**Certified Organic, Certified Co-op**

Ohio farmers join forces in GRO

to grow their market reach

By Kimberly Roush, Program Assistant

and Hannah Scott, Program Manager

Ohio Cooperative Development Center

*This article is slightly updated from a version that originally ran in the Sept-Oct. 2015 issue of USDA’s “Rural Cooperatives” magazine.*

Great River Organics, Inc. is a farmer-owned cooperative of seven certified-organic farms in central and north-central Ohio. The co-op is working to “grow regional farm businesses, preserve Ohio farmland and provide a larger-scale, local alternative to organic produce from outside Ohio.”

Great River Organics (GRO) became a cooperative in December 2014, with support from the Ohio Cooperative Development Center (OCDC) at The Ohio State University South Centers. OCDC’s mission is to improve the economic condition of rural areas of Ohio and West Virginia through cooperative development.

Funds from a “mini-grant” program offered by OCDC allowed GRO to hire the services of an attorney and an accountant, and to develop marketing materials, which helped the co-op lay a foundation for success. GRO also participates in the Ohio and West Virginia Food Hub Network, facilitated by OCDC, which provides education and networking opportunities to support the development of food hubs in the region.

GRO aggregates, markets and distributes farmer-owners’ organic produce, which includes the Great River Market Bag, a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program that includes about 300 members throughout central Ohio.

The other major component of the cooperative is the development of a wholesale business focused on making GRO farmer-owners’ produce widely available to consumers. The co-op growers “feel strongly about seeing their organic products readily available in places where people most frequently shop: grocery stores,” says GRO board member Michael Jones.

GRO has been working to build relationships with area partners to offer larger volumes of organic produce. Simultaneously, GRO farmers have been working to develop quality standards to ensure that they provide certified-organic products to retail partners that meet and exceed industry specifications.

Jones and Charlotte Graham, GRO’s general manager, make it clear that the cooperative model is integral to GRO’s identity. The business was originally started as a limited liability company (LLC), but its farmers eventually realized that member-ownership would best meet their ultimate goal, which, in Jones’ words, is “to bring prosperity to the farmers.”

 “What is so great about the co-op is that it enables growers to have more control over the way they do business in the marketplace by being part of this cooperative, having the collective marketing power,” says Graham. Another benefit of the co-op is that its farmers can rely on GRO staff for these vital marketing and distribution services, so that they can concentrate their own efforts on growing quality organic produce.

The young cooperative plans to grow its wholesale business, allowing current farmer-owners to expand production while adding new certified-organic farmer-owners.

For more information, visit: [www.greatrivrefarms.org](http://www.greatrivrefarms.org), or e-mail Graham at: info@greatriverorganics.org.