



Newsletter of the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service: A project of the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT)

Transitioning to Organic Production

In order for their farms and products to be certified organic, farmers must comply with the standards of the USDA's National Organic Program. What can producers expect during the process of moving toward and switching to organic production? This issue of ATTRAnews looks at some of the pitfalls and potholes of the transition period and offers advice for how to smooth the way.

NCAT and Organics *By George Kuepper, NCAT Agriculture Specialist*

Since 2001, the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) has had a special relationship with the National Organic Program (NOP). It has been our task to produce educational and compliance materials that assist producers and handlers in transitioning to organic certification. Under NCAT's first contract, we developed and published the Organic Crop and Livestock Workbooks, a compliance checklist for producers, and a series of documentation forms.

These publications are being used by producers, handlers, and certifiers in all regions of the country. They are also being used as training materials for Extension agents, NRCS personnel, and other agricultural professionals who need an understanding of organic agriculture and the federal regulations that govern it.

Now NCAT is poised to release a new wave of publications as a result of our second contract with the NOP. A compliance checklist for handlers is already available. It will be followed next by updated organic system plan templates, often used by organic certifiers as application forms. These documents collect and organize all the information that certifiers need to evaluate a farm or handling operation for certification.

We are also planning a series of farmer guides for how to complete organic system plans. These guides – directed to small and large crop farms and to livestock production – explain the sort of information certifiers are seeking, why they require it, and how best to present it. We hope that the new guides will make the application process easier and faster for farmers and their certifiers.



At Phil Foster Ranches in Hollister, Calif., USDA horticulturist Eric Brennan and Foster examine red chard marketed under the Pinnacles Organic Produce brand. Photo by Scott Bauer, USDA ARS.

What is the Organic Transition Timeline?

A three-year conversion period is required to achieve full organic status. In other words, no prohibited substances (synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, etc.) may be applied to the land for 36 months prior to the harvest of any product that will be labeled or otherwise represented as organic. Farms or specific fields that do not yet meet this requirement may be considered "in transition", though this term does not have legal status.

– Adapted from ATTRA's *Organic Farm Certification and the Organic Crops Workbook*

Myths and Realities about Going Organic

Myth	Reality
Yields will be miserable.	Yields are comparable under well managed systems.
Pests will eat you up.	Most pest problems can be prevented using integrated approaches.
Weeds will take over your farm.	Weed management requires constant attention.
Transitioning is impossible.	Transition can be challenging: plan cash flow with budget projections.
The paperwork will kill you.	Recordkeeping can help your operation in many ways in addition to organic compliance.
You'll never make any money.	Organic certification expands your market options and often gives premium prices.
It can't be done.	It can be done if you plan, persist, and ask for help when you need it.

By Ann Baier, NCAT Program Specialist

ATTRA Publications on Organics

ATTRA provides many publications in English and Spanish on organic certification and management. Download these from the ATTRA website's organic page – www.attra.ncat.org/organic.html – or call 800-346-9140 for a printed copy.

Guide to ATTRA's Organic Publications (AT005) – This will direct you to everything ATTRA publishes on organic certification, policy, crops, livestock, marketing, and management.

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www.attra.ncat.org

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Collaborating for Organic Transition in Montana *By Jeff Schahczenski, NCAT Program Specialist*

The complex transition to organic production can be eased with good technical assistance and information resources.

For the last two years NCAT has joined with local partners in Montana to increase the ability of the Montana office of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (MT NRCS) to serve organic agriculture. Dave White, the head of MT NRCS, has shown national leadership through his agency's support of this project and support for organic agriculture generally.

Some of the accomplishments of this truly exceptional collaboration:

- The MT NRCS website was expanded to include an organic agriculture resources section: www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/organic
- NCAT organized 12 months of toll-free phone conferences on a wide variety of subjects with Montana organic farmers and ranchers and state experts.
- NCAT provided the 50-plus local offices of the MT NRCS with a collection

of ATTRA material on organics.

As a result of the project, MT NRCS is offering more resources to organic producers through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program and the Conservation Security Program.

Besides NCAT and MT NRCS, project partners included the Montana Organic Certification Office, the Alternative Energy Resources Organization, and the Independent Organic Inspectors Association, with the assistance of the Montana Organic Association.

Conservation Benefits of Organics: What's Not to Like? *By Rex Dufour, NCAT Agriculture Specialist*

The national EQIP program, administered by NRCS, can provide cost share for a variety of farm conservation activities. EQIP money can be used for organic transitioning activities. But many local NRCS officials are unfamiliar with organic management practices, and may be skeptical of any claims made about the conservation benefits of organically managed systems.

If you're interested in applying for EQIP funds to help transition your farm to organic, you may need to help educate your local NRCS staff on how to view organic farming as a conservation resource. Ask your NRCS office to have organic farming be highly ranked as a "resource of concern" when considering EQIP applications. Also

consider providing your NRCS office with the following two peer-reviewed articles, which support the linkage between organic farming and conservation activities:

Reduced nitrate leaching and enhanced denitrifier activity and efficiency in organically fertilized soils. Kramer, S.B., et al. 2006. Proceedings, National Academy of Sciences 103:4522-4527. <http://www.pnas.org/cgi/content/abstract/103/12/4522>

The effects of organic agriculture on biodiversity and abundance: a meta-analysis. Janne Bengtsson, et al. 2005. Journal of Applied Ecology, vol. 42. <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1365-2664.2005.01005.x>

For a list of other articles that discuss organic farming and conservation, please email rex@ncat.org.

Resources for Organic Certification and Information

National Organizations

The USDA National Organic Program
202-720-3252; www.ams.usda.gov/nop/indexNet.htm

Organic Farming Research Foundation
831-426-6606; www.ofrf.org

Organic Materials Review Institute
541-343-7600; www.omri.org

Washington State Department of
Agriculture Organic Food Program
360-902-1805; <http://agr.wa.gov/FoodAnimal/Organic>

Midwestern Organizations

Midwest Organic & Sustainable
Education Service
715-772-3153; www.mosesorganic.org/index.html

Minnesota Organic Farmers Information
Exchange Program
320-212-3008; <http://mofie.coafes.umn.edu>

Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Assoc.
614-421-2022; www.oeffa.org

Northeastern Organizations

Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners
Association
207-568-4142; www.mofga.org

Northeast Organic Network
518-583-4613; www.neon.cornell.edu

Northeast Organic Farming Association
203-888-5146; www.nofa.org

Western Organizations

Alternative Energy Resources Org.
406-443-7272; www.aeromt.org

California Certified Organic Farmers
831-423-2263; www.ccof.org

CCOF's Going Organic program:
www.ccof.org/goingorganic.php

Montana Organic Association
406-887-2869

New Mexico Organic Commodity
Commission
505-841-9065; <http://nmocc.state.nm.us/index.html>

Oregon Tilth
503-378-0690; www.tilth.org

Texas Organic Farmers and Gardeners
Association
877-326-5175; www.tofga.org

Washington Producers Tilth
206-442-7620; www.tilthproducers.org

Southern Organizations

Center for Environmental Farming
Systems, Goldsboro, NC
919-513-0954; www.cefs.ncsu.edu/organic.htm

Florida Certified Organic Growers
and Consumers
352-377-6345; www.foginfo.org

Georgia Organics, Inc
770-993-5534; www.georgiaorganics.org

Organic Certifiers. For a complete list of certifiers accredited by the USDA's National Organic Program: www.ams.usda.gov/nop/CertifyingAgents/Accredited.html

Find Organizations Across the Country

NCAT's Sustainable Agriculture Organizations and Publications Database—online only:

www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/susagorg.php

Publications

Transitioning to Organic Production
This informative publication from the Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education's Sustainable Agriculture Network can be downloaded at www.sare.org/publications/organic/index.htm or call 802-656-0484.

New Mexico Organic Producer Marketing Guide

Most of the advice in this excellent handbook is useful to farmers all over the country. Download it at <http://nmocc.state.nm.us/marketing.html> or call 505-841-9067.

Gallatin Valley Goat Dairy Goes Organic Story and photos by Paul Driscoll, NCAT Editor

Melvyn and Sue Brown probably found the transition to a certified organic goat dairy and cheese manufacturing easier than most producers. Having always operated from an organic perspective, the Browns' decision to become certified was less an economic consideration than a continuation of their production philosophy and a reflection of their outlook on life.

Amaltheia Dairy is in southwest Montana's picturesque Gallatin Valley, where the Browns first started milking goats in fall 2001. Mel and Sue were soon able to purchase a small regional cheese-making facility which was quickly moved to a new location in Belgrade, about three miles from the farm, and expanded. The dairy and plant attained certified organic status in August of this year.



Finding New Suppliers

A grounding in organic production practices meant the Browns' 20 acres did not require a recovery period from years of herbicide, pesticide, and fertilizer use. Still, the dairy had to find certified hay and feed for approximately 300 milking goats. Most of the hay is grown locally — some within



sight of the dairy. Mineral supplements are certified, even the bedding straw. "Pretty much everything you bring onto the place," Melvyn said.

The goat herd, too, had to pass a one-year waiting period. Melvyn and Sue made some minor adjustments to their milking procedures to meet certification standards, using hydrogen peroxide formula to disinfect udders and finding an acceptable compound to treat mastitis when it occurs. Certification for the cheese production was relatively easy, Melvyn said, since the sole source of goat milk is his own farm.

Amaltheia's cheese making plant is located in a small industrial park near the Belgrade airport. Milk is delivered to the plant in a 1,000-gallon tank truck twice a week. Two employees and daughter Sarah oversee production of regular and flavored chevre, feta, and ricotta cheeses. Capacity is approximately 2,000 pounds per week.

Lining up the Market

Sarah and Sue handle most of the marketing duties, which today includes Whole Foods stores in the West, Trader Joe's, and Wild Oats. Melvyn said the larger outlets would purchase everything he could produce, and he may consider purchasing goat milk from certified dairies in the area to expand capacity. But for now the Browns still deliver to the restaurants and smaller grocery outlets that supported them from the beginning. They also ship over the Internet, often sending out air packages from the nearby Gallatin airport.

Melvyn said he would always advise anyone considering the path to certification to "just do it." One minor bump on his own path, he noted, was that some buyers knew that certification was forthcoming and held off on their usual orders until the product was certified.

Tips from Organic Inspectors on Transitioning Your Farm

- You don't have to go hook, line, and sinker into organics. You can start with a field or a parcel. Just keep records, keep them separate, and document all inputs, practices, etc.
- You don't necessarily have to apply for certification at the beginning of the 36-month transition period. Consult your certifier to learn what will be required. You can generally wait until about six months before the first harvest that will occur after the transition period. The timing may depend on what you grow as your first crop, so allow plenty of time.
- You must be able to document land-use history.
- The greatest risks for transitioning producers are record keeping, human resource management, budgeting, and coping with the economic transition.
- You will need a marketing plan for the crops you grow during your transition period. Even though you are managing the crops as organic during the transition, you will not be able to sell these crops as organic. The transitional label does not carry legal status. Since it is possible that your yields might drop initially, you need to carefully consider your markets and cash flow.
- While some crops may produce lower yields without synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, organic growers often have relatively low input costs, so your bottom line may be steady. However, management costs may be higher, at least initially while you are learning to manage a system differently. The organic premium may increase your profits after certification is complete.
- It takes time for your farm's ecology to adjust to organic management. The natural processes will continue to develop as the farm becomes more balanced.
- Not all growers find the transition difficult. Producers who are already rotating crops and using sustainable practices will likely have an easier time.



Advice from Farmers about Organic Transition Sylvanus Farm, Burkesville, Kentucky

Located in Southcentral Kentucky's Cumberland County, Sylvanus Farm is certified organic by the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association. Todd Elliott and Sarah Paulson cultivate about 5 acres of vegetables, herbs, flowers, and fruit on their 23-acre farm, marketing through a community supported agriculture (CSA) project. They also raise chickens and Black Angus beef.

The farm is 2½ hours from Nashville and 1½ hours from Bowling Green. Todd and Sarah say proximity to urban centers is essential for a CSA to work, but they could not buy higher-priced land nearer the cities. Many CSAs opt out of organic certification because they know their members personally and don't need it, but Todd notes several reasons to certify. Even though they know their members well, he says that certification is important to many of their customers, as it distinguishes them as the only certified organic CSA in the area. Some potential members contact them specifically because they are organic. Also, if they want to expand to

other types of markets, certification will be required.

Challenges to certification? Todd says, "I don't think it is that hard to certify." Here are some tips from Sarah and Todd for growers considering the step to organic production:

- Keep a daily journal. Write down what you do. Records are not only a requirement for certification, they also help you make informed management decisions.
- Get very familiar with the organic regulations.
- Before applying any inputs to your crops, contact your certifying agent.
- Be aware of what your neighbors are doing. Are there chemical drift concerns, and how might their crop impact yours? As an example, when close neighbors stopped growing corn, crows descended on Sylvanus Farm in droves the next year.

For more information see www.sylvanusfarm.com. Excerpted from NCAT's *Southern Organic Resource Guide*.

Organic Livestock Feed Supplier Database

NCAT staff have updated the Organic Livestock Feed Supplier database on the ATTRA website. This database allows users to search by state for formulated organic feed rations or for individual ingredients. Because the new database is self-listing, suppliers can enter their own contact information and description of the feeds they offer. www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/livestockfeed_srch.php.

New and Updated Publications from ATTRA

- ♦ Aquaponics—Integration of Hydroponics with Aquaculture (IP163)
- ♦ Cómo Prepararse para la Inspección Orgánica (SP261)
- ♦ El Proceso de la Certificación Orgánica (SP262)
- ♦ Lavender Production, Products, Markets, and Entertainment Farms (IP243)
- ♦ Maintaining Irrigation Pumps, Motors, and Engines (IP299)
- ♦ Managing Internal Parasites in Sheep and Goats (IP293)
- ♦ Organic Allium Production (IP138)
- ♦ Switchgrass as a Bioenergy Crop (IP302)

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