

Testimony of Jeremy Brown
Dawson County, Texas - Organic and Conventional Farmer
Before the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research
October 30, 2019

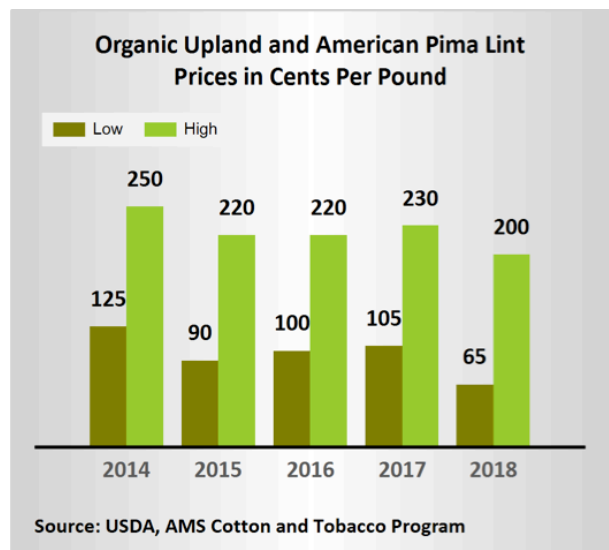
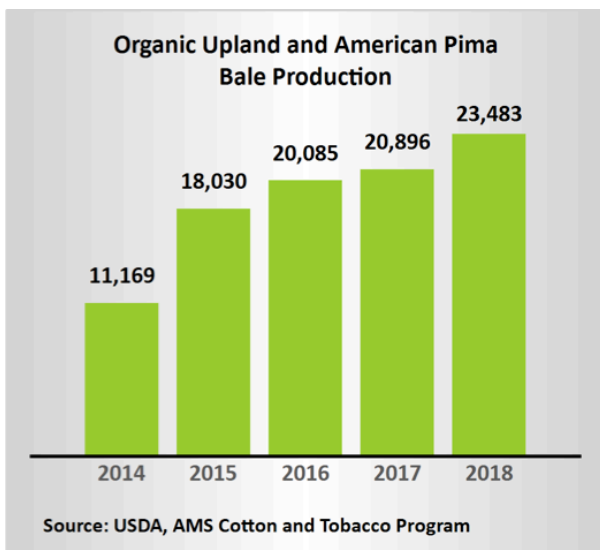
Chairwoman Plaskett, Ranking Member Dunn, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

For the record, my name is Jeremy Brown and I am an organic and conventional cotton farmer in Dawson County, Texas. I also currently serve on the Executive Committee of Plains Cotton Growers, Inc. (PCG) which is our certified producer organization composed of cotton producers from the Texas High Plains and I am a board member of the Texas Organic Cotton Marketing Cooperative (TOCMC).

Thank you for holding today’s hearing to review the state of organic agriculture from a producer’s perspective. Currently, I farm close to 4,000 acres of cotton, wheat, rye, corn, grain sorghum and cover crops. 1,100 of the 4,000 acres is in organic based production. I began farming in 2008. At that time, all of my land was under conventional based practice’s. In 2010, I began to convert some acreage to organic cotton production. Largely this was driven due to more favorable market conditions and the timing of an expiring Conservation Reserve Program contract.

Pricing Opportunity

As I mentioned, organic production can certainly provide producers with market opportunities since production is limited. On average, organic cotton production in the U.S. makes up 0.11% of the U.S. crop and has steadily been increasing in production. Because of the limited amount of



organic cotton production, coupled with demand in niche markets, pricing opportunities for organic production typically are better than conventional. In 2010 when I had my first organic cotton crop, lint pricing opportunity for organically grown cotton compared to conventionally grown cotton that year was almost double ranging from \$1.00 to \$1.30 per pound of lint. In addition to lint, organic cottonseed typically brings more value to a producer. In 2018, organic cottonseed prices ranged from \$400 to \$525 per ton as compared to \$155 to \$225 per ton for conventional cottonseed.

For reference purposes to the committee, cotton is marketed very uniquely compared to other row crop commodities. The differentials, also referred to as loan rate premiums and discounts, are calculated based on market valuations of various cotton quality factors for the prior three years. Since I sell my cotton through a cooperative, my cotton is marketed through a cotton pool made up of cotton from other producers. USDA classing specifications are used to classify each bale of cotton into different quality pools. Payments to producers are then determined by the pool in which the bale is assigned, giving producers an incentive to grow the highest quality cotton possible. However, quality, like yield, is somewhat subject to weather conditions that are beyond the farmers' control, resulting in some year-to-year variations in the percentage of the crop in each pool. The quality pools are the basis of my cooperatives price structure. Buyers receive bales from the pool containing cotton of the quality specifications they have requested and are charged the price related to that pool.

Additional Considerations for Organic Production

Land that I initially transitioned to organic production was relatively easy since that land did not have any conventional crop protection products applied to it, however, converting conventional farmland into an organic state takes dedication and time since the land must not have any conventional crop fertilizers or pesticides applied to the land for three consecutive years.

When deciding to transition a portion of my farmland to organic production there were also other factors outside of pricing opportunities that I had to consider. The region where I live in Texas is a well-suited environment for organic cotton production. Winter temperatures are cold enough to limit insect pressure and provide a hard freeze to defoliate the cotton plants naturally prior to mechanical harvest. Additionally, we have fully eradicated the pink bollworm and boll weevil in our region. Our climatic conditions and quick-drying soils also help aide with some weed control.

Challenges That Exist with Organic Cotton Production

While pricing opportunities as referenced are prevalent in organic cotton production, we are not without our challenges. In many years, since I farm in an area with limited or no irrigation, my organic cotton yields are very rainfall dependent and can vary significantly from year to year just as a conventional crop can when grown in the same type of environment. However, in ideal conditions, organic cotton yields are often times less than conventional yields. For these reasons, it is critical that producers continue to have access to affordable, effective crop insurance products for organic crops. In addition, safety net programs in the farm bill provide important support for both conventional and organic production on an equivalent basis.

Additionally, depending on where we gin our cotton, we tend to pay higher ginning costs than conventional producers because the gin has to perform a cleanout when it transitions from ginning conventional cotton to ginning organic cotton in order to meet the organic program standards.

We spend a great amount of effort and time on soil health and building our soil profile naturally. In order to do this, I can plant a green crop and plow the plant residue into the soil profile before planting cotton. Additionally, I spread compost as a natural fertilizer. While we do have some crop protection products that can be used on an organic crop, often times it is very expensive and, in my experience, does not work well. The natural way I choose to build nutrients into my soil profile does take longer to build into the soil, when compared to conventional production, where nutrients can be incorporated into the soil mechanically at various intervals.

Probably one of the largest challenges I have as an organic producer is sourcing enough labor. As I mentioned previously, our climatic conditions do provide very minor aid in weed control, however, we spend a lot of time mechanically and manually controlling weeds which takes more labor to do across 1,100 acres. As such, more cultivation is required of an organic crop as compared to conventional crop production which can impact the level of sustainability and climate-friendly practices.

In closing, I want to thank you again for the opportunity to be here today. Certainly, as you can tell from my testimony that there is value in organic production to a producer and our ultimate end user – the consumer, just as there are benefits to growing conventional production for consumption. In either farming practice, we as producers are great stewards of our land. We focus on soil health and nutrient management through innovation and technology and by adopting good farming practices. We do these things not only to create value in our product, but also to produce

the safest most abundant supply of food and fiber to feed and clothe our own families, friends, neighbors and the world.

If Members of the Committee have any questions, I will be happy to address them.

Thank you.