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NEB NEWS

Newsletter of the Nebraska Natural Resources Conservation Service

Organic Agriculture Heats Up

By: Randy Gunn, South Central Nebraska RC&D coordinator & Joanna Pope, NRCS public affairs specialist

With the new Organic Initiative available from NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Nebraska hopes to see an increase in organic agriculture across the state.

With the recent national push for promoting organic agriculture, Nebraska NRCS has been ahead of this trend. For several years Nebraska NRCS, in partnership with Natural Resources Districts, has offered incentive payments to assist farmers and ranchers with the transition from conventional to organic agriculture. Eventually, that assistance expanded and became available statewide.

Nebraska's Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC&D) have also been active in promoting organic agriculture. Through the Organic Farming Statewide Project, nine RC&Ds have been providing workshops, technical assistance and field tours across the state. Funding for the project is provided by a grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund administered by the Northeast Nebraska RC&D Council.

The South Central Nebraska RC&D recently held an organic farming field event in Hamilton County. The tour was held at organic agriculture veteran Paul Huenefeld's farm. Paul and his son James demonstrated several practices they use on their organic farm.

One of the highlights of the tour was a demonstration of how the Huenefelds control weeds on cropland. Instead of using chemicals, the Huenefelds have a cultivator that uses propane flames to "burn" back weeds.



"Weed flaming" was demonstrated at a recent organic agriculture field tour in Hamilton County.

Photo by: Randal Gunn, NRCS

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Helping People Help the Land

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Other practices demonstrated included composting manure for fertilizer and interseeding red clover into winter wheat to add nitrogen to the soil.

Also during the tour Bill Gilg, NRCS resource conservationist in Hamilton County took the opportunity to encourage farmers and ranchers interested in transitioning new acres to organic agriculture to take advantage of the EQIP Organic Initiative.

The field day was organized by Tom Schwarz, an organic farmer from Bertrand, Neb. Schwarz is also an organic technician assisting the South Central Nebraska, Loup Basin, and Trailblazer RC&D Councils through the Organic Farming Statewide Project. Having hands-on technical assistance from experienced organic farmers has been one of the greatest strengths of the Project, according to Randal Gunn, South Central Nebraska RC&D coordinator.

“Tom is doing an outstanding job of setting up field days and other events for this project. He’s a great asset,” Gunn said.



Paul Huenefeld (bottom photo) shared his 20 plus years of experience in organic farming at a field tour held at his farm in May. Huenefeld explained how interseeding red clover into his winter wheat helps add nitrogen to his soil (middle photo) and how to use composted manure as fertilizer (top photo).

Photos by: Randal Gunn, NRCS

Throughout the Huenefeld tour Paul told the group how his family had always been involved in conservation, which was evident by the extensive windbreaks surrounding his farm.

A concern for the environment and his family’s health motivated his decision to convert his entire farming operation to certified organic in the early 1980’s. Today he grows organic corn, popcorn,

soybeans, alfalfa and wheat. His son James is a high school senior and plans to join the operation as the fifth generation to farm the land.



“Organic farming is working in harmony with nature. It’s fascinating and something we’ll never fully understand,” said Huenefeld.

Hopefully, through field events like this, farmers and ranchers will understand more about organic agriculture. ♦