

Review Comment

Docket Information

Docket ID CCC_FRDOC_0001
Long Title Recently Posted CCC Rules and Notices.

530

Document Information

Document ID CCC_FRDOC_0001-0075
Document Title Environmental Quality Incentives Program

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Government Agency State of Minnesota, Department of Agriculture

Comments

I appreciate the opportunity to offer comment on the new organic priorities contained in the Interim Final Rule on the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program which were published in the Federal Register on January 15, 2009. In developing these comments, I sought input from the Minnesota Organic Advisory Task Force (OATF), a 14-member body mandated by Minnesota Statute that includes organic producers, processing and retail representatives, consumers, researchers, educators, and agricultural membership organizations.

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture recognizes the conservation and environmental protection requirements required of organic farmers by the National Organic Standards. I am pleased to see provisions for organic conversion contained in this interim final rule and would like to offer specific comments on several sections.

Please find my full written comments attached in pdf format.

Attachments

G:\Mmoyniha\Organic\MDA Organic Issues\NRCS-IFR-08005--EQIP Organic Comment Letter.pdf

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April 16, 2009

Financial Assistance Programs Division
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 5237S
Washington, DC 20250-2890

VIA <http://regulations.gov>

Docket Number NRCS- IFR-08005

I appreciate the opportunity to offer comment on the new organic priorities contained in the *Interim Final Rule on the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program* which were published in the Federal Register on January 15, 2009. In developing these comments, I sought input from the Minnesota Organic Advisory Task Force (OATF), a 14-member body mandated by Minnesota Statute that includes organic producers, processing and retail representatives, consumers, researchers, educators, and agricultural membership organizations.

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture recognizes the conservation and environmental protection requirements required of organic farmers by the National Organic Standards. I am pleased to see provisions for organic conversion contained in this interim final rule and would like to offer specific comments on several sections:

§1466.5 National allocation and management

§1466.6 State allocation and management

I recommend incorporating additional language to make it clear that payments for organic or organic conversion are available in all counties of 50 states and territories, ensuring eligibility for all organic and converting producers, no matter where they live and farm.

§1466.7 Outreach activities

§1466.11 Technical services provided by qualified personnel not affiliated with USDA

While many state and local NRCS staff have little to no direct knowledge or experience with National Organic Standards and/or practices, state departments of agriculture, universities, and nonprofit organizations often possess a great deal of organic expertise. In addition to using the services of Technical Service Providers (TSPs), NRCS should enter into contribution, cooperative, or other agreements with these entities 1) for technical assistance and outreach activities and 2) to provide training to NRCS staff who will be administering the program at state and local levels.

§1466.11 Technical services provided by qualified personnel not affiliated with USDA

§1466.26 Contract violations and terminations

NRCS should use the expertise of organic certifying agencies accredited by the USDA National Organic Program to assess the suitability of organic transition plans and organic system plans and to help monitor an operations compliance with organic certification requirements once an EQIP contract for organic or organic conversion practices has been initiated.

§1466.20 Applications for contracts and selecting applications

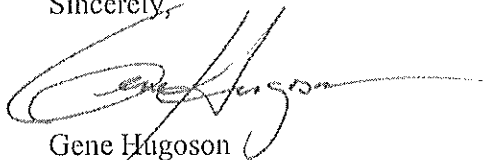
This section authorizes the grouping of applications within ranking pools. I encourage the State Conservationist or his/her designee to group and rank applications for organic and organic conversion payments separately so that they compete on their relative merits. I believe that a specific organic/organic conversion ranking pool would promote equal access to this program to all producers in all counties.

§1466.24 EQIP Payments

This section currently states that payments for practices related to organic production may not exceed \$20,000 per year or \$80,000 in aggregate over the course of six years (excluding technical assistance). Many practices that organic farmers use also benefit the environmental quality of nonorganic, or conventional, farms. It is unclear why an organic producer who implements practices like biofilters, managed grazing, conservation crop rotation standards, contour buffer strips, etc. (all of which would merit inclusion in his/her Organic System Plan) should be subject to a \$80,000 cap, while a conventional producer who implemented the same suite of practices would be eligible for up to \$300,000 in support. At a minimum, I recommend it be made explicit that the \$20,000/\$80,000 limits apply **only** to practices **specifically** related to organic or organic conversion.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important rule.

Sincerely,



Gene Hugoson
Commissioner

GH:ADFA:jmm

cc: Beverly Durgan, Dean, University of Minnesota Extension
William Hunt, State Conservationist, NRCS
Al Levine, Dean, U of M College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences