

Organic farmers plant seeds in Congress

Merced Co. dairyman and allies seek millions of dollars for research.

By Michael Doyle

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WASHINGTON—Lawmakers largely left organic alone the last time they wrote a farm bill. Merced County dairy farmer Tony T. Azevedo now wants to correct that oversight.

Azevedo and his allies seek tens of millions of dollars for research. They want help with crop insurance, and they crave protection in case their crops become contaminated.

"Our goal is to give all farms in the United States a chance to become part of organic [farming]," Azevedo said Tuesday.

Azevedo, 55, is a lifelong dairyman who spent his early career as a conventional farmer. For the past 11 years, he has forgone traditional chemicals, put his 700 cows out to pasture and trod his own path as the self-described first organic dairy farmer in the San Joaquin Valley.

This week, he and other organic farmers are hand-sowing their agenda around Capitol Hill. It's an ambitious and politically challenging wish list being shared with the likes of Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced.

Their agenda includes:

- Creating a new \$50 million-a-year grant program to assist farmers in adopting organic practices.

- Providing \$5 million annually to help farmers offset the cost of attaining organic certification.

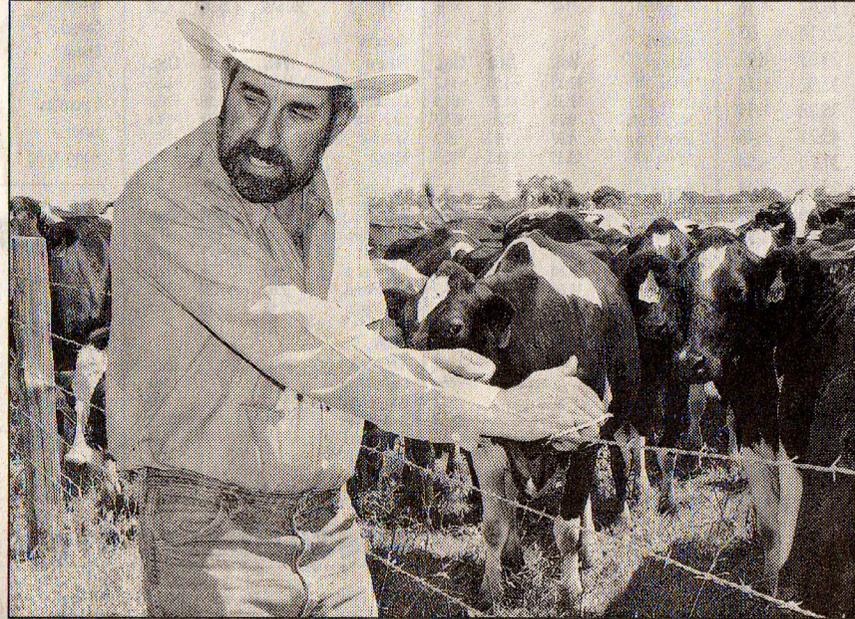
- Establishing a new \$25 million-a-year organic farming research program.

Federal funding is only part of the game plan.

Organic growers pay a 5% surcharge on their crop insurance rates. They want that to stop.

And, in a challenge to some big corporate players, the growers want to be able to recoup their losses from manufacturers of genetically engineered seeds in the case of crop contamination.

With 4 million acres in the United States now certified as organic, twice the level when Congress wrote the 2002 farm bill, growers undeniably com-



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Dairy farmer Tony T. Azevedo and fellow organic farmers are meeting with officials on creating a \$50 million-a-year grant to assist farmers in adopting organic practices.

mand attention from more lawmakers.

"They are now more receptive," Azevedo said. "Organic farming has become fashionable."

Along with Hilmar almond farmer Glenn Anderson and others, Azevedo is doing the rounds among the congressional offices responsible for writing

agricultural legislation. As early as next week, Cardoza could introduce a specialty crop bill with provisions affecting the organic growers.

Then the real juggling begins.

"They may not get the specific language they're asking for," Cardoza said.

"I don't think anyone will get everything they want."

Cardoza now chairs the House subcommittee responsible for organic agriculture, but the first version of the multibillion-dollar specialty crop bill he introduced last fall did not mention the word "organic" in its 71 pages.

The omission was not one of disrespect — Cardoza said he supports "added attention" to organic farming — but it does reflect an enduring political challenge.

The organic farmers lobbying Capitol Hill this week are arriving after the draft specialty crop bill already has been shipped to the House's legislative counsel for a final technical scrubbing. It will inevitably change in coming months, but there's always a political advantage to starting on the inside.

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