



ACORN

Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network
Issue 28, Spring 2008

Growing Opportunities

IT'S BEEN SUCH A WHIRLWIND THESE past few months—between conferences, workshops, industry meetings, and finishing up projects. Through this, I've had a lot of contact with a wide range of people. What the consistent thread has been between so many of these conversations is opportunity: Current producers are looking to expand or consider value-added elements to their production; new entrants are looking at box programs (CSA's); and I've been surprised by the number of people who are planning some very large scale endeavours that would support the organic industry—Opportunity is everywhere.

This also holds true for ACORN. I personally believe that ACORN is in an ideal position to make local organics much more visible and accessible. Chefs are looking for local food; institutions are looking for local food; consumers are looking for local food. Wouldn't it be great to tempt these "locavore" taste buds with the flavour and benefits of local organic offers?

ACORN has so many ways to do so too, including our searchable database of all certified organic growers. ACORN is also expanding its farmer-chef program into New Brunswick and PEI, ensuring that organic growers have the marketing materials to build new restaurant and wholesaler relationships with. This is just the beginning—we've got more tricks up our sleeve...

Best of luck seizing the many opportunities in organics,

Beth

President's Message

FINANCIALLY AND ADMINISTRATIVELY, ACORN is doing very well. Despite the scheduled scale-down in funding by the three provincial governments, ACORN's Executive Director has been able to present a balanced 2008 budget that contains expenditures, including funded projects, of over \$300,000. ACORN has enough reserves to continue operating at its current level for several more years, even if the scheduled provincial cutbacks continue. Given the positive evaluation of ACORN's performance by a recent consultant's report, however, the board of directors is optimistic that the government cutbacks in funding will be reversed in the near future.

In spite of this hopeful picture, it is important that ACORN members reflect thoughtfully on government policy toward encouraging organics and on ACORN's role within it. Governments, in operating and project funds to ACORN, in the salaries and indirect costs of organic specialists, in new federal support for OFC organizing, and in direct grants by NB and PEI, have spent and are spending a great deal of money on encouraging organic production. As shown in the following table of statistics from COG, the number of certified organic farms in the NS, NB, and PEI grew rapidly in the 90's but reached a plateau in the years 2000-2005.

Certified Organic Farms in NS, NB and PEI 1992-2006

Year	#	Year	#	Year	#
1992...	34	1997...	71	2002...	109
1993...	32	1998...	77	2003...	104
1994...	42	1999...	90	2004...	112
1995...	50	2000...	110	2005...	115
1996...	62	2001...	118	2006...	140

Source: Adding provincial figures from the COG website; 2006 data from ACORN

Insofar as the results of government policy and of ACORN's work should be judged on how the number of certified organic farms has grown, the numbers from 2000 to 2005 do not reflect well. The 2006 numbers give some cause for optimism. Much of the 2006 increase in certified organic farms occurred in PEI in response to active government encouragement. However, with the advent of the new Canadian regulation and the increases it will bring to certification costs, we may lose some of the presently certified farms. We should focus on the results that governments and ACORN are achieving as well as on ACORN's undoubted ability to implement projects.

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2008 Gerrit Loo Award Presentation

AT THE ACORN ORGANIC BANQUET ON March 7th, Karen Davidge of Good Spring Farm, was awarded the Gerrit Loo Achievement Award for her outstanding contributions to organic agriculture.

Since 1970, Karen and her husband Brock have been involved in organic food production. After returning to New Brunswick, they and their three children started Good Spring Farm, a mixed vegetable, small fruits, certified seed potatoes and poultry operation on Keswick Ridge. Their three chicken breeds fall under "Rare Breeds Canada", with their own meat bird strain called "Good Spring Selects".

Starting in 1980, they became permanent stallholders at Fredericton's Boyce Market. Karen is the "farmer" and Brock helps when possible and looks forward to when he can also work on the farm full time.

In 1987, with organic certification available for the first time in Atlantic Canada through the Organic Crop Improvement Assoc. (OCIA), Good Spring Farm was among those first six farms certified.

Over the years, Karen has been keenly involved in farm organizations to advance sustainable

practices, the organic sector, and, promote an awareness of the importance of a viable, diversified Canadian and local farm industry. Recently, she and Brock have used the farm as a means to work with ex-offenders and "at risk youth" to help them develop their life skills and to successfully re-enter society plus discover their full potential.

The fall of 2006 brought a new, challenging dimension to the Davidge farm and their retail experiences. They, along with two other farm families, purchased the former Stirling Apple's building located next to the Green Village garden center in Fredericton, moved it to Keswick Ridge, and opened The Apple Bin-Exclusively New Brunswick Produce store. By selling only NB agricultural products, it helps stabilize farms and farm families, keeps money circulating in our communities, and contributes to a more secure food supply. It is a very clear opportunity for New Brunswickers to support NB GROWN.



Karen and Brock Davidge awarded the Gerrit Loo Memorial Achievement Award for contributions to organic agriculture in Atlantic Canada.

ACORN is proud to honor Karen's tremendous accomplishments and recognizes the trailblazing that both she and Brock have experienced, for the greater good of agriculture in New Brunswick and beyond.

Annual General Meeting

ON MARCH 8, 2008, ACORN HELD ITS ANNUAL GENERAL Meeting. The minutes from 2007 were accepted, financial statements reviewed, and the 2008 budget approved. ACORN also welcomed its new board member: Tina Davies, Emmerdale Eden Farm (PEI-producer). We also want to thank out-going board member, Joyce Kelly (Nature's Route Farm, PEI), for the last four years of her time, commitment, and work on the Executive—we'll miss you!

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Wholesale Opportunities for Organics in Canadian and US Markets

ON MARCH 19TH (CHARLOTTETOWN) AND 20TH (Halifax), more than thirty people attended ACORN's workshop on wholesale opportunities in Canada and the US. This workshop was sponsored and organized by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Speakers ranged in expertise, providing a great spectrum of information. Matthew Holmes, Organic Trade Association, started out the workshop, covering the new organic regulation and general market trends.

Anne Lawrence, Pro Organics (a SunOpta Company), provided the Canadian wholesaler/distributor perspective.

"Planning and communications are essential in wholesaling," Lawrence stated. "Now is a good time to be hearing from our growers. Usually, you just hear from them before harvest and that's hard to deal/manage with."

Aurise Randall, Associated Buyers, added the perspective of the US market and wholesaling.

"Know your market, know what you are capable of, before you jump into the market," advised Randall.

"Have liability insurance, know what you're getting into, and have a back-up plan. Understand who you're doing business with and what the relationship is, before you sign anything."

Providing a local perspective, Dwayne Coffin of Vanco Farms (PEI) spoke in Charlottetown. He recounted that Vanco had been struggling to make money on conven-



Aurise Randall, Associated Buyers, speaks on wholesaling at the recent Wholesale Opportunities for Organics in Canadian and US Markets workshop.

tional potatoes four years ago, so the family farm looked to organic for profitability and to reduce its environmental impacts.

Vanco started with 10 acres, and "threw out half of them because of filed diseases". Today, Vanco grows 185 acres of certified organic potatoes and it's the largest producer in Canada. 85% of Vanco sales are now to US Eastern Seaboard, with 15-20%/year growth witnessed and still "lots of potential" in US.

In Nova Scotia, Franklin Evans of Acadian Seaplants, provided a company overview and explained to the group how they made the decision to go organic.

"We identified who was buying organic products, listened to existing customers, asked what the preferred certification options were, and attended trade shows." Franklin recounted.

Franklin sees a real opportunity in the organic marketplace, "so getting a piece right now and growing is good strategy".

The workshops certainly resulted in some very positive developments—new wholesale relationships were established, good media coverage (TV and print), and lots of new ideas for moving forward. For more notes on this workshop, please visit www.acornorganic.org/trends.html

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The 8th Annual ACORN Organic Conference Update

MORE THAN 400 PEOPLE ATTEND THE ACORN Conference and Trade Show, held in Memramcook, NB, March 5-8th.

The trade show, which had sold out in early December, was open from the afternoon of March 6th until March 8th. This was the longest trade show ACORN has ever offered and exhibitors reported dozens of new sales leads!

Speakers and participants came from across Canada and the Northeast, and left raving about the great learning and networking they experienced.

Thursday's conference kick-off, featuring Dag Falck, from Nature's Path, and Pat Mooney,



The organic banquet was a delight to the taste buds, with many conference-goers stating it was the "best yet"!



Thanks to the generous contributions of supporters, ACORN raised about \$2,000 at the annual silent auction!

ETC Group, spoke to a standing room only crowd. Offering unique perspectives, Falck and Mooney raised significant awareness on the new threat of nanotechnology. With many people expressing alarm, both speakers assured the room that the answer was "exactly what you are already doing—growing and supporting organic".

On Friday night at the sold out banquet, Karen Davidge (Good Spring Farm, NB)

was presented with the Gerrit Loo Organic Achievement Award (see page two). The keynote address by Marc Schurman (Spring Valley Farm, PEI) provided a fresh and very honest perspective of a conventional farmer bringing organic into his operations.

ACORN is now in the process of compiling all the presentations and notes from the conference and putting them on its website. You can access these at www.acornorganic.org/confprogram.html.

ACORN is grateful for the generous conference funding provided by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the New Brunswick Agriculture Council, as well as the Carrot Cache Foundation. ACORN also appreciates its industry sponsorship from Speerville Flour Mill, EcoCert Canada, and many other supporters.

Conference Planning for 2009

Have an idea for the 2009 ACORN conference in Nova Scotia? Let us know now. We start planning over the summer and have the majority of our program put together by the Fall.

What to get involved in planning the conference? We'd love to have you. Most of the work is done by email and conference calls. Drop us a line at admin@acornorganic.org or call 1-866-322-2676.

Farmer-Chef Project Update

ACORN UNDERSTANDS THERE IS GREAT need for more farm marketing and promotional material development. In the past year, ACORN has attempted to address this barrier by conducting a pilot project in Nova Scotia called the Chef-Farmer Project. The project goals were to create homogeneous marketing materials for any organic producers interested in marketing their products to restaurants. The materials included

a profile of the farm (including photographs, the farm history, philosophy and specialties), as well as a "sell sheet" listing farm products, a brief description of each product and seasonal availability. A "checklist" was also constructed to help farmers with the first steps of establishing new customer contacts. ACORN then created a brochure targeting food service chefs and owners and operators outlining the business benefits of procuring

local organic food. This project was met with great enthusiasm by more than 20 participating farms, and has since generated more demand for the service. It is ACORN's intention to create profiles for organic farms in NB and PEI during the coming months.

For more on this project, including the checklist and brochure, see www.acornorganic.org/trends.html.

Getting More Local Organic Into Institutions

By Theresa Richards

AT THE RECENT ACORN CONFERENCE, a survey was distributed to assess the organic sector capacity for selling products to institutions (including schools, universities and colleges, government institutions, day cares and restaurants). This was part of a feasibility study funded by the Canadian Organic Grower's Growing Up Organic project. The survey asked questions about distribution, storage, processing and marketing and it found some interesting and inspiring results.

Marketing: According to the survey, a majority of organic farmers sell their produce either from the farm gate (30%) or at farmers' markets (30%), followed by wholesale distributors (15%), direct to stores (13%), and through Community Supported Agriculture (11%). These statistics really speak to the issue that most organic farms still rely heavily on direct marketing.

Supportive Infrastructure: Distribution of local and organic products remains a major issue, with no silver bullet answer. Half of farmers ranked high interest in selling to institutions with the same percentage indicating that distribution is a challenge for their business. Respondents ranked "funding" and "delivery costs" (costs incurred by the producer) the largest barriers to distribution, followed by "not enough organic product to supply demand", "Transportation Costs" incurred by the distributor and "Logistics of a distribution system". As identified in the ACORN Sustainable Funding Plan, "acces-

sible distribution options to increase the industry's competitive position and market saturation are imperative".

In addition to distribution, three-quarters of respondents (73%) required climate-controlled storage and more than half reported that they did not have adequate storage facilities. 63% said they would be interested in sharing storage facilities with other organic farmers. In an interview with a farmer who identified storage as a barrier, it was suggested that ACORN initiate research into the possibility of central storage facilities.

Status of Small Scale and Organic Processing: Although there are 531 processing plants in Atlantic Canada, organic processing is practically non-existent outside of producer-owned facilities in the Maritimes. There are approximately six processing facilities in New Brunswick, 12 in Nova Scotia and five in PEI that have the ability to do co-packing arrangements with organic producers. There are several others in each province that would potentially consider adding organic processing to their repertoire, but this isn't currently taking place. What we do know is that processing is essential to increasing institutional purchasing of local and organic foods—many kitchens don't have the staff to cut carrots or even peel potatoes!

The chart below indicates the results from the recent survey about what facilities producers thought would be most useful for processing

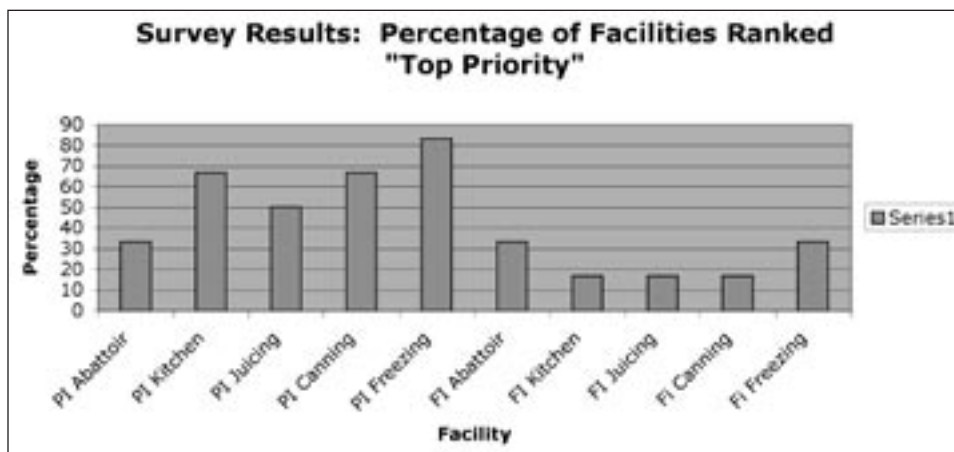
their products. A provincially inspected freezing facility was ranked as top priority, followed by provincially inspected kitchens and canning facilities. It is important to note that with only one exception, all of the livestock producers ranked inspected abattoirs as the top priority.

Marketing and Promotional Materials: The survey found a majority of farmers ranked marketing as very important. Of those who did rank it high, over 50% had hired a professional to create marketing materials, and most did not feel knowledgeable about creating their own effective marketing tools, nor how and where to distribute promotional materials.

When asked about their interest in selling their products to institutions, the average ranking was high; however, only half felt they had enough product to sell to institutions. Several respondents wrote that restaurants were the only institutions of interest to them, while others indicated that they are trying to grow supply. A mere third responded that they were already working to create networks with institutions, business' and industry.

Considering the high level of interest in selling to institutions, there is a lot to be done to help farmers access the institutional market. In ranking what marketing tools farmers would find helpful in order to effectively market their products to institutions, a product "sell sheet" was the top priority, followed closely by a farm profile and brochure. Interestingly, website ranked lowest.

Next steps: These survey results will help direct ACORN's further projects and research. ACORN will be looking into further distribution and delivery prospects, organic processing and co-packing opportunities, as well as trying to match storage needs to storage facilities. ACORN will also be continuing the Chef-Farmer project in the coming year to develop farm profiles and sell sheets for organic farms, as well as to foster and encourage relationships between local organic farmers and the chefs who care about offering the best to their customers.



*PI = Provincially Inspected; *FI = Federally Inspected

Food Bank Farm CSA: Beth's Notebook

IN JANUARY, I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to attend the Guelph Organic Conference. While there, I sat in on the half day Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) workshop with Michael Docter of Food Bank Farm, Mass. I believe I was the only person in the room from Atlantic Canada, so I wanted to share some of my notes on the workshop with you. The full (and much longer) version of these are on the ACORN website (www.acornorganic.org/workshopnotes.html).

Michael Docter's been farming for 30 years. What began as a CSA run by the local food bank has now evolved into a 700-share program with 1300 households that is personally owned by Docter, but the physical farm remains in the food bank's ownership.

In a creative partnership, Docter pays for all the direct costs for the farm (23-24,000/year), as well as donates half the weight of all the food grown back to the food bank (that's about 200,000 pounds).

Food Bank Farm consists of 50 acres—30 owned by food bank and 20 of this is

leased/bartered from other landowners. The farm is financially sustainable with \$600,000/yr in sales from the CSA and extra sales, which is about an even income split.

How Food Bank Farm's CSA Works

It's \$670 for big share (feeds 5-7 people) or \$475 for regular (3-5 people). This is weekly between June-October, then once a month for November and December. According to an independent study, a share costs less than half of what it would be for the same amount of organic produce in a supermarket.

People pick-up their food directly from the farm, but CSA members don't work there or get a discount for volunteering.

Docter had found the typical CSA model too restrictive and prescriptive, so he's opted to offer choices: members are given a bag and they can fill up the bag however they choose (volume based). It was "terrifying" at first, but it all worked out. Now members have one bag for greens, one for root vegetables etc. For large items, like cantaloupes, members are just told how many they can take.

At Food Bank Farm, they don't make own salad mixes – members do it themselves (so don't have to have arugula if they don't like it, where someone else may only want it). This approach also helps avoid food prep/safety issues too.

Adding Value

At Food Bank Farm, there's also an on-site members-only farm store. They've developed a product mix to enable members to avoid conventional grocery

store for "months on end". The store offers some special items once a week ie. chicken for sale from another farm. There's local milk (not organic) and this has really helped keep customers with them. Products are also labeled with food miles wherever possible.

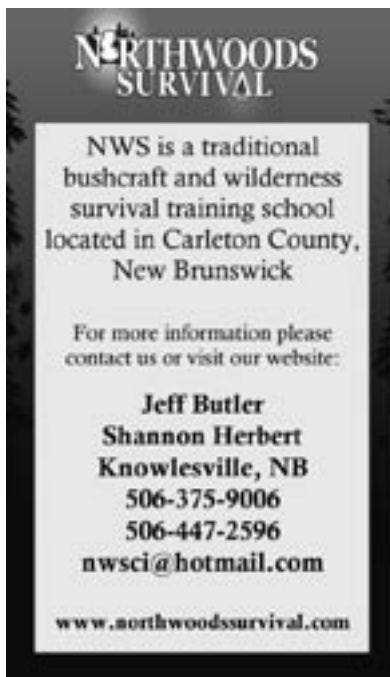
Increasingly, Food Bank Farm has been adding value added selections. They do five kinds of salad dressings, four varieties of pestos, several jams, quiches, baked goods etc. There's even a bicycle-powered grinder for grinded corn meal, which is used to make corn muffins and other products. This offers a great story and significant profit margin.

People Power

Food Bank Farm has two part-time staff in store and seven in field. Five are live-in apprentices and the others are salary (\$10-11/hr). Sherry, the store manager who's been there for nine years, earns \$25/hr. Food Bank Farm also gets some volunteers, mostly from local colleges.

When Food Bank Farm hires people, they do it by having them come out and work for a day. Docter strongly suggests that farms don't hire over the table, because they need hard-working individuals. He's made that mistake once and won't be doing it again.

Food Bank Farm is affected by labour shortages, so they are setting up a pension plan for those who've been with them for more than three years. They also offer two bonuses, one at the end of year and another for those returning next year. They also provide an empowering work arrangement for apprentices and staff through managerial responsibilities—everyone is a "boss" of a different area (ie. the tomato field).



Nuts and Bolts

Monday, Wednesday and Friday are CSA pick-up days (and the try to not to work on Sundays), so there's a good schedule at the farm.... Read more on the schedule at www.acornorganic.org/workshopnotes.html.

Food Bank Farm doesn't refrigerate any produce—everything is cooled by water. This is also better in short term too, because it's less pressure on cell walls of produce.

Everything is direct seeded, except for tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants. They are now putting in a greenhouse to do their own starts.

Man vs. Machine

Docter is well known for balancing the use of human and equipment power. With more than 250 varieties of vegetables, flowers and herbs, he's got to cost out time and money, and look for economical solutions to labour. Docter also looks for rental options.

Another creative approach is the Food Bank Farm U-pick. This includes strawberries, sugar snap peas on the trellis, cherry and plum tomatoes, green beans, flowers (one acre of 4-5 plantings with more than 50 varieties), and more than 20 types herbs. It's all part of the share and members can pick what they want. This reduces labour, while adding value for members.

Details: Equipment and Weeds

"Some people may know the scientific name for weeds," says Docter, but on his farm there are two kinds of weeds, "in row and between row".

Rotations at Good Food Farm are based on weed management. They take good notes, grading every field in August from #1-5, then compare to previous year's field history. They then plant weed sensitive crops in clean soil. After each crop is done, they disc so weeds don't seed.

For in-row weeding, the Bezzerides (www.bezzerides.com) is used. The farm also uses a flame weeder on wheels. This is set at constant height, which can then "run down rows". There's also the basket weeder, which is very effective when weeds are in the thread stage, as it's close to crops, and doesn't throw dirt. Can buy them for \$2,000 or so, and it does 1-3 rows.

The farm also uses Reemay cover for Asian greens for flea beetles—uncover, pick, re-cover—all season long. Docter prefers Typar—the heaviest Reemay can get—and then uses it for 5-7 years.

Plastic is reserved for early tomatoes, melons, and eggplant. They plant plastic at least one week before planting to capture moisture. This will also help kill weeds. To kill weeds on the edges of plastic, they go through with an implement and then manually hoe.

Generally, Docter likes to under sow with clover quite a bit for nitrogen. He uses clover in crops where mechanical cultivation is impossible, so it also helps weed suppression (ie. tomatoes with stakes).

Observations and Advice

Food Bank Farms is situated in a very competitive environment, "there's another CSA every direction you go within 10miles". Docter believes that this has severed to heighten awareness and it's good for market.

"We're also ruthless about sending customers spam," says Docter, who sends one or two emails per week. He tells members about

what's going on that week and what the special options are—from fish to muffins. He advises other CSA manager to tell stories about farm and use humour.

"Scale is essential for profitability". Docter thinks that 400 shareholders is the minimum to pay "yourself a salary and fair wages". This requires about 15 acres. He also suggests that CSA's keep some chickens and/or goats, as it's good for agri-tourism.

Docter is quick to point out that having a CSA requires adaptability, constant innovation and creative problem thinking. He uses computers for all farm record keeping: seeding rates, calendar, crop rotations etc. and suggests Excel, but says any spreadsheet good, "The important thing is just to keep records".

Beth's note: The growth of CSA's in Atlantic Canada has been quite striking to me in the last few years and it's a trend I know will grow. I have much more details on this presentation on the ACORN website or you can visit www.foodbankwma.org/farm/.





Provincial News

ACORN IS TAKING THE LEAD WITH THE Organic Federation of Canada (OFC) to build strong provincial organic representation. In New Brunswick, a working group has been formed and met at the ACORN Conference. During this meeting, Clark Phillips was appointed the New Brunswick representative on the OFC, and Beth McMahon is the alternate.

Working with the PEI Certified Organic Producers Cooperative, ACORN is creating a working group to further build awareness of organic regulation, standards, and other industry issues. Brian Craig is the new OFC representative and Raymond Loo is the alternate.

Newfoundland and Labrador are also working with ACORN to help establish a more cohesive organic voice for the province. On April 18, a full day workshop on organic agriculture was held in St. John's featuring Dr. Av Singh and many others. This was the first organic workshop for the province, marking a new beginning for the organic community. Mark Wilson is the OFC NL representative.

Nova Scotia has formed a new non-profit, membership-based organization—the Organic Council of Nova Scotia (OCNS). The OCNS' goals include representing the entire NS organic sector (producers, processors, wholesalers, retailers, local organic certifiers, organic inspectors, local organizations (NGO), researchers, educators, consumers and others) to government and the OFC. It provides strong communications; encourages organic practices; promotes the benefits of organics to consumers; and will be assisting with the coordination of the new organic regulation and standard. Angela Patterson is the OFC NS representative and interim OCNS Chairperson. For more information on the OCNS, you can contact Angela at jangela@angelhoeve.ca.

What is the Organic Federation of Canada?

THE ORGANIC FEDERATION OF CANADA (OFC) was established to serve the interests of the entire Canadian organic sector, thus ensuring a solid implementation of the new Canadian Organic Regulations and Standards.

To carry out its mandate, the OFC has members from all of Canada's provinces

and territories, so as to promote an interactive dialogue between the organic sector, the provinces and the CFIA Canada Organic Office and to ensure the continued strong growth of Canada's organic industry. To find out more, visit www.organicfederation.ca.

Organic Regulation and Standards Up-date

IT SEEMS THAT ONCE YOU THINK you know something, it all changes!

Apparently, there's a possibility that the implementation date for the national organic regulation could be extended. This is due in great part to the fact that the standard is undergoing revisions, and likely won't be completed until 2009. It's pretty difficult to ask the sector to adopt the old regulation, and then just a few months later, change the standard!

In other news, the Canadian Organic Office (CFIA) met with the US National Organic

Program (NOP) to discuss equivalency on April 11. The organic standards committee met in early April in Ottawa, and has just completed its second balloting process. A third ballot from the April meetings is still forthcoming. This third ballot will include the suggestion to require a regular review of all synthetics on the Permitted Substances List (PSL), as well as to make the review criteria for getting products on the PSL more strict. Stay tuned for more information on the regulation and standard developments in the ACORN e-newsletter.

Looking for Seasonal Help?

AS A MEMBER, YOU CAN POST JOBS on ACORN's website and in the e-newsletter. Other ideas including sending the position details to the Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada, Goodwork Canada, local schools, posting it where you sell your products (including the farmers market) and through word of mouth.

If you are looking for an apprentice, why not consider joining SOIL? It's a \$30.00 annual fee and you get a listing on both the SOIL website and ACORN's. For more information or for a registration form, you can call ACORN or visit www.soilapprenticeships.org.