

Patricia D. Hastings

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For Immediate Release: May 17, 2007: Press release from the NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, courtesy of Lynne Richmond; PO Box 330 Trenton, New Jersey 08625-0330; www.nj.gov/agriculture. For more information, see press release below .

ORGANIC FARMS AND PROCESSORS TO GET NJ DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE STAMP OF APPROVAL

(TRENTON) –New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Charles M. Kuperus today announced that New Jersey has become the 17th state in the nation to gain accreditation by the United States Department of Agriculture to offer in-state certification services to farmers and processors who want to enter the organic market in the Garden State.

Standing in a field of organic garlic and other vegetables at Cherry Grove Organic Farm in Lawrence Township, Kuperus said the Department's certification program will allow the state to assist organic growers with marketing Jersey Organic products, similar to the Jersey Fresh brand for general produce.

"There is a growing demand for organic produce, milk and meat in New Jersey and it makes sense that the Department of Agriculture provide oversight for the quality and integrity of these products like we do for Jersey Fresh," said New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Charles M. Kuperus. "When people see the Department's or the United States Department of Agriculture's organic seal on a product, they will know it meets the stringent standards that must be met to label it organic."

The Department was directed to establish an organic certification program through legislation signed into law in September of 2003. The law required the establishment of certification procedures for "certified organic" and "transitional sustainable" and the designing of a label to be affixed to agricultural products that receive certification.

The Department had to endure a rigorous process to receive its accreditation, which allows the Department to certify crops, wild crops, livestock and handling operations to the National Organic Standards, which can be found at www.ams.usda.gov/nop/NOP/NOPhome.html.

Overseeing this process was Erich Bremer, the Department's Organic Certification Program Supervisor.

"I am very excited that the Department of Agriculture decided to take on the challenges and responsibilities of establishing an organic certification program," said Bremer. "The Department's accreditation represents the best of what can happen when government and private sector work together for the benefit of all."

Prior to April of this year, the Department had an agreement with Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey (NOFA-NJ) to provide organic certification in the state. The Department funded the program, provided personnel and offered seminars on navigating the complex application process for certification.

Donna Drewes, President of the NOFA-NJ Board of Directors says the new certification program is beginning at a time when the demand for Jersey Organic produce currently surpasses the supply.

"This is a very exciting moment for the future of organic farming in New Jersey," said Drewes. "We are all looking forward to close collaboration with NJDA in order to improve and expand services offered to New Jersey's organic farmers and consumers alike. New Jersey consumers have a strong interest in an organic, local food supply and NOFA-NJ will be stepping to the plate to provide the energy and organizational skills needed to build the supply and create the connections needed to make this a reality."

With the NJDA taking over the regulatory aspects of organic certification, NOFA-NJ will focus on education, technical support and training for existing and converting organic farmers, along with expansion of marketing opportunities and networks that are linked to local communities.

The Department expects to have at least 52 organic farms in New Jersey with 2,228 acres in organic production with \$2.8 million in organic sales. There are an additional five certified organic farms with 95 acres in Pennsylvania. The program also has certified 18 organic food processors and handlers.

Matt Conner, operator of Cherry Grove Organic Farm, said while 70 to 80 percent of his income is derived through sales at the Summit Community Farmers Market, he operates a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) facility with 400 families who buy shares of the crops.

Conner, a first generation farmer, grew up in a farming community and worked on farms, but was drawn to organic farming after interning at an organic farm. He grows a variety of vegetables and annual cut flowers. He has pick-your-own cherry tomatoes, green beans and flowers.

"A large number of organic farms in New Jersey are smaller in scale and offer CSA's," said Secretary Kuperus. "Through our new certification and branding program, we hope to grow the organic farming industry in the state."

For more information on New Jersey's Organic Certification Program, visit:
www.nj.gov/agriculture/divisions/md/prog/jerseyorganic.html.

In addition to New Jersey, the state Departments of Agriculture in Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah and Washington, the New Mexico Organic Commodities Commission and the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management are accredited organic certifying agents.

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New Jersey, the Garden State!