

# MEET NATE “ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR” LEWIS

Nate Lewis was awarded the Tilth Alliance Advocate of the Year award in Wenatchee, WA during the Tilth Conference in 2016. He is the Farm Policy Director for Organic Trade Association (OTA) and co-owner of Oyster Bay Farm. Tilth Alliance's Farmlink & Statewide Operations Manager Kate Nagle-Caraluzzo recently spoke with Nate.

**Q: You are a farmer and also a professional in agriculture. How did you first get involved with farming?**

I left the east coast to attend Evergreen State College. That's where I met Melissa Barker, now my wife, but back then she pulled me into farm work at Oyster Bay Farm in Olympia. They were growing mixed vegetables and raising pork and poultry. I went from knowing almost nothing about food production to working on a farm, and it was a critical life-changing moment for me.

**Q: You and Melissa now own Oyster Bay Farm. Does the farm drive you to continue this important work?**

Absolutely! The farm keeps me grounded and reminds me daily that we don't live in a perfect world. Policy can be based in theory and some things that seem like a good idea might not actually be good in practice. So for me it's helpful to be reminded that I'm a farmer advocating for change for my own farm. In the end, policy is only as helpful as we make it.

**Q: When you look back on issues you've been involved with, is there one victory that stands out?**

Absolutely. This situation was the perfect marriage of me understanding the rule as a farmer and as an expert on regulations. We successfully convinced the FDA to modify waiting times for the application of compost on organic farms. OTA, with the help of producers, showcased that the excessively long wait times weren't in favor of organic farmers, scientifically or practically.

And this work isn't just one individual. My favorite thing about working with OTA is using the producer voice to help affect change across the board on policy, especially this set of small farmers, like me, who historically haven't had a voice in the food and farm advocacy space before.

**Q: There's been criticism that Organic Trade Association hasn't done enough to represent small farmers. Do you ever feel a tension as a farmer and an official representative?**

The tension I feel most is not having more time in a week



to do both jobs! The truth is that I haven't compromised any of my values by being on staff at OTA. It's made me realize how complicated the larger system is. Now I think more broadly about the issues.

We are trying to shift the narrative that OTA only represents the big organic farms. So my job is to represent the smaller farmers better. We're doing that in-

part with the Farmers Advisory Council, which Tilth is a member of. I don't think there's any one way to fix all these problems -- which can be hard. Small changes can feel like big wins for us.

**Q: How have you seen things change in terms of a shift towards sustainable agriculture?**

I think there's a new sense of legitimacy with organic food. It was niche and fringe when I first started farming and now it's mainstream. That helps us build this great case for the business of organic and sustainable agriculture.

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**Q: What policy issues do you see as high priority?**

With change in the administration, there's a lot still to be seen and we must be nimble so we can react well. Our top priority will be the Farm Bill. Small producers need to know that this affects their operations. We can act as their champion if producers allow a bridge. Slowly but surely we need to make sure this bill protects agriculture across the board.

**Q: How do you think we can best nurture this community of farmers to become strong advocates**

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### **for the movement?**

First, I think we have to embrace all types and scales of organic agriculture. Anyone who is organic should be welcomed into the Tilth tent. It provides the perfect clearinghouse for information and policy work.

Second, it's incredibly important to support your membership organization. Farmers can also join their commodity association if there's a good fit. Your membership means that your stake in this movement is direct to the people who are championing our work.

And finally, staying up to speed is crucial. I know reading about the Farm Bill isn't as fun as looking at the seed catalog, but to know what is affecting you as a farmer, you have to know the landscape. It helps you take advantage of your local connections.

### **Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share with our members?**

Tilth was my first avenue as a farmer, and it helped me find this larger community of organic and sustainable farmers. It made me feel like we were doing the right thing, and we're moving forward with solutions. We're using business and economy to revolutionize our movement. This movement is helping to solve the world's important problems like climate change and hunger.

Voices matter; my work doesn't amount to anything without farmers standing behind us. Farmers are valued and heard. We know that small change is hard, but that's the reality we live in. As your advocate, I ask for your patience and encourage open dialogue.

**SEE THE FULL INTERVIEW WITH NATE LEWIS AT [TILTHPRODUCERS.ORG](http://TILTHPRODUCERS.ORG).**