



United States Department of Agriculture



Go Organic

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service is helping Iowa's organic producers protect their natural resources through the Organic Initiative.



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EQIP Organic Initiative

Iowa's organic farmers are implementing long standing and new, innovative conservation practices to protect the natural resources on their farms through a USDA initiative to help producers of all commodities meet their conservation goals. The 2014 Farm Bill specifically includes help to organic producers through the Organic Initiative.

Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) the Organic Initiative provides financial assistance to National Organic Program (NOP) certified producers, as well as producers in the process of transitioning to organic production.

Organic producers applying through this initiative can receive up to \$20,000 per year or \$80,000 during any six year period. Farmers may also compete for the larger pool of EQIP funds that allow for up to \$300,000 over six years.

EQIP is administered through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Program applications are accepted on a continuous basis at NRCS offices across the state. NRCS offices are stationed at USDA Service Centers in every county in Iowa.

Initiative Requirements

- » Financial assistance is provided for only those practices which will assist growers meet provisions of an Organic System Plan (OSP) as administered by the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS).
- » Payments are not authorized for activities or practices which are solely production related and are not linked to an identified resource concern.
- » Participants who are already certified organic must implement EQIP practices according to an approved OSP and submit a copy of their current OSP.
- » Participants who are transitioning to organic production must submit a self-certification letter stating they agree to develop and implement conservation practices for certified organic production that are consistent with an OSP, and provide the name and contact information of the USDA-accredited certifying agent who will be used for the organic certification process.

What is an OSP?

An Organic System Plan (OSP) is a management plan for organic production or for an organic handling operation that has been agreed to by the producer/handler and the certifying agent. It includes written plans that govern all aspects of ag production or handling. An OSP must be developed annually and include:

1. practices and procedures to be performed and maintained;
2. a list of each substance to be used in production or handling;
3. monitoring practices and procedures to be performed and maintained;
4. a description of the record keeping system;
5. practices and physical barriers established to prevent co-mingling with conventional food and contact with prohibited substances, and;
6. additional information deemed necessary by the certifying agent (CA) to document NOP compliance.



Photo by Jerry DeWitt

Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops

Iowa Organic Initiative Conservation Practices

- Animal Mortality Facility
- Composting Facility
- Conservation Crop Rotation
- Conservation Plan Supporting Organic Transition
- Contour Buffer Strips
- Contour Farming
- Cover Crop
- Critical Area Planting
- Fence
- Field Border
- Forage Harvest Management
- Heavy Use Protection Area
- Nutrient Management
- Pasture and Hay Planting
- Pest Management
- Pipeline
- Prescribed Grazing
- Residue and Tillage Management, No-till/Strip-till
- Residue and Tillage Management, Mulch-till
- Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops
- Stripcropping
- Watering Facility
- Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment
- Windbreak/Shelterbelt Renovation

Reaching A New Audience

By all accounts, the Organic Initiative has been an overwhelming success in Iowa. Since its inception in 2009, NRCS has provided nearly \$8 million to Iowa producers through the EQIP Organic Initiative.

From seasonal high tunnels to cover crops, nutrient management to conservation crop rotations, USDA's Organic Initiative is helping Iowa farmers and vegetable growers protect and enhance natural resources on their organic operations. And it's allowing for an easier, more environmentally-friendly transition for producers converting to organic agriculture.

The following four feature stories are snapshots of Organic Initiative successes across Iowa. These stories showcase certified and transitioning producers who are taking advantage of the Organic Initiative. They show how the Initiative is assisting producers in all corners of the state in all types of operations - from corn and soybeans to livestock production to vegetable production.



Glen Elsbernd

Young Vegetable Grower Flourishing



Elsbernd in a row of potatoes.

Twenty-three year-old Glen Elsbernd is utilizing the USDA's Organic Initiative and higher payment rates on conservation practices as a Beginning Farmer to help transition his 88-acre Winneshiek County farm to organic vegetables much sooner than he expected, and in doing so is protecting valuable natural resources on the farm...

Elsbernd is in his third growing season operating the farm, following a one-year stint learning about growing organic vegetables at Harmony Valley Farm in Wisconsin. "My original goal was to have the entire farm in vegetables in 20 years," said Elsbernd. "I think I'll have it within 10 years now."

Elsbernd markets his produce under the name "G It's Fresh." He and his crew of at least six workers grow everything from romaine lettuce to carrots to parsnips. He says his biggest sellers are potatoes, lettuce and broccoli. During his first growing season, he sold produce through Grown Locally and the Winneshiek County Farmers Market. Grown Locally is a cooperative of more than 20 local farms and producers who work together to deliver a variety of locally produced food. He says Grown Locally markets the group's food to many schools and restaurants.

His operation is expanding, so this year he is also marketing his produce to Organic Valley™, a farmer-owned Wisconsin-based company that sells organic products nationwide. "At first I had a problem with too much produce, and now I don't have enough," he said. "I guess it's a good problem to have."

Cover Crops

Elsbernd interseeds alfalfa into a four-seed mix of triticale, hairy vetch, oats, and a grass mix. Triticale is a cereal rye/winter wheat cross that is easy to establish. He likes it because it effectively controls erosion and suppresses weeds.

For early spring produce, Elsbernd plants an Austrian winter pea and oat cover crop. "Austrian peas are winter hardy, but easy to kill off in the spring," he said.

Elsbernd has also uses winter tillage radishes, which are a deep-rooted cover crop that benefit the soil by reducing compaction, improving water infiltration, increasing organic matter and keeping the soil well-covered over the winter.

Beginning Farmer

A native of Spillville in northeast Iowa, Elsbernd also received higher payment rates on conservation practices for participating in EQIP as a Beginning Farmer. The USDA defines a Beginning Farmer as one who has not operated a farm for more than 10 consecutive years.

"The Program has been a really big help for me to get my operation going," said Elsbernd. "It's been the shot in the arm that I needed."



Cover Crops

Organic Initiative Conservation Practices

- » Conservation Crop Rotation
- » Cover Crops
- » Forage Harvest Management
- » Nutrient Management
- » Pest Management
- » Seasonal High Tunnel System



Elsbernd inspects his romaine lettuce.

Jason & Paul Wells

Cover Crops Suppress Weeds for Dairy Operation



Jason and Paul Wells in their wheat cover crop.

An aerial-applied wheat and red clover cover crop is helping to suppress weeds, reduce soil erosion, and provide other environmental benefits on 200 acres of certified organic cropland that help feed a 150-head certified organic dairy operation in Van Buren County near Milton...

Wells Dairy is a father-son operation that first certified organic cropland in 1993, and just recently certified the dairy in 2008. Father, Paul, and son, Jason, farm about 1,000 acres of certified organic pasture and cropland as well.

Certified organic crop producers are required to grow row crops no more than three years in a five-year rotation. Their rotation is typically soybeans-corn-soybeans-small grain and at least one year of hay.

Cover Crops

A major issue with growing row crops organically is weed invasion. Jason Wells says their fields get particularly weedy by the third consecutive row crop year. That's how cover crops help. In fall 2009, they aerial applied wheat and red clover to standing soybeans to reduce weeds and erosion, limit nitrogen leaching, increase soil organic matter, and improve overall soil quality.

"We are very happy with the wheat and clover," said Jason. "We tried to plant a rye cover crop in the past, and it got away from us."

With no experience applying cover crops aerially, Jason says he was skeptical during the winter months whether the wheat/clover cover crop would come in this spring, but he was pleasantly surprised. "If you were out here this February you could barely tell we seeded cover crops this year, but they just shot up this spring," he said.

A major reason why they aerial applied the wheat and clover was a wetter than normal fall, which included a late soybean harvest. The cover crops were applied in late October, more than a month later than recommended. And with a wet spring, the father-son team didn't cultivate the cover crops and plant corn until mid-June. They plan to aerial apply cover crops again this year, but this time in late August or early September.

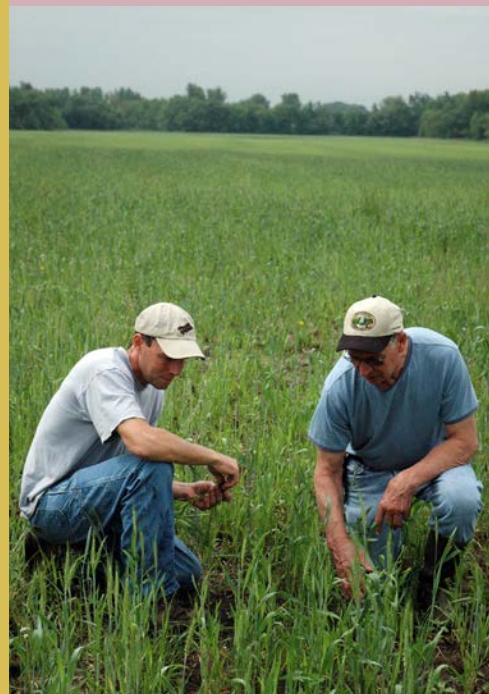
"With the wet ground, we wouldn't have even applied cover crops without the assistance of the Organic Initiative through EQIP," said Jason. "It really worked for us and helped our operation through a wet fall and spring, which can be tough for organic farmers."



Organic dairy cows graze.

Organic Initiative Conservation Practices

- » Cover Crops
- » Pest Management



Inspecting the wheat cover crop.

Gary Otto

Cherokee County Farmer Transitions to Organic Production



Gary Otto kneels in his organic transitioning cornfield.

A strong history of land stewardship and a suite of new conservation practices are helping longtime conventional farmer Gary Otto of rural Cherokee transition about 160 row crop acres to certified organic agriculture...

Gary Otto conventionally farmed corn and soybeans for 35 years before beginning the organic certification transition process in 2008. He is splitting his 160 acres into five equally-sized fields. In those 30-acre fields he will annually rotate alfalfa/wheat, alfalfa, corn, soybeans with cover crops, and corn.

Having also worked off the farm for many years, Otto says the desire to farm full-time was a major factor in his decision to transition to organic production. “My farm is too small to make a living farming conventionally,” he says. Otto’s son, Travis, is also interested in farming. With the extra help he feels more comfortable with the added workload that organic farming brings.

Through the years Otto has implemented sustainable conservation practices such as terraces, field borders, grassed waterways, contour buffer strips and windbreaks to help reduce soil erosion, protect water quality, and attract wildlife. Through the Organic Initiative he is applying pest and nutrient management plans, cover crops, a heavy use protection area, and crop rotations.

Since beginning the organic transition process, Otto says he has seen very little erosion. “It’s a balancing act between getting rid of weeds and protecting against soil erosion,” he says. “I am careful to farm along the contour and leave crop residue wherever possible.”

Otto feels the EQIP Organic Initiative has helped him most in nutrient management planning. “Having to apply strictly organic inputs for nutrients, it’s hard to keep a balance,” he says. “It’s been a learning experience. The education I’ve received is worth more than the payment.”

He says organic farming can be a little discouraging at times. For example, organic corn prices have dropped steadily since he began transitioning. “At the time we set up our rotation there was a pretty good market for organic corn. Right now, that’s not the case,” he says.

Nonetheless, Otto is staying positive. He says the camaraderie among organic producers has helped. “I am sticking with it. That’s the thing about organic growers – we’re willing to share our experiences and information,” he says. “It’s not like we’re competing against one another.”



Wheat is one of Otto’s five rotations.

Organic Initiative Conservation Practices

- » Conservation Crop Rotation
- » Cover Crops
- » Heavy Use Protection Area
- » Nutrient Management
- » Pest Management



Gary stands in a terrace with wife, Alura, and son, Travis.

Ron Muth

Initiative Helps Northwest Iowan Experiment with Cover Crops



Ron Muth overlooks his organic vegetables.

Funding through the USDA's Organic Initiative is helping Sioux County organic farmer Ron Muth experiment with cover crops which help suppress weeds and supply nutrients to his row crops and his vegetables...

Ron Muth, whose farm is near Ireton in northwest Iowa, grows 60 varieties of mostly organic vegetables, along with more than 100 acres of a corn, soybeans, alfalfa, oats and wheat rotation – all organic. He started growing organic vegetables eight years ago, and he says it is a continuous learning process. "I imagine if I do this 10 more years it's still going to be a learning experience," he says. "People in the niche part of agriculture share ideas well, so I've learned a lot really fast."

He says his forte is tomatoes, peppers, beets, carrots and onions. "I'm getting better at sweet corn – I've always fought the weeds and bugs," he says.

Muth says he is constantly trying new things to grow a better crop, and to suppress weeds, a major issue for organic farmers. His most recent experiment was sowing an oats cover crop into sweet corn to help reduce weeds. He says the key is to plant sweet corn at least a week before sowing the oats – that way the slow-growing corn has time to grow before the fast-growing oats take over. "It really works neat," he says. "The first time I tried this I put them in simultaneously and the oats grew too fast too soon, so this year I planted the sweet corn first to give it time to establish." He says this may be the second consecutive year he gets all the sweet corn out of every patch.

Muth is using an oats cover crop because of its availability and because of wet ground. However, he plans to go with a rye cover crop on much of his cropland next year.

In addition to cover crops, Muth is utilizing the Organic Initiative to implement three other conservation practices including conservation crop rotations, nutrient management and pest management.

He employs three to five part-time workers to pull weeds, harvest, clean vegetables, and load and haul produce to farmer's markets in Sioux City, Akron, and Hawarden.

Muth says some of the myths about organic farming are not totally true, like the overall cost per acre to grow a crop. "We're led to believe that growing an acre of vegetables is very expensive compared to row crops, but it isn't," he says. "And your net return per acre is considerably higher [in organic farming]."

He says the key is managing labor costs. "Growing organic vegetables is [labor] intensive," he says, "but what I like about it is the initial investment per net return of dollar is a pretty nice deal."



An oats cover crop in sweet corn.

Organic Initiative Conservation Practices

- » Conservation Crop Rotation
- » Cover Crops
- » Nutrient Management
- » Pest Management



Muth harvests vegetables the day before a farmer's market.

Conservation Planning with NRCS

NRCS works with private landowners to help them protect the land, water and air quality. Those who know us typically think the agency only works with farmers and ranchers. But NRCS also works with cities and counties, non-profit groups and businesses, schools and other conservation groups throughout Iowa. What many people don't know or recognize is that the conservation work we do impacts their lives on a daily basis.

Since the aftermath of the Dust Bowl, our main charges has been to help landowners identify natural resource concerns and put together a plan for repairing and protecting the resources on their property. This voluntary conservation plan addresses when and how farmers should till their soil, apply nutrients and pesticides, how and when cattle should graze pastures, how crops should be planted, what crops should be planted and in what rotation. The plan may also include different conservation practices or structures to be planted or installed to help keep soil and nutrients in place and out of water supplies.

For more than 75 years NRCS 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 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 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 confidential. Implementation may be partially funded through Farm Bill programs such as EQIP.





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