

Dear Rochelle

by Rochelle Eisen

With 2010 being a watershed year for the BC's Organic Extension Services I thought I would commandeer my Dear Rochelle space to talk about extension services.



Since September 2007 with funding secured by the Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia from the BC Ministry of Agriculture, I have supplied organic extension services in BC, with support from the COABC's Office Team, BC Ministry Agriculture specialists, Canadian Agriculture researchers along with extension agents and crop specialists from other provinces.

Organic Extension in BC is helping to:

- ✓ **Sustain local food production by:**
 - Reducing our carbon footprint
 - Building rural / urban agriculture community
 - Creating farming opportunities and jobs
 - Stimulating local economies
- ✓ **Level the playing field with our USA counterparts, Washington State for example, who:**
 - Receive certification fee subsidies (up to \$750/yr)
 - Have access to over 40 state scientists doing pertinent research, and 7 state extension agents
- ✓ **Deliver healthy nutrient rich food, which:**
 - Improves the health of BC citizens
 - Reduces everyone's exposure to pesticides
 - Minimizes our impact on our air, land and water
 - Diminishes our need for expensive health services

How are Organic Extension Services helping organic farming in BC?

Every year, the OEA (organic extension agent) answers hundreds of phone calls from organic farmers, processors, and distributors. Over half of the queries come from people not already involved in organic agriculture. A key role has been to assist BC in adapting to the new federal regulation and guidelines.

Additionally, the OEA plays key roles in maintaining the high quality of COABC communications via the BC Organic Grower magazine, seminars, Webinars (the only of their kind in BC), COABC's Annual Conference and various workshops.

The OEA is one of BC's representatives on the Technical Committee of the Canadian General Standards Board Committee on Organic Agriculture and on the Processing and Greenhouse Working Groups. The OEA also represents BC nationally on the Capacity Building subcommittee of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Organic Value Chain Roundtable and serves on the Expert Committee on Organic Agriculture as well as contributes to a cross-country Organic Extension Agent Committee. The OEA participates in the federal provincial Minor Use Pesticide process (Health Canada, PMRA), which fosters relationships with researchers interested in doing research of interest.

Closer to home, the OEA contributes to the BC's Organic Sector strategic planning process as well as the COABC's strategic and operational planning process and has built relationships with and contributed an organic perspective to educational post-secondary institutions, including UBC and the UBC Farm, Kwantlen University and the University College of the Fraser Valley.

The OAE plays several roles in BC Organic conferences, trade shows and other regional educational events and venues by

presenting, moderating or facilitating. Extension Needs Surveys are conducted to assess operator information and priorities (field bindweed, poultry training etc) and through other feedback loops which helps identify educational and knowledge gaps, then strategizes on how to address those issues and communicates this information to researchers/scientists.

Clearly, the BC Organic Extension Agent is a role that has proven to be effective in supporting organic agriculture in this time of great change and opportunity. The OEA plays a key role in communications, capacity-building and strategic planning, integrating the research and information needs of BC producers, processors and distributors with the services available via BCMAL, AAFC (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada), universities and electronic resources.

Organic Extension increases organic production in BC by helping current organic producers overcome barriers, by supporting non-organic producers to move to organics, as well as helping all producers to employ organic solutions to their problems. If anyone is central and key to the organic movement in BC, it is our Organic Extension Agent, and the loss of this position would constitute a major setback to organics and an obstacle to continuing growth of organic food production in BC.

Unfortunately the money that, up to now, supported this province-wide service is running out August 30, 2010 and so far the COABC has been unable to replenish the pot.

To maintain 80% of what services already in place requires \$100,000 per annum. With an additional \$50,000 annually, all the above functions including the cost of a part-time assistant would be covered.

I believe the continued need for a knowledgeable, fully-funded and inspired organic extension-type service is a critical component of the BC Organic infrastructure needed to meet the demands of farmers converting to organic production and those already practicing, especially since the implementation of the new federal regulation.

There are more hurdles to jump in the next two years as the federal Stream of Com-

merce period (the 2-year adaptation period following the implementation date of June 30, 2009 for the federal Organic Product Regulation) comes to an end in June 2011 and as BC continues to explore modifying its legislation to require mandatory certification for organic claims made within the province and as the COABC continues to explore methods of broadening its membership base. All of these will increase demand for extension services in BC.

If you have any ideas on how we can rally the funds or even inspire those in our organics movement, get in contact with Rochelle 250.499.2413 or extension@certifiedorganic.bc.ca. Readers should also keep in mind this article was written in mid-March and it is possible by the publication date the situation may have changed. Please do feel free to check in with Rochelle for an update on the situation.

1 In 2009 the OEA fielded questions from 860 farmers, processors, and distributors and approximately 850 requests for assistance from various support people such as suppliers, industry representatives, crop specialists and consultants. From September 2007 (beginning of the position) through Jan 2010 the OEA has handled a total of 3,750 enquiries (over 1900 from farmers etc, and the balance from the support sector). If enquiries continue to increase at the same rate 1890 enquiries will be handled in '09-'10.