



PEI Certified
Organic Producers
Co-operative

**Membership Input on
Organizational Direction - 2014**

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Executive Summary

This report is the result of an industry survey of PEI organic producers. There were 13 face to face interviews and 10 phone interviews from a list provided by the PEI Certified Organic Producers Cooperative (PEICOPC). The diversity of the industry was very apparent by the diversity of the participants of the survey. Large commercial producers, small part-time producers, vegetable, row crop, fruit, and animal producers were all participants. Acreages varied from 2 acres to hundreds of acres. This diversity, while very exciting and suggestive of positive growth opportunities, is a great challenge to the PEICOPC Board and Executive. Aspirations and priorities vary greatly among the organic producers on PEI.

A number of recommendations were made for the Board's consideration based on input received from those interviewed. Attached to the report is the summary of feedback from the producers interviewed. PEICOPC is a small organization with limited financial and manpower resources. All of the desires of the membership cannot be met with the resources available, and this is understood by the membership. Our recommendations are driven by this reality and with the understanding that it will take time to implement recommendations and to see the fruit of adopted recommendations.

The results of the membership survey were reported at the PEICOPC AGM and then members present participated in a workshop to prioritize their needs for the Board's consideration. Members were split into two groups for the workshop - those who market directly to consumers and commercial producers (mostly grain and oilseed producers). The three top priority work areas identified were:

1. Coordinating organic research on Prince Edward Island and sharing of results with producers and other stakeholders.
2. Lobbying government to influence their decisions to support the development and growth of the organic sector on PEI.
3. Being a catalyst to network and share information between producers and other groups.

Specific ideas were then generated by the two groups in each of these three areas.

Following a review and assessment of this report, the Board should communicate to its members, plans in response to the report.

Introduction

Dynamic Outcomes is very appreciative of the positive support of the Board of the PEICOPC, the Executive Director, and especially the many participants who willingly shared their time and expressed their opinions during interviews and phone conversations. A number of impressions have been left with us as a result of these interviews that should be an encouragement to the industry. Optimism and passion for the industry are obvious. Support for the PEICOPC is strong, but challenges are recognized and opportunities for improvement exist. Many producers are close to their customer base and this is very positive. The organic acreage on PEI is growing, and while there are threats (ie wire worm in potatoes), it is likely that the industry will continue to grow. The industry is very diverse but producers appear to be very supportive of one another. The Province has been very supportive and this has been a real encouragement to many.

The Organic Industry has reason for optimism on PEI.

Methodology

Dynamic Outcomes Consulting (DOC) worked with the a committee of the Board and the Executive Director to develop a questionnaire which focussed on fundamental questions regarding the future of the PEI Certified Organic Producers Cooperative. The PEICOPC has challenges including:

1. how it remains relevant to its membership
2. how it serves such a diverse range of members and
3. how it funds itself on a sustainable basis.

The PEICOPC provided DOC with a list of members and other stakeholders. DOC arranged for 13 face-to-face meetings and 10 phone interviews. Calls were made to just about all members on the list, and messages left with those who had answering services. Interviews or calls were made with all those available. As this process was nearing completion there was a diminishing return regarding ideas or comments which had not been heard before. It was felt that the results of this report are comprehensive with respect to the range of comment, opinion and ideas available among the membership and stakeholders.

Recommendations

The following recommendations reflect the input received from those interviewed based on the questions asked. A question by question review of the input received is presented in Appendix 1.

1. The Board should create a plan, with time lines and actions, for creating a closer working relationship with ACORN. This may include greater cross directorships, joint meetings, a review of activities and responsibilities to prevent duplication, joint events, and web site support of one another. The growth of a supportive relationship for the advancement of the organic industry should be the objective.
2. The Board should clearly define its priorities, and focus on these priorities. It needs to be understood by everyone that the PEICOPC cannot meet all of the wishes and desires of its membership. A suggested list of priorities (not in any particular order) would be:
 - a) lobbying on the industry's behalf to government.
 - b) providing educational and information services to producers and the public.
 - c) developing markets
 - d) promoting organic production and consumption on PEI.

e) being a catalyst to network and information sharing to and among producers.

f) co-ordinating organic research on PEI and sharing the results of organic research.

Given the resources available to the Board, two and definitely not more than 3 of these priorities should represent at least 80% of the future effort. Only through concerted effort in an area is the PEICOPC going to achieve results that will enhance its recognition.

3. Following the establishment of priorities, an action plan should be put in place that is matched with financial and human resources. If 2 (c) were adopted then an action plan should be creating which would include a review of current activities. The Old Home Week booth would be part of the review and the question would be its time and cost effectiveness compared to other options. This would be part of the plan, or not. In a like manner other activities would be reviewed, and a decision made.

4. The web site should be an essential communication tool to members and the public alike. As updates happen the membership should be notified by email.

5. There are many members of the public who are customers and passionate supporters of organic production and organic producers. This is a support system and resource that needs to be cultivated and encouraged. Perhaps a Director could chair a committee of the Board that is made up of volunteers from the public who are supporters. This committee would have an opportunity to present to the Board annually, would be invited to PEICOPC events, and to the annual meeting as non-voting participants. They would be included in the web site and would have an opportunity to post questions, share recipes, make suggestions, and recruit like minded people.

6. The Board needs to be encouraged that its many activities are appreciated by its membership. New producers expressed appreciation of the efforts of Joyce Kelly and Susan MacKinnon as they transitioned to organic. This type of support should be continued, and where possible expanded.

Planning Workshop

The report was presented at the PEICOPC AGM. Following the presentation a planning workshop was completed to provide additional focused feedback from the general membership. Approximately 18 producers participated in the workshop.

Major work areas: The following were presented as the key work areas for the organization based on their previous plan and input from the membership during the recent interviews:

1. Lobbying
2. Education and information for producers
3. Education and information for the public
4. Market Development
5. Being a catalyst to network and share information
6. Coordinate organic research on PEI and sharing results

Participants had an opportunity to add or take away from this list, and were satisfied with these 6 key work areas.

Producers were then split into two groups based on their farm type. Direct marketers worked together in one group and commercial producers including all of the grain and oilseed producers worked together in another group. Each group was asked to prioritize these six areas of work. It was recommended to them that 80% of the efforts of COPC should be focused on only 2 of these areas.

A voting process was used separately in each group. Both groups selected #6, and the commercial group selected #5 while direct marketers selected #1.

All present were comfortable identifying these three areas as the main focus of effort (80% of funds and staff) of COPC:

1. Coordinating organic research on PEI and sharing these results with producers and other stakeholders.
2. Lobbying government to influence their decisions to support the development and growth of the organic sector on PEI.
3. Being a catalyst to network and share information between producers and other groups. It was clear in the interviews that COPC needs to show leadership in bringing people together to further their operations and the organic sector in general.

Each of the two groups were asked to identify more specific project ideas that fit within these three key work areas.

Ideas for coordinating organic research:

It was clear that the general membership see that coordinating organic research on the Island is a key area for the COPC to focus on. There is a wide range of ideas presented from both workshop groups covering grain and oilseed and vegetable production. Further to this there were many ideas raised in personal or telephone interviews (Appendix 1). Many of these could warrant further assessment.

Research is also an area where government has strong support for industry groups to lead in research, including producers making a contribution to the cost of conducting the research. Often this can be a combination of in-kind and cash contributions, which represent a small percentage of the overall costs.

In particular, the Department of Agriculture and Forestry has a "Research Coordination Program" where expertise can be contracted to pursue research funding and then coordinate the research effort. This includes completing literature reviews of research efforts related to organic production.

RECOMMENDATION: That the PEICOPC learn more about this program and consider submitting an application. The first step in the process should be triggering the Coordination Program as most activities required to take many research ideas, assess them, develop a short list, write funding applications and get the appropriate research partners in place is all funded through the program.

The following is a list of ideas for the Board to consider. The number beside each idea represents the number of votes or priority it was seen as in the workshop.

Commercial Group:

- Fertility research 8
Explain what's happening, process
Long term viability of the soil
finding long term, consistent methods and products
Research soil health in terms of disease, threats, specific seed varieties
- Clover within crop rotation 6
- Do more literature based research before completing field research 5
Includes cross commodity groups which can relate to organic
- Crop specific cover crop research specific to organic production 4

Direct Marketers - ideas for research:

- Rock Dust/Soil – Soil Amendments 7
- Beneficial Insects – wireworm 4
- BRIX 5
- Season Extension 3
- Food & Health 2
- Composting 1
- Irrigation
- Crop Varieties
- Post Harvest

Additional ideas from individual interviews

- Weed control
- Developing substitutes for lime

New crops

Range of organic agronomy trials

Spacing, density and allowing for adequate nutrition in vegetable crops

Post harvest handling

See Appendix 1 for more.

Ideas for Lobbying Government

During the workshop the Direct Marketers first had a general discussion about lobbying, what it means and who is being lobbied.

Lobbying efforts tend to be directed at government. In the case of PEICOPC, government is the main audience and lobbying needs to occur in order to influence government in a number of areas, including general support for the organic sector, support for programming and to address the legislative gap in certification regulations.

- Premier – elected TOP PRIORITY
- Media (ways) TOP PRIORITY
- Federation of Agriculture
- Other

After further discussion with the Board, it was agreed that the focus needs to remain on Government, and this should include both elected officials such as the Premier and Ministers, it must also include the Department of Agriculture.

KEY MESSAGING - was agreed as follows:

1. Continue to provide the organic sector with adequate funding to continue growing the sector and making organic a bigger part of the food industry on PEI.
2. With new plans and new board members, do not eliminate the funding to PEICOPC. Support the organization so that the organization can support the sector.
3. With NB regulations on certification being approved, efforts should continue to get PEI to follow suit.

Ideas for Networking / Sharing

The commercial growers felt that the ability to get together in informal ways was an important way for producers to share information. This was confirmed by many that were interviewed. Ideas were mixed between these and more informal efforts and ideas such as the use of websites.

- Create “GO TO” site for existing and considering farmers (link from PEICOPC to ACORN)
- Summer “In Field” meetings with producers with a social atmosphere
- Revitalize the Maritime Organic Grain Network, which could be used to lobby for an “organic” livestock sector.

Conclusion

The PEICOPC must focus its efforts to be more successful in the future. This review provides the Board with an opportunity to do so. This process has identified the areas that PEICOPC must focus, and has provided a number of ideas from the membership. The concept that the PEICOPC must use 80% of its efforts and resources in these three areas has been put forth as a guideline to help the organization maintain its focus. The information presented is for the Board of Director's consideration. Once the Board confirms its priorities, it should communicate to its membership their plans in response to this report. Secondly, the Board should share this report with those that participated in the process.

Appendix 1- Feedback from Organic Producers

The following is based on the feedback from face to face interviews and phone interviews. Not all responses are included but are reflected in the report.

1. Who represents you on PEI?

There have been a variety of responses from no one to PEICOPC, to ACORN, to ACORN and PEICOPC, to the Federation of Agriculture. There is a lot of respect by many participants that ACORN is doing a good job, like the "grow a farmer" program. There was the opinion that the Federation is focused on serving larger farmers and not interested in small farmers.

2. Is representation needed and sufficient?

Some larger producers do not need representation. There is a sense that the PEICOPC represents smaller producers more than larger ones. A local voice is good and needed for the industry. There is also concern that the PEICOPC may represent larger producers and not smaller producers who may feel left out.

A voice to government is needed, lobbying for continued subsidy of "Certification" costs is needed. All "organic" producers should be certified and a mandatory requirement.

There were comments that communications from the PEICOPC were deficient as well as comments that communications were very good; and there were comments that the PEICOPC was doing a good job on the web site and reaching the public.

3. What assistance do you need and how can an industry organization help?

There was very good feedback on this. The most common issue seems to be crop care help, guidance, and education. Education and information should be focused on both producers and the public. Help in finding markets was another issue. Also, help finding suppliers from seed to crop care items. Promotion of the industry generally is seen as an industry organization function.

Help in certification, and the rebate are important; as well as a voice to government for continued support of the organic sector.

Workshops and training are areas that the PEICOPC should continue to focus on. The web site should provide contact information of producers, suppliers, and production information. Networking for information sharing is a very good and important activity.

Research is an important role for the organization.

4. Interested in serving as Director of PEICOPC?

Many have served on the Board in the past or are currently serving. A few said no. Some would be interested in the future. Many people are serving in volunteer capacities in their communities and PEICOPC is competing for that time commitment.

5. What should the top priorities of the PEICOPC be focused on?

There were a large number of suggestions here, and this is a challenge to the PEICOPC.

Promotion and education of organics to the public was voiced in different ways as a very important priority. This should focus on children in schools, government, mass media, consumer information and health benefits. An up to date web presence should be maintained for both educational and marketing reasons. There are organic supporters and advocates that are very helpful to the industry and there should be a strong effort to include them as a valuable part of the industry.

Market development is a priority; such as bringing buyers to PEI to meet producers. It is important to keep the web site updated with organic producers and the crops that they produce. Local market development is also important, such as the encouragement of local farmers markets.

Encouraging producers of like commodities to meet to share information and get to know each other; and perhaps to work together, both buying supplies and selling products is important. Networking encouragement is important.

Lobbying government to maintain and expand support of government programs for the organic sector is important. The certification rebate is very important especially so for smaller producers; but very much supported by all organic producers.

PEICOPC should continue and expand its coordination role in producer focused research.

PEICOPC should lobby commodity boards like the Potato Board, for research support for organic production of that particular commodity.

Lobbying, education, information, networking, market development, coordinating research are the consensus areas of focus.

6. What research projects should be a priority?

It was mentioned by several that the role of PEICOPC should be a coordinating role and not a hands on role in research. Suggestions were:

Variety trials under organic production.

Weed control/mulching trials for crops like soy beans, fruit and vegetables.

Use of mussel shell as a substitute for lime.

Market research.

New crops to PEI research – how to produce and store new crops.

Food related health research.

Organic agronomy research.

Crop rotation research for oilseeds and vegetable crops

Vegetable crop spacing / seeding density for adequate nutrition

Research on new inputs becoming available

Post harvest handling - i.e. temperature management

Research on how to control mustard and lambs quarter in soybeans.

Nutrient management for fruit trees.

Potato production research, agronomy, insect control, weed control, and wire worm.

It was also noted that this is very challenging for the PEICOPC since so many organic products are being produced on PEI and the research needs are so varied.

IDEA: Producers need to be grouped according to like interest. These groups should be network groups and research project groups. Each group should take responsibility for their own priorities (both information sharing and research) and use the PEICOPC as the hub for industry sharing and research coordination.

7. Who should be leading the research priorities?

PEICOPC should have a coordination role.

Some felt that ACORN also does research and perhaps R & D should be left to ACORN. Perhaps there is confusion here, and I am not sure if ACORN does research or if it has a role in distributing research results.

The Organic Agriculture Center of Canada (OACC) is affiliated with Dalhousie Dept of Agriculture and is active in organic research in Canada.

The Board of PEICOPC should make the final decision on research priorities.

8. Who should be paying for research priorities?

Government funding is needed but also there should be some producer contribution.

Whoever is benefiting from the research should be contributing. Perhaps this means that producers, suppliers and government share in the funding.

Perhaps both the producers and marketers/retailers should contribute to the costs of research.

The challenge is that there is too little money available to fund research.

9. Would you be interested in participating in a research project?

Some producers already have and would again, while many others expressed a willingness to participate.

10) Your suggestions on how to improve the organic industry organization.

There was some discussion about ACORN. It is well thought of by some members of the PEICOPC and it was suggested that a closer working relationship with ACORN should be developed. The New Brunswick model was suggested as a model to follow. There is currently one ACORN Board member from the PEICOPC Board plus other PEI Board members. Increased cross membership would be helpful and perhaps PEI reps on the ACORN board could attend some PEICOPC board meetings as ex-officio members.

Old Home Week demos got a mixed review. Some felt that it was a waste of time while others felt that it was an important consumer awareness/education tool.

The organization should promote more producer meetings to talk about common problems, like the kitchen meetings, as well as have professional development days, including bear pit sessions to share information. Perhaps there should be information sharing capability on the web site.

Information is needed on the organic certification requirements to ship products to other countries.

The organization should be more energetic and more proactive. Organics should have a higher profile in the market place.

The organization needs a long term vision that is a focus and guide to the industry. The mandate of the organization needs to be clarified.

The organization should be lobby the Province in a very aggressive way to require certification of anyone who is displaying an organic sign or claiming organic production.

There was also the suggestion of reaching out to non-producers who are very interested and supportive of organics; perhaps another type of membership.

The organization should be encouraging more direct government involvement in the organic industry and in the promotion of the production and consumption of organics. Government programs should be shared with the membership by the PEICOPC web site.

It was observed that there is a lot of competition for producers' time and interest by a variety of organizations. This makes it challenging to be at or near the top of the priority list in producers' minds.

Appendix 2 - Planning Workshop Worksheets

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND CERTIFIED ORGANIC PRODUCERS COOP

PLANNING WORKSHOP WORKSHEETS

<u>Overall vote on priority work areas</u>	<u>Groups 1 and 2</u>	<u>Total</u>
1. Lobbying	10 + 14	= 24
2. Education and information for producers	8 + 9(Acorn)	= 17
3. Education and information for the public	8 + 17(Acorn)	= 25
4. Market Development	3 + 17(Acorn)	= 20
5. Catalyst to network and share information	19 + 0	= 19
6. Coordinate organic research on PEI	41 + 15	= 56

During the voting process, direct marketers voted on where they saw overall priorities, however, they also indicated that in 3 areas ACORN could and should play the lead role, and that PEICOPC should focus its efforts on the other work areas. As a result, the following three areas were identified as the top priorities for PEICOPC

1. RESEARCH
2. LOBBY
3. NETWORK

GRAIN AND OILSEED - GROUP 1

CO-ORDINATE RESEARCH

- Cover crop research specific to organic which is crop specific 4
- Clover within crop rotation 6
- Do more literature based research first 5
Includes cross commodity groups which can relate to organic

- Fertility research 8
Explain what's happening, process
Long term viability at the soil
Long term, consistent methods and products
Research soil health in terms of disease, threats, specific seed varieties

NETWORK/SHARE INFORMATION

- Create "GO TO" site for existing and considering farmers(link from COPC to ACORN)
- Summer "In Field" meetings with producers with a social atmosphere
- Revitalize Maritime Organic Grain Network which could be used to lobby for an organic livestock sector

DIRECT MARKETERS - GROUP 2

RESEARCH

Rock Dust/Soil – Soil Amendments	7
BRIX	5
Beneficial Insects – wireworm	4
Season Extension	3
Food & Health	2
Composting	1
Crop Varieties	
Irrigation	
Post Harvest	

LOBBYING

- Premier – elected TOP PRIORITY
- Media (ways) TOP PRIORITY
- Federation of Agriculture
- Other