

EQIP Special Initiative for organic production

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 USDA's Agriculture Census.

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 Washington, more than \$1 million is available through a special allotment for organic farmers through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Financial assistance

Successful applicants can receive funding to implement six core conservation practices designed to improve natural resource conditions. Not only do these practices offer significant environmental benefits, but they are also important to growers. The six practices are: #1. Crop Rotation; #2. Cover Crop; #3. Nutrient Management; #4. Pest Management; #5. Prescribed Grazing; and #6. Forage Harvest Management. Because practices can be more expensive to implement under organic systems, payments for these six core practices have been increased by up to 60 percent. Practices currently implemented are not eligible for payment.

In addition to the six core practices, there are more than 20 additional practices that can qualify for funding through this initiative in Washington. 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 Conservation 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 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 time line to implement the conservation practices. Producers may be eligible for other conservation 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) database through the Farm Service Agency (FSA).
- b) Apply for assistance under the EQIP at the NRCS office.
- c) Have or be willing to develop an Organic System Plan (OSP) on your land.

What do I bring with me?

If you are already certified:

1. Proof of farm ownership
2. Your organic system plan

If you are transitioning:

1. Proof of farm ownership
2. You will be required to submit a self-certification letter to the district conservationist stating that you “agree to develop and implement conservation practices for certified organic production that are consistent with an organic system plan.”

What if I sell under \$5,000 a year and wish to acquire organic certification?

If producers who sell less than \$5,000 a year wish to use EQIP to obtain organic certification, they may do so; however, they are required to implement conservation practices for certified organic production that are consistent with an OSP. 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.

Other programs available

While most EQIP contracts pay producers 50-70 percent of the cost of structures or management, some producers may receive a larger percentage.

Those who have farmed less than 10 years are considered beginning farmers and may be eligible for 75-90 percent. Socially disadvantaged or those with limited financial resources (defined on a county-by-county basis) can also receive up to 90 percent of the costs of conservation practices.

NRCS administers a complete suite of conservation programs to improve and conserve natural resources, enhance wildlife habitat and help people help the land.

For more information:

Washington-specific information can be found at www.wa.nrcs.usda.gov. Agency information can be found at www.nrcs.usda.gov and www.ams.usda.gov. Contact your local USDA service center to apply.