Inspectors Association (IOIA) training (and became trained as an inspector myself). During that internship, I also helped develop New Brunswick's first Organic Agriculture Apprenticeship program in partnership with a local college. In Mexico, I worked for the Organic Farmers' Markets Network developing promotional materials and visiting organic farms. I also helped to map out organic coffee parcels in Oaxaca, Mexico, and participated in a carbon sequestration program with growers there. Upon returning to New Brunswick, I conducted several organic farm inspections in PEI and New Brunswick and participated in organic farm tours to Maine.



During my Masters of Environmental Studies at York, I did work placements with urban agriculture organizations such as The Stop and Greenest City. I apprenticed at Whole Circle Farm and conducted my research on organic farmers' markets in Toronto. Following my Master's, I received a Metcalf Internship award to work for The Stop Community Food Centre where I implemented the greenhouse's composting system and hosted one of Toronto's largest Seedy Saturdays at the Wychwood barns. I also worked on a signage system for The Stop's farmers' market.

After a short stint as a researcher for the Hamilton Community Food Security Stakeholders Committee writing a farmers' market policy white paper, I was hired at Sustain Ontario, where I worked for four and a half years. There, I facilitated policy working groups and conducted government relations work focused on sustainable farming and food security issues. I coordinated the Vote On Food campaign, which helped get the Local Food Act passed and managed the Flocking Options campaign that led to the Chicken Farmers of Ontario introducing a new Artisanal Chicken Program that allows small-scale

farmers to grow up to 2000 birds for local consumption without purchasing quota. I was also engaged in consultations on regulating neonicotinoids in Ontario.

Your vision: why organics?

Thinking about food as an intimate link between the political and the personal has been part of my life since I was in high school. As an environmentalist and a bit of a policy nerd, I believe that the organic certification system is one of the most effective and established ways to shift agriculture to a more sustainable and healthful system. As I've witnessed the trend towards supporting local in Ontario over the past 10 years, I've also seen how difficult it is to reconfigure our globalized food system. I've also witnessed a lot of greenwashing by both private companies and the government, using consumer preference for "local" to uphold the status quo. It is a huge success that companies like A&W and McDonald's are talking about the origins and ethics of their food products as well as offering healthier options, but as "good food" takes the stage in the mainstream, it is even more important to push for higher standards of ecology and transparency, and I believe that the organic system has an enormous role to play in this.

The projects you want to realize for your organization

It is my personal and professional goal to get the Ontario government talking about and supporting organic agriculture.

“Considering the wealth and population of Ontario, it is incredibly disappointing that there is so little political infrastructure or dedicated public programming to support organic production. Specifically, my goal is to have the Ontario government finally enact an organic regulation within the province and to support that regulation with transition support payments and programs that are inclusive and/or tailored to small-scale agriculture.”

This September, I'm proud to say that we saw a Private Members Bill co-sponsored by the NDP and Conservatives introduced into the legislature.

My second goal is to establish a mechanism for stable funding for the organic sector. My experience in the non-profit sector has taught me that funders, especially government, can be fickle, overly bureaucratic and unreliable. The fate of an organization, let alone a sector, that I believe is so critical for the future of the province, cannot be left to the whims of ad hoc funding. I believe that establishing an organic check-off in Ontario or Canada is critical to the health and longevity of our organic sector. Having a stable funding base will allow us to leverage more funds from government, consumers and industry that can be used to propel the sector forward into the future.

The main challenges?

- **The need for a cultural shift in government thinking:** the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs is a big ship that is difficult to turn. It is embedded in the agri-food community, which is heavily influenced by agri-business and the way things have always been done. It is also influenced by a shrinking public purse. That said, I believe this ship is turning, slowly, to allow for more diverse approach to food and food systems.
- **Lack of trust and solidarity in the organic system and standards:** The organic system has become less vogue in recent years among foodies and food systems nerds, in part due to the Michael Pollan phenomenon of dismissing "Big Organic" and, in one fell swoop, all of organic as part of the globalized food system. But not everyone can hunt and kill their own pig, and while there are many successful small-scale direct marketers using the Community Supported Agriculture model, this doesn't negate the fact that the organic system has done a lot of good for food in general. Without organic, consumer awareness may never have shifted in the ways that it has. And while a standards-based system is flawed, it is, nevertheless, one of best tools we have to move agriculture in a more ecological direction. There will always be some fraud, but without standards, there will be much, much more and it is my belief that we need to improve what we have together rather than throw the baby out with the bathwater. Regardless of the size and scale of your business, organic farmers and businesses need to show solidarity for the organic system while we try to improve it.

Your organic wish!

My organic wish is that I can walk into any grocery store in Ontario during the summer months and find Ontario organic products available. They don't have to be affordable, just accessible.



<https://www.organiccouncil.ca/>

Linda Labrecque

Quebec Organic Dairy Producers Union, Member of UPA

Your basic academic background or training?

I hold a diploma from the Institut de technologie agroalimentaire de la Pocatière. I work as an organic dairy producer and as a technician in agricultural management at the Groupe conseil agricoles (CGA) of Lotbinière-Nord.

How long have you been involved in the organic sector?

I started as the secretary of the organic producers' group in the Lotbinière area in 1994. At the end the 90s, I was elected as a member of the Federation of Quebec organic producers, representing the dairy producers; in 2001, I was the founding chair of Quebec Organic Dairy Producers Union.

Why organics?

“Because it respects the soil, plants and animals; to serve these three objectives allows businesses to be more viable without the use of synthetic crutches”.

The projects you want to realize for your organization?

To apply the development plan - Organic Milk 2017-2024 supported by the Quebec Dairy Producers Union – where the common goal of all the representatives of the organic dairy sector is to double and market the current organic milk production. This is our project and our challenge.

Your main challenge? To find how to reach the targeted objective while offering ongoing support to producers who meet the growing demand for organic milk. We need enough skilled counselors for technical support; it is always a challenge to support growth. We also want to reach equivalence with imported products and are trying to achieve coexistence with GE crops. We have to educate consumers and maintain the integrity of the certification system.

Your organic wish? To obtain financial support for satisfying our ambitions for Canadian organic production while meeting the challenges that we described.



<https://www.upa.qc.ca>

Janice Melanson

Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network

Partnering with the New-Brunswick Organic Working Group and the Coalition of Organics in Nova Scotia (COINS)

Your basic academic background or training?

I have worked in the environmental health sector, advocating for a reduction in the use toxic chemicals that are linked to human and environmental health. I have worked in the fair-trade sector, supporting artisans and small-scale farmers, advocating for gender equity, sustainability and true cost transparency for fair pricing. Throughout my career, I have developed administrative skills in governance, finance, and non-profit and charitable sector management. Now, in my new position as Executive Director for ACORN, I draw on my leadership experience and a solid track record in networking and engagement, to lead my team forward within the organic network.

How long have you been involved in the organic sector?

Less than six months!

Your vision: why organics?

The goals set out by IFOAM's Organic 3.0 truly inspire me and mirror many of the global challenges that I have advocated for in both my personal life and my career. As I lead ACORN forward, I want to find ways to make a real impact to evolve the organic movement from a niche market to a modern, innovative system with global impact on issues of hunger, inequity, energy consumption, pollution, climate change, loss of biodiversity and the depletion of natural resources. This is a tall order, but based on the passion and dedication that I've seen within the organic sector so far, I have confidence that the potential exists in the sector. I am thrilled to be a part of a movement with lofty goals to reach for that will make the world a better place.



The projects you want to realize for your organization?

The issues that organic and small scale farmers face in the Atlantic region from province to province are not dissimilar. The impact of climate change to food systems due to coastal sea level rise, changing temperatures, and increasingly erratic weather will impact the way food is produced, stored, distributed, and consumed.

I'd love to see more cohesive inter-provincial collaboration, beginning at the government level through to agricultural associations, both conventional and organic, to allow for more collaborative efforts to ensure food security and policy for the entire region. I want to bring folks together and create supportive frameworks and educational resources to make that happen.

Your main challenge?

Funding the sector is a huge challenge that impacts all regions of Canada. In an increasingly competitive funding environment, where non-profits and the charitable sector are all seeking the same dollars, the organic sector will need to be innovative and open-minded about how to collectively overcome this need.

Your organic wish!

I wish for a day when food is equitably and affordably available to everyone and there is no longer a distinction between organic and conventional farming, because healthy, sustainable practices are the norm.



<http://www.acornorganic.org/>

Karen Murchison

PEI Certified Organic Producers Co-Operative

Your basic academic background or training?

I have a BSc.Agr. in Plant Science, specializing in agronomy from the Nova Scotia Agricultural College and MBA from University of Prince Edward Island.

How long have you been involved in the organic sector?

I have been involved in agriculture nearly my entire life, beginning my formal career in agronomy more than 20 years ago. I have worked in organics for 2 years.



Why organics?

I feel very strongly that soil is the foundation for and the single most valuable asset on any farm.

The commitment to soil health that I see in organics is what drives my passion for this sector.

I am encouraged when I see our organic producers here leading by example and conventional farmers across the province incorporating organic production methods into their systems. My own vision is that this renewed focus on soil health and productivity will lead many other farmers to adopt more organic practices resulting, ultimately in healthier soils, water, people and communities.

The projects you want to realize for your organization?

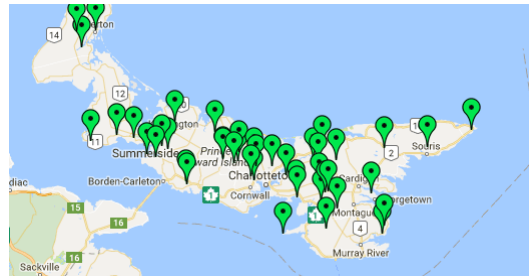
I echo the need for a sustainable funding model for our organization, and our goal is to develop an executable growth strategy that will not only strengthen our organization but our farms and our sector overall; by encouraging transition, introducing more livestock and clearly defining market opportunities.

Your main challenge?

Growing this sector sustainably to meet a seemingly continuous growing market demand is certainly a challenge; however adapting to production to a changing climate I see as an ongoing and perhaps our main challenge.

Your organic wish?

That every farm in this province looks at organics for not only the financial opportunities but for the long term benefits to our environment, local economies and rural communities. I also deeply wish that every person in this province had access every day to healthy organic food products, whether at home, at school, or in hospitals and institutions.



<http://organicpei.com/>

Nicole Boudreau

Organic Federation of Canada

Your basic academic background or training?

I have a bachelor degree in Arts and Communication from McGill University and a bachelor of science (biology) from Sherbrooke University. I also have a certificate in management.

How long have you been involved in the organic sector?

I have worked for the organic sector for 12 years. I first worked for CARTV monitoring the Quebec organic market, then was hired by OFC in 2007.

Why organics?

Simply to protect nature, the environment and, consequently, human health. Organic agriculture revitalizes soil while protecting the air and water. It prevents soil depletion by feeding the soil through green manures and crop rotation. It is sustainable, promotes biodiversity and meets consumers' demands. I admire farmers who transition towards organic agriculture and relearn agricultural practices by applying the ecological principles of the Canadian Organic Standards.

I worry about the quality of life – for example, when I read that there are atrazine residues in potable water of Montreal and Toronto. We have to reduce use of synthetic pesticides – that is obvious.

The projects you want to realize for your organization?

The main mandate of OFC is the maintenance of the Canadian Organic Standards and organic research. We are in discussions with the Canadian government to ensure the funding of the upcoming review of the COS because we believe that the government has to get involved: to remain competitive, our organic producers should benefit from the same support that our US and EU competitors receive from their respective governments. In fact, the US and EU governments fund the maintenance of their national organic standards and have created support program for transitioning to organics. To obtain support from the Canadian government is of immediate importance.

We are also preparing the Organic Science Cluster III Project in cooperation with the Canadian Agriculture Centre of Canada; we hope to maintain this project that is essential to the development of organic agriculture by facilitating knowledge transfer in order to have organic producers benefit from the results of research.



Your main challenge?

The OFC has to find better funding sources for its core activities and for the research activities under OSCIII. The management of industry funds is a gigantic activity in itself. The organic industry does not benefit from a permanent funding mechanism and we constantly have to adjust and solicit industry partners, whose funds are also solicited by the other associations dedicated to the growth of the Canadian organic industry.

I also believe that the three main national organic associations, COG, COTA and OFC, should closely coordinate their activities; we have already established better communication and are coordinating some of our activities. But this cooperation has to be ongoing and strong in order to provide the sector with the tools that it needs to survive.

Your organic wish?

I wish that the government will acknowledge that organics serve the general interest, that it is a 'public good' practice respectful of our environment, and that our parliamentarians will better support the organic sector. It is a public health issue. Our friends the bees know this very well!

