



Organic Advocacy

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 2, 2017

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***Pioneer Organic Farmers to Field Test New Organic Strawberry Starts
Signaling Industry-Wide Change in Production Practices***

Watsonville, CA – In recognition of their vital research to improve organic strawberry farming systems, Organic Advocacy and Farm Fuel Inc. have been awarded a grant to study organic strawberry transplant (start) performance in Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties. Funded by the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF), whose mission is to foster organic farming system improvements, the study will provide data essential to facilitating the organic strawberry industry's transition to using organic starts. Although organic starts have not been available to organic strawberry growers for a decade, Innovative Organic Nursery, LLC, based in Watsonville, CA, has stepped in to fill this gap and supply starts for the upcoming field trials.

Of course organically certified strawberry farmers do not use synthetic pesticides or fertilizers, but they do buy starts from conventional nurseries that fumigate soils with chemicals like methyl bromide and chloropicrin, because they have no other choice. USDA's National Organic Program has permitted this practice, under the organic regulation's "commercial availability" clause, with the expectation that organic strawberry nurseries would emerge. But, this has not happened because no market pressure, incentives or government mandate exist to stimulate organic strawberry start production.

Dissatisfied with organic farmers being forced to grow conventional starts, the *Organic Strawberry Fields Forever* Project (OSFF) formed in partnership with organic farmers to serve as a catalyst for change within the organic strawberry industry. Three years later, 200,000 organic starts of four public varieties have been planted and their fruit will be harvested this spring.

"This change in the organic strawberry industry is a long-time coming," said Dr. Lisa J. Bunin, Director of Organic Advocacy and founder of OSFF. "The success of our project will be achieved when the entire organic strawberry industry is organic -- from start to finish."

Farm Fuel will conduct research trials on several organic farms including Swanton Berry Farm, High Ground Organics, and Live Earth Farm. Two slots remain open for organic strawberry growers to participate in field trials and those interested should contact OSFF for further details.

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OSFF, is not alone in its efforts to drive the use of organic starts. Driscoll's, the world's largest organic strawberry grower, has announced an end to the use of conventional starts as early as 2020. But, their varieties are *proprietary* and only available to farmers who grow for the Driscoll's label. OSFF's and Farm Fuel's collaboration is focused on conducting research of *public* varieties to meet the needs of the rest of California's organic strawberry farmers.

"To be competitive, small, medium and family farms need to get out ahead of the curve and support the growth of organic strawberry transplant production and a truly organic system of production across the supply chain," said Steve Pedersen, High Ground Organics farmer and OSFF participant.

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Organic Advocacy is a public interest and environmental advocacy organization that partners with innovative organic farmers, organic businesses, and public interest organizations to improve organic food production systems and advance organic agriculture. Our *Organic Strawberry Fields Forever: From Start to Finish* Project aims to eliminate conventionally grown starts, currently used by organic strawberry farmers, by stimulating the supply of and demand for *public varieties* of organic starts. www.organicadvocacy.org

Farm Fuel Inc. is a Watsonville, CA, based company that develops plant based alternatives to chemical pesticides. For the past ten years, Farm Fuel has researched and supported growers across the United States to cultivate healthy, biologically balanced soil with products such as mustard meal fertilizers and anaerobic soil disinfestation (ASD). Farm Fuel was founded by a dedicated group of organic farmers and scientists and today has a staff of field consultants and scientists available to support growers. www.farmfuelinc.com