

2008 Farm Bill Organic Agriculture

Illinois

July 2009

OVERVIEW

Organic farming is one of the fastest growing segments in U.S. agriculture. From 1992 through 2005, the acres of certified organic cropland rose from 403,000 to more than 1.7 million; organically certified pasture acres rose from 532,000 to over 4 million; and the total number of organic certified livestock rose from 11,000 in 1992 to over 196,000.

LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) highlights the availability of financial and technical assistance to help producers of all commodities meet their conservation goals. It specifically includes help to agricultural producers transitioning to organic farming.

CONSERVATION PLANNING

For more than 70 years, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS—formerly the Soil Conservation Service) has placed a high priority on helping agricultural producers with conservation plans to meet their environmental and economic goals, while concurrently planning for the protection of the soil, water, air and wildlife resources. Conservation goals are highly individual and may certainly include transitioning to organic agriculture (or boosting pollinator populations, increasing biodiversity including soil-borne organisms, enhancing water quality, controlling invasive species, or dozens of other resource enhancing possibilities).

NRCS conservationists work with farmers and ranchers to come up with scientifically-sound alternatives for accomplishing their goals and working out a timeline to implement the conservation practices in the plan.

All information provided to NRCS for conservation planning purposes is strictly confidential. Implementation may be partially funded through Farm Bill programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).



In Illinois, having a conservation plan will give applicants a higher status when applying for the competitive EQIP contracts.

Illinois applicants will need to include their Organic System Plan (OSP) as part of their EQIP application for transitioning to organic production. Farmers who have an OSP have typically accomplished much or all of the work needed to develop an NRCS conservation plan and thus compete for EQIP contracts on a priority basis.

EQIP FOR ORGANIC TRANSITION AND MORE

Farmers who want to apply for financial assistance to transition to organic agriculture may receive assistance under a new provision of EQIP that allows producers to apply for up to \$20,000/year or \$80,000 over six years. Producers are required to develop and carry out an OSP.

In Illinois, NRCS is setting aside a separate pool of EQIP money for transitioning to organic. A large number of conservation practices may be funded using Organic Transition EQIP including cover crops, crop rotation, mulching, integrated pest management, wind breaks and filter strips. Ranchers may apply for assistance installing fencing and watering for rotational grazing systems.

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

EQIP is a competitive program (one out of every two to three applications is funded on the average) and projects are generally ranked for environmental benefits; producers transitioning to an organic system should realize significant environmental benefits.

2008 Farm Bill Illinois NRCS 2009 EQIP for Organic Farms

EQIP is a competitive program and projects are generally ranked for environmental benefits to be achieved. Producers with an organic system can still realize significant environmental benefits from using NRCS approved conservation practices.

Conservation Crop Rotation

Through EQIP, Illinois NRCS offers financial assistance for the use of conservation crop rotations to reduce soil erosion and to improve soil quality in organic crop production.

This option is intended to assist producers in the transition to organic certification during the three-year period when land must be farmed organically but is not yet certified organic. The producer must follow a USDA-certified OSP approved by a recognized certifying agency. This assistance is for producers of fruits and vegetables, livestock and row crops. A certified producer may use this practice to bring currently non-certified acres into certification.

Financial assistance is limited to established amounts per acre for each year of the three-year transition. NRCS will only provide payment for transition work yet to be completed.

The producer will submit a complete OSP approved by a certifying agent (list available at: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/CertifyingAgencies/Accredited.html>) to NRCS prior to preparation of the EQIP contract. When requested, the producer will provide records documenting farming activities scheduled in the plan to NRCS for review. These records must be retained by NRCS. However, these records must also be retained by the participant for a minimum of five years.

Pest Management

Organic producers in Illinois can receive financial assistance for implementing a pest management plan during the organic transition process. To qualify, at least three of the following must be completed:

1. Increase rotation diversity to include more than four crops in a rotation.
2. Include close-grown grasses and/or legumes in a rotation.
3. Include biological or cultural controls.
4. Utilize legumes other than soybeans in a resource conserving crop rotation.
5. Utilize cover crops in a conserving crop rotation.
6. Establish a pollinator-friendly (non-grass) buffer, documented on the Pollinator Job Sheet.
7. Use mechanical controls while maintaining soil loss to tolerable (T) levels.

Conservation practices funded using Organic Transition EQIP include...

- Composting facilities
- Contouring buffer strips
- Contour farming
- Cover crops
- Crop rotations
- Fencing and watering (rotational grazing)
- Field borders
- No-till/Strip-till
- Pasture and hayland plantings
- Pest management
- Ridge-till
- Windbreaks

SPECIAL SITUATIONS

While most EQIP contracts pay producers 75% of the cost of structures or management, some producers may receive a larger cost share percentage. Those who have farmed less than 10 years are considered beginning farmers and are eligible for 90%. Those with limited financial resources (defined on a county by county basis) can receive up to 90% of the costs of conservation practices.

CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

Farmers cannot be paid retroactively through EQIP for conservation work they have already undertaken. However, producers with comprehensive conservation systems on their farm or ranch should be well positioned to participate in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

The new CSP provides technical and financial assistance to those producers who already have applied the basic conservation practices and are willing to implement a higher level of conservation on their operations. Producers participating under CSP receive incentive payments for the specified higher levels of conservation treatment.

APPLYING FOR EQIP

When applying for EQIP, especially when applying for the first time, producers should be mindful that they will need to fill out forms providing USDA with information that confirms that they are eligible to participate in these public-funded programs. USDA employees can help with the legal and financial forms that will make it possible to receive funding. Most of these forms are not required for farmers requesting only technical assistance.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information and updates about Farm Bill activities, visit USDA's Web site: <http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

or NRCS' Web site: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2008>

Illinois NRCS program information is available at: <http://www.il.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/>