

Supporting

Organic Agriculture



2014 Farm Bill Conservation Programs

OVERVIEW

Organic farming is one of the fastest growing segments in U.S. agriculture. A recent USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service Organic Production Survey counted 14,540 organic farms and ranches in the United States, comprising 4.1 million acres of land. Organic farmers reported \$3.12 billion in sales in 2012, up from \$1.7 billion in 2007.

LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

The Agricultural Act of 2014 (2014 Farm Bill) highlights the availability of financial and technical assistance to help producers of all commodities meet their conservation goals. It specifically includes help to organic farmers and ranchers and those transitioning to organic production.

CONSERVATION PLANNING

For more than 75 years, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS was known as the Soil Conservation Service until 1994) has placed a high priority on helping agricultural producers create conservation plans to meet their environmental and economic goals, while concurrently planning for the protection of the 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 and ranchers to come up with scientifically-sound alternatives for accomplishing their goals and working out a timeline to implement the conservation practices in the plan.

Implementation of conservation practices may be partially funded through Farm Bill programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). In California, having a conservation plan in advance of applying for an EQIP contract may make an application more competitive.

EQIP FOR ORGANIC TRANSITION AND MORE

Farmers who want to apply for financial assistance supporting organic agriculture may receive assistance under a new provision of the EQIP program that allows producers to apply for up to \$20,000/year with a maximum of \$80,000 over six years.

Organic farms are required to develop and carry out an organic system plan (OSP). In California, NRCS is setting aside a separate pool of EQIP money for organic agriculture. A large number of conservation practices may be funded using Organic Transition EQIP including nutrient management, cover crops, crop rotation, mulching and hedgerow planting. Ranchers may apply for assistance installing fencing and watering for rotational grazing systems.

Farmers may also compete for general EQIP funding. All the conservation practices available under Organic EQIP (and dozens more) are also available under this "general" EQIP. There will be more money available in this larger pool of general EQIP funds, but there will also be more competition.

Farmers can get up to a maximum of \$450,000, through 2018 (the life of the 2014 Farm Bill), from a combination of Organic EQIP and/or general EQIP financial assistance.



EQIP is a competitive program (one out of every two to three applications is funded on the average) and projects are generally ranked for environmental benefits. Producers interested in organic systems should realize significant environmental benefits and thus are well positioned to be funded.

SPECIAL SITUATIONS

Most EQIP contracts pay producers approximately half of the cost of structures or management. Benefits for organic producers may be higher due to the typically greater costs involved in farming organically. Additionally, payment rates are typically higher for those who have farmed less than 10 years (considered beginning farmers and ranchers) and for those with limited financial resources (defined on a county by county basis).

Beginning farmers and ranchers who served in the U.S. Armed Services will receive an application preference in certain EQIP and Conservation Stewardship Program application funding pools. Please inquire with your local NRCS service center for more information if you are a military veteran.

CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM (CSP)

Farmers cannot be paid retroactively through EQIP for conservation work they have already undertaken. However, producers with comprehensive conservation systems on their farm or ranch should be well positioned to participate in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

CSP provides technical and financial assistance to those producers who already have applied the basic conservation practices and are willing and able to implement a higher level of conservation on their operations. Producers participating under CSP receive incentive payments for the specified higher levels of conservation treatment.

When applying for EQIP, especially when applying for the first time, producers should be mindful that they will need to fill out forms providing USDA with information that confirms that they are eligible to participate in these public-funded programs. USDA employees can help with the legal and financial forms that will make it possible to receive funding. Most of these forms are not required for farmers requesting only technical assistance.

For more information on NRCS Farm Bill conservation programs, visit:

www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/ca/programs/

Top Organic Practices Used By NRCS Customers

NRCS offers technical and financial assistance on conservation practices for organic agriculture. Here are the top conservation practices implemented on organic farms in California.



NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT

Managing the amount, source, placement, form, and timing of application of plant nutrients and soil amendments.



COVER CROP

Growing grasses, legumes, and forbs for seasonal cover, erosion control, soil quality, nutrient cycling, biodiversity, and weed suppression.



MULCHING

Using ground cover to manage soil moisture, soil temperature, erosion, and weeds. Provides vegetative cover, and improves soil condition.



IRRIGATION WATER MANAGEMENT

Determining and controlling the rate, amount, and timing of irrigation water in a planned and efficient manner.



FENCING

Establishing a fence serves as a constructed barrier to livestock, wildlife, or people. Regulates animal movement for improved pasture productivity.



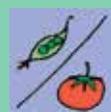
HEDGEROW PLANTING

Establishing a line of dense vegetation to provide wildlife habitat, increase carbon storage, and provide dust barrier. May act as a habitat for beneficial insects and pollinators.



CONSERVATION COVER

Maintaining a permanent vegetative cover to reduce soil erosion while improving water, air, and soil quality; pest management; and adding wildlife habitat.



CONSERVATION CROP ROTATION

Growing crops in recurring sequence on same field to control soil erosion, aid soil quality, manage plant nutrients, and improve water efficiency.