

Nebraska Fact Sheet:

Expanding or Transitioning to Organic Agriculture with EQIP

May 2011

Overview

According to the USDA Census of Agriculture's 2008 Organic Production Survey, organic production is poised to grow over the next five years. In 2008, organic farms had \$3.16 billion in total sales – \$1.94 billion in crop sales and \$1.22 billion in sales of livestock, poultry and their products. Organic farms had average annual sales of \$217,675, compared to the \$134,807 average for U.S. farms overall.

The 2008 Organic Production Survey counted 4.1 million acres of organic farm and ranch land in the United States. In Nebraska there was 146,188 acres certified for organic production. Of that, 156 farms harvested 76,322 acres of organic crops, while there were 68 farms with 69,866 acres of certified organic pasture.

EQIP Assistance for Organic Agriculture

Farmers and ranchers who want to apply for financial assistance to transition new acres to organic agriculture may receive assistance under a provision of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The EQIP Organic Initiative is special funding available through the Natural Resources Conservation



Organic produce at a farmers market in Oakland, Neb.

Service (NRCS). This Initiative provides technical and financial support for implementing practices related to organic production to address identified natural resource concerns. Applications for the EQIP Organic Initiative are taken continuously throughout the year.

Nebraska NRCS was allocated \$1.5 million for 2011 through the EQIP Organic Initiative. The Initiative allows producers to receive up to \$20,000/year or \$80,000 over six years to implement conservation practices that address identified resource concerns. EQIP may not be applied to practices that are solely related to increasing production and are not linked to addressing an identified resource concern.

Eligible Practices and Payments

A number of conservation practices will be funded through the EQIP Organic Initiative to address natural resource concerns related to organic production systems. These include:

- cover crops;
- crop rotations;
- fencing and watering facilities for rotational grazing;
- field borders, and;
- seasonal high tunnels for crops.

A full list of eligible practices is available on the Nebraska NRCS web site - www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov.

In addition, three practices are available to facilitate the transition from a conventional production system to an organic production system. These are; 1.) Conservation Crop Rotation practice for transitioning cropland, 2.) Forage Harvest Management to transition permanent hayland, and 3.) Prescribed Grazing to transition pasture or rangeland. Payments range from \$45 - \$85/acre for cropland, depending on where it is located and whether or not it is irrigated. Payments for hayland are \$3.52/acre, and payments for prescribed grazing are \$2.40/acre.

Producer Requirements for EQIP

Eligible agricultural producers include: those certified through USDA's National Organic Program, those transitioning to certified organic production, and those who meet organic standards but are exempt from certification because their gross annual sales are over \$1,000, but less than \$5,000. To be eligible for the EQIP Organic Initiative producers are required to develop and carry out an organic system plan. EQIP may not be used for any costs related to obtaining organic certification.

Producers Transitioning to Organic

Producers who are applying for EQIP Organic Initiative assistance to transition to organic production will be required to implement conservation practices consistent with an organic system plan and must provide the name of the USDA accredited certifying agent they have contacted.

Financial Assistance for Developing a Conservation Activity Plan

Another option for transitioning producers is to develop a conservation activity plan (CAP) with financial assistance from NRCS (\$2,250 - 2,700/CAP). This plan helps producers determine what is required for transitioning to organic agriculture prior to developing an organic system plan. This assistance is not available to producers who are already certified organic.

Certified Organic Producers

In order to qualify for EQIP Organic Initiative assistance, applicants with certified organic operations must submit a copy of their current organic system plan. NRCS shall verify that the applicant's operation has maintained status as a certified operation.

General EQIP

Producers may also compete for the larger "General" EQIP monies that allow for up to \$300,000 over six years. All the conservation practices available under the EQIP Organic Initiative (and dozens more) are also available under General EQIP. There will be more money available in this larger pool, but there will also be more competition.

Assistance from Veteran Organic Producers

In addition to the assistance available from NRCS, the following organic producers have offered their expertise to assist farmers and ranchers making the transition to organic agriculture. Feel free to contact any of the following individuals:

- Mark & Marcy Jones have been certified organic producers for over 25 years in the tablelands of western Nebraska. He may be reached at (308) 778-7130.
- Martin Kleinschmit is a certified organic producer who farms in the Hartington, Neb., area. He may be reached at (402) 254-7310 or martink@hartel.net.
- Tom Schwarz has been farming organically since 1998 in the Bertrand, Neb., area. He may be reached at (308) 472-3269 H, (308) 233-4711 C, or tlschwarz@charter.net.
- Dave & Deb Welsch operate West Blue Farm near Milford, Neb. They may be reached at (402) 826-5361 or dwelsch@westbluefarm.com.

More Information

For information about organic agriculture, visit the Nebraska NRCS web site at www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov, or visit your local NRCS field office located in the USDA Service Center.



Claudia Stevenson, NRCS Resource Conservationist in Perkins County, helped Mike Wyatt transition to organic agriculture through EQIP.