Kernel

Kernel: Seeding the Next Generation of Organic Farmers

Kernel is a new program that pairs USDA Organic certified producers and handlers with those seeking to transition to organic with the goal of facilitating knowledge transfer via mentorship. This may sound familiar - while much smaller in scope, Kernel is inspired by and builds upon the successes of the USDA TOPP mentorship program, which ends this fall.

All existing TOPP mentors and mentees are encouraged to join Kernel. Applications are available on the Kernel website, grow-organic.org. Applications are purposely simple and should take about five minutes to complete. The goal is to make the transfer from the USDA TOPP program to the Kernel program as easy as possible. And there is space on the application to indicate whether existing TOPP participants want to remain in their current TOPP pairings.

So how does Kernel differ from TOPP?

- Like TOPP, mentors will be matched with at least one transitioning mentee. However, with Kernel, there is an option to mentor up to five mentees.
- Because of limited funds, compensation for mentoring is $1,000 per year per mentee, as opposed to higher sums available in TOPP. That said, ASU intends to distribute up to $2 million over five years to mentors in acknowledgment of their important contributions.
- MentorPRO will be utilized as a new and additional communication tool to allow mentors and mentees the flexibility to communicate and access resources via a phone app.
- This is not a USDA program. Kernel is a project of the ASU Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems, with financial support from the Kern Family Foundation and engagement of six regional organic organizations: California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), Florida Organic Growers (FOG), Midwest Organic Services Association (MOSA), Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA), Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA), and Oregon Tilth.
- Kernel requirements are less than those of TOPP. Mentors and mentees are expected to:
    - Participate in approximately forty (40) hours of mentorship in one (1) year
    - Complete brief twice-yearly mentorship activity updates in MentorPRO
    - Participate in brief program evaluations
    - Recommended to attend at least one Kernel virtual educational event

Going forward, new Kernel participants will be accepted into the program on a rolling basis via the same website application. Mentors must have at least three (3) years of experience with USDA Organic certification. Mentees who are producers must have at least two (2) years of farming experience and have access to land before the start of their mentorship year. Mentees who are handlers must have access to a facility or equipment for handling or processing before the start of their mentorship year.

Training will be provided for all new mentors and mentees via MentorPRO and online.

As our collective TOPP efforts come to a close, we would appreciate your help in spreading the word about Kernel and the next phase of organic mentorship. If there is any information that you know will impact service to mentors and mentees, we would like to hear from you. You can reach us directly at organic@asu.edu.

In appreciation,
ASU Swette Center, Kernel Team