

## Program Helps Farmers Transition to Organic Agriculture

By: Joanna Pope, Nebraska NRCS Public Affairs Officer

**M**ore and more Nebraska farmers are looking into organic agriculture. As demand for organically-raised crops grows, and the price for these commodities continues to increase, Nebraska farmers are looking into taking advantage of these benefits.

Becoming certified as an organic farm takes time, knowledge, and a lot of paperwork. The transition can be daunting to farmers, which is why the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is offering assistance.

NRCS, through their Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), is providing an organic transition incentive payment for farmers and ranchers who make the transition from conventional to organic agriculture. Incentive payments vary across the state – east vs. west, irrigated vs. dryland, and cropland vs. rangeland. NRCS Resource Conservationist Claudia Stevenson in Grant, Neb., says the incentive payment is effective in getting producers make the switch.

“In Perkins County we had been offering first time organic growers an incentive payment of \$50 per acre. This incentive rate now varies, but it continues to give farmers encouragement to make the transition to organic ag, and it provides a safety net while learning a new farming system,” Stevenson said.

Perkins County farmer Mike Wyatt is enrolled in an EQIP organic transition contract. He has been working with Stevenson in making the transition from conventional to organic. Since signing up for EQIP Wyatt’s fields have become certified organic.

It takes three years of growing crops chemical-free by organic standards to become certified. Once certified organic, farmers need to be re-certified on an annual basis.



*Claudia Stevenson (right) helped Mike Wyatt transition to organic agriculture through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).*

Wyatt acknowledges that the additional oversight and regulations might turn some producers off, but he has been very happy that he converted to organic agriculture.

“I get a lot of satisfaction from farming this way. It obviously has its challenges, but we get a premium price for a premium product. The demand for organic crops is so high that I feel catered to when I’m contracting my crops. That’s a pretty nice position to be in,” Wyatt said.

Wyatt has also noticed environmental improvements on his farm since transitioning to organic farming. His soil seems healthier and has more water holding capacity. Plus he had no drop in yield since transitioning to organic farming.

NRCS is also working to provide education to producers interested in farming organically. The Organic Farming Statewide Project is a three-year,

statewide education program to help farmers and ranchers transition to organic production. The project is partially funded through a grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and will be carried out in nine Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) areas statewide.

The Organic Farming Statewide Project is designed to provide information at the local level from experienced organic farmers, supported by three organic farming technicians. Farm tours, information meetings, and statewide gatherings will provide farmers the knowledge base and social environment needed to decide if their operation is suited for organic farming.

The nine RC&D's in the project include: Northeast Nebraska RC&D in Plainview, Nebraska Loess Hills RC&D in Oakland, PrairieLand RC&D in Madison, Nebraska Great Plains RC&D in David City, Five Rivers RC&D in Tecumseh, Trailblazer RC&D in Red Cloud, South Central Nebraska RC&D in Doniphan, Panhandle RC&D Scottsbluff, and Loup Basin RC&D in Ord.

Wyatt did a lot of reading and attended classes to learn about organic agriculture methods. He also learned a lot from other organic farmers in the area. He thinks that neighbor-to-neighbor support is what is really needed to help promote organic agriculture.

“I'm glad NRCS is willing to help support organic agriculture. They've been a real help,” Wyatt said.

To learn more about EQIP, transitioning to organic agriculture, RC&D's and the additional assistance available from NRCS, contact your local USDA Service Center or visit [www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov). ♦

---

## Helping People Help the Land



An Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer