

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service is helping Arkansas's organic producers protect their natural resources through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program ...



Organic Initiative

Overview

Organic farming is one of the fastest growing segments in U.S. agriculture. From 1992 through 2005, the acres of certified organic cropland rose from 403,000 to more than 1.7 million; organically certified pasture acres rose from 532,000 to over 4 million; and the total number of organic certified livestock rose from 11,000 in 1992 to over 196,000.

EQIP Organic Initiative

Arkansas'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 2008 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 over six years. 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 almost every Arkansas county.

Initiative Requirements

Financial assistance is provided for only those practices which will assist growers to 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 Organic System Plan?

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.

Producers interested in applying for Organic Initiative funding must submit applications through their local NRCS Service Center, which can be located through the Web site at:

<http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?agency=nrcs>

Conservation Planning

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 Arkansas. What many people do not 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 have 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 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.

For more information on the Organic Initiative in Arkansas call your local USDA Service Center or visit the NRCS Arkansas Web site at:

www.ar.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip_organic.html

Arkansas Organic Initiative Conservation Practices

Arkansas NRCS offers technical and financial assistance on the following conservation practices for organic agriculture:



Access Control

The temporary or permanent exclusion of animals, people, vehicles, and/or equipment from an area



Composting Facility

A facility to process raw organic by-products into biologically stable organic material



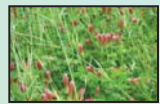
Conservation Crop Rotation

Growing crops in a recurring sequence on the same field



Conservation Plan - Organic Transition

A specialized conservation plan to guide the transition from conventional to organic agriculture



Cover Crop

Crops including grasses, legumes and forbs for seasonal cover and other conservation purposes



Deep Tillage

Performing tillage below the normal tillage depth to modify adverse properties of a soil



Forage Harvest Management

The timely cutting and removal of forages from the field as hay, green-chop or ensilage



Mulch Till

Managing crop and other plant residue while limiting the soil-disturbing activities used to grow crops



Nutrient Management

Managing the placement, timing and application of nutrients



Pest Management

Using environmentally sensitive strategies to manage weeds and insects



Pipeline

A pipeline used to distribute water for irrigating crops



Prescribed Grazing

Managing the harvest of vegetation with grazing and/or browsing animals



Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops

A structure used to cover crops to extend the growing season in an environmentally safe manner