

Conservation Opportunities for Organic Farmers and those Transitioning to Organic Farming

Fact Sheet - February 2010

Application Window February 8 - March 12, 2010

Overview

Organic food sales remain the fastest growing sector in the food industry, swelling by 18 percent in 2007. Organic food sales more than tripled, to \$1.7 billion in 2007 from \$393 million in 2002, according to data released by USDA's Agriculture Census.

All 50 states now have certified organic acreage for a total of 4 million acres of farmland. California remains the leading state in certified organic cropland, with more than 220,000 acres, mostly for fruit and vegetable production. Texas has experienced growth with a total of 87,000 acres and ranks sixth out of 50 states in organic cropland acreage.

The Texas Department of Agriculture reports that there are approximately 150 certified organic producers of crops ranging from fruits and vegetables to tree nuts, corn, peanuts, hay, wheat, cotton and rice.

Assistance Available

Financial Assistance

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) provided funding specifically to help organic farmers and those agricultural producers transitioning to organic farming.

In Texas, more than \$4 million is available in 2010 through a special allotment for organic farmers via the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Successful applicants will receive financial assistance to implement priority conservation practices designed to improve natural resource conditions. Not only do these practices offer significant environmental benefits, but they are also important to growers. Farmers who want to apply for financial assistance may receive up to \$20,000/year and are limited to \$80,000 over a six-year period.

Conservation Planning Assistance

For more than 70 years, the Natural Resources Conser-

vation Service (NRCS) has placed a high priority on helping agricultural producers with conservation plans to meet their environmental and economic goals, while at the same time planning for the protection of the soil, water, air and wildlife resources. Conservation goals are highly individual and may 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 will come to your farm and work with you to develop a conservation plan based on your farm goals. The plan will specify a timeline to implement the conservation practices. Conservation planning assistance is free and does not require participation in financial assistance programs.

Confidentiality

All information provided to NRCS for conservation planning purposes is strictly confidential.

How Do I Get Started?

Visit your local USDA Service Center to:

- a) Register in the Service Center Information Database (SCIMS) through the Farm Service Agency.
- b) Apply for assistance under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program at the NRCS office prior to March 23, 2010, for current year funds. (Applications received after this date, will be considered for future funding.)
- c) Have or be willing to develop an Organic System Plan on your land
 - 1) If already certified as organic, bring a copy of your Organic System Plan for review
 - 2) If transitioning to organic, submit a self-certification letter to the NRCS district conservationist stating your intent to do so. The NRCS will provide a template for self-certification.

(Continuation)

Conservation Opportunities for Organic Farmers and those Transitioning to Organic Farming

Eligibility Requirements

- a) Be an agricultural operation that produces at least \$1,000 in agricultural products or has IRS Schedule F form showing profit or loss from a farm operation
- b) Must own, or have control of the land (by lease or rental agreement) for length of contract
- c) Must be actively engaged in farm operation
- d) May be an individual, entity or joint operation
- e) Be registered in the USDA Service Center Information Database (SCIMS)
- f) Be certified as organic according to the National Organic Program or be in the process of transitioning to organic production

Farms under \$5,000 in Revenue Per Year

If producers who sell less than \$5,000 a year wish to use EQIP as part of their transition to organic certification, they may do so; however, they are required to implement conservation practices for certified organic production that are consistent with an Organic System Plan (OSP) the same as those who are already certified.

What is an Organic System Plan?

An Organic System Plan is a required written management plan that covers all components of an organic production and handling system. Such a plan must be developed annually and must include:

1. A description of practices and procedures to be performed and maintained;

2. A list of each substance to be used in production or handling, indicating its composition, source, location(s) where it will be used, and documentation of commercial availability;
3. A description of the monitoring practices and procedures to be performed and maintained, including their frequency;
4. A description of the record keeping system implemented to comply with established requirements;
5. A description of the management practices and physical barriers established to prevent co-mingling of organic and non-organic products on a split operation and to prevent contact of organic production and handling operations and products with prohibited substances; and
6. Additional information deemed necessary by the certifying agent (CA) to evaluate compliance with the regulations.

The OSP is administered by the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). Payments are not authorized for activities or practice components which are solely production related and are not linked to an identified resource concern. Payments may not be used for any costs related to organic certification.

The USDA Accredited Certifying Agent in Texas is the Texas Department of Agriculture (www.agr.state.tx.us)

For more information:

Texas specific information can be found at www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov. Agency information can be found at www.nrcs.usda.gov.