



# Motivations and Obstacles for Farmer Transition to Organic Farming

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# What We Did

- We surveyed farmers and ranchers who
  - had an EQIP- OI contract with USDA-NRCS between 2010 and 2015, and
  - self-identified as “transitional” participants in that program.
- The list included 1,829 farms. 615 farmers completed the questionnaire for an adjusted response rate of 34.2%.

# We Asked

## Demographic questions:

- years farming
- number of acres
- cropping system
- farming system relative to organic certification.

## Questions regarding:

- what motivated them to transition to organic certification
- what were the obstacles
- what resources helped them
- what additional support is needed

# Characteristics of the Aggregate

- **Mostly smaller farms but larger also**
  - 60.5% farm fewer than 25 acres
  - 20% farm more than 100 acres
- **Mostly vegetables but a wide array of other crops**
  - 54.7% produce vegetables
  - 13.3% produce fruits or nuts
  - 32.0% produce extensive crops including grains and legumes (12.6%), livestock (16.0%) and dairy (3.4%)
- **Wide range of farming experience**
  - 55.5% have been farming fewer than 10 years (BFRs)
  - 27% have more than 20 years of experience
- **Wide range of ages**
  - Most farmers are middle-aged with nearly 60% between 46 and 65.
  - More than 25% are under 45 years old



Aggregate results are useful but do not tell the whole story.

We found most compelling differences based on status of organic certification:

- 100% Certified Organic
- Transitioning to Certified Organic
- Split Certified Organic/Conventional
- Not Pursuing Organic Farming

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# Motivations

## **Values-based**

- Fits my and/or my family's values
- Concerns about environment
- Potential enhancement of farm sustainability
- Concerns about human health

## **Market/Profit**

- Access the expanding market for organics
- Potential increase in profit
- Specific market opportunity or contract from a buyer

# Motivations

Motivation (Percent)	100% Certified Organic	Transitioning	Split	Not Pursuing
<b>Values-based</b>				
Fits my and/or my family's values	95.0	92.9	<b>75.4*</b>	<b>87.5*</b>
Concerns about environment	90.1	92.3	<b>75.0*</b>	<b>78.4*</b>
Potential enhancement of farm sustainability	91.0	91.0	<b>74.6*</b>	<b>78.4*</b>
Concerns about human health	89.5	90.2	<b>66.2*</b>	<b>72.6*</b>
<b>Market/Profit</b>				
Access the expanding market for organics	59.7	<b>70.8*</b>	65.7	52.0
Potential increase in profit	67.9	61.2	60.6	<b>51.6*</b>
Specific market opportunity or contract from a buyer	34.2	34.9	41.9	27.5



# Obstacles to Transition

## Major, Minor, or Not

- Weed management
- Managing soil fertility
- Planning crop rotations
- Reduced yields
- Pest or disease control
- Cost of labor
- Cost of organic inputs
- Cost of organic certification
- Record keeping requirements of certification

- Availability of labor
- Availability of organic inputs
- Learning process
- Access to technical expertise
- Availability of organic processing facilities
- Obtaining adequate prices during transition
- Finding buyers/market for my organic products

	Full Sample	100% Certified	Transitioning	Split	Not Pursuing
<b>Farm Level</b>					
Weed management	X	X	X	X	X
Pest or disease control		X		X	X
Learning process	X	X	X	X	X
Managing soil fertility	X	X	X	X	X
Reduced yields				X	
Planning crop rotations					
<b>Local &amp; Regional Infrastructure</b>					
Cost of organic inputs	X	X	X	X	X
Availability of organic inputs	X	X		X	X
Availability of labor		X			
Cost of labor				X	X
Access to technical expertise				X	
Availability of organic processing facilities					X
<b>Marketplace</b>					
Obtaining organic price premiums	X		X	X	X
Obtaining adequate prices during transition			X		
Obtaining organic price information	X		X	X	
Finding buyers for organic products					
<b>Administrative/Policy</b>					
Cost of organic certification	X	X	X	X	X
Recordkeeping requirements of organic certification	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Totals</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>11</b>
Orange = Major; Yellow = Minor; Grey = No Clear Trend; Green = Not an Obstacle.					

# Resources

- Information on organic pest, disease, and weed management
- Information on soil health management for organic farms
- Information on effective organic crop rotations
- Information on organic crop varieties
- Information on organic markets
- Market development for organic products
- Organic and/or transition crop enterprise budget templates
- Financial planning tools for transitioning to organic
- Advance contracts from buyers during transition
- Certified transition label

<b>Resource</b>	<b>100% Certified</b>	<b>Trans.</b>	<b>Split</b>	<b>Not Pursuing</b>
Information on organic pest, disease, and weed management	1	1	1	1
Information on soil health management for organic farms	2	2	3	2
Information on effective organic crop rotations	3	7	5	5
Information on organic markets	4	3	2	3
Information on organic crop varieties	5	8	6	6
Market development for organic products	6	4	4	4
Organic and/or transition crop enterprise budget templates	7	9	10	9
Financial planning tools for transitioning to organic	8	5	8	8
Advance contracts from buyers during transition	9	10	7	7
Certified transition label	10	6	9	10

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Market development for organic products	6	4	4	4
Organic and/or transition crop enterprise budget templates	7	9	10	9
Financial planning tools for transitioning to organic	8	5	8	8
Advance contracts from buyers during transition	9	10	7	7
Certified transition label	10	6	9	10

# Recommendations

- 1. Adopt a value-based approach to appeal to a wider audience of farmers***
- 2. Focus outreach to specific groups for greater success***
- 3. Keep an eye on the special needs of Transitioning farmers***
- 4. Provide individualized, in-person support***
- 5. Develop more effective weed (pest) management strategies***



# Recommendations

- 6. Study the relationship between yield and successful transition***
- 7. Develop more regional handling infrastructure***
- 8. Support transitional certification as an “on-ramp” program***
- 9. Support certification cost-share assistance***

## **Conclusion**

Our results make it clear that there is plenty of work to do by a wide variety of organizations and agencies working in the organic sector that have specializations in crop research, farmer education, infrastructure development, market development, and policy development.

Questions?