Will Farm Bill 'Level the Field' for Organic Producers?

Local News

Posted by:

Posted on : June 8, 2012 at 5:00 am

Washington, D.C. - As the Farm Bill heads to the Senate floor for debate, at least one amendment is expected on behalf of organic farmers. Making sure farmers have crop insurance is a big part of the nation's food supply safety net outlined in the Farm Bill - but many organic farmers say it isn't worth it. They pay a five-percent surcharge for crop insurance, and yet, when they incur losses, organic farmers are reimbursed based on conventional crop prices.

Ariane Lotti, assistant policy director for the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, says an amendment from Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) would change that.

The core of Senator Merkley's amendment is really about making sure that, if an organic farmer participates in crop insurance and experiences a loss, he or she is paid back at the organic price instead of at the conventional price, which is often much lower. - Ariane Lotti

Lotti says the current system sets up an unnecessary barrier for organic producers, and it affects their ability to get loans as well as disaster relief. She points out that the insurance prices and payout differences are based on a common assumption that organic farming is somehow riskier than conventional farming - a belief she says is turning out to be incorrect.

"As the scientific literature expands on organic farming, we're actually seeing that organic farming systems are more resilient in the face of extreme weather, such as droughts and flooding. So, one could argue that organic farming is less risky than conventional farming in certain respects."

The Farm Bill hits the Senate floor today for what could be a few weeks of debate and amendments. Lotti thinks there's a good chance the Merkley amendment will be adopted.

"I absolutely do feel like it has a chance - because it's a question of fairness. And it's also a question of making sure that the core of our farm policy works for, not just one sector of agriculture, which is the conventional sector, but the full array of farmers in America."

Sen. Merkley wants to require the USDA to publish an organic price series for all crops - something it has only done for five crops to date.