

# FAQ about organic farming

## How is organic farming different from conventional farming?

Organic farming refers to agricultural production systems that do not use genetically modified (GM) seed, synthetic pesticides or fertilizers. Some of the essential characteristics of organic systems include design and implementation of an organic system plan that describes the practices used in producing crops and livestock products; a detailed record-keeping system that tracks all products from the field to point of sale; and maintenance of buffer zones to prevent inadvertent contamination by synthetic farm chemicals from adjacent conventional fields.

Organic farmers use biological methods and management practices such as diversified crop rotations that improve soil quality. Organic farming increases soil organic matter, which enhances the soil's ability to absorb and store carbon, cycle nutrients, and absorb water. Increased soil organic matter contributes to greater resilience under stresses such as drought and flooding.

## What does certified organic mean and how is certification regulated?

USDA defines organic production as the use of cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that support cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. USDA set national organic standards in 2000, providing a single set of rules for organic farmers and handlers.

The National Organic Program (NOP) develops the rules and regulations for the production, handling, labeling, and enforcement of all USDA organic products. This process, referred to as rule-making, involves input from the National Organic Standards Board (a Federal Advisory Committee made up of fifteen members of the public) and the public.

To gain organic certification, a farmer (of cropland, pasture or livestock) submits an organic system plan to an accredited certifier each year. This documents how the farmer adheres to NOP standards. Certified organic farms and processing facilities undergo annual inspections to verify that they are meeting the standards. Organic inspectors examine all elements of a farm operation for adherence to the standards and verify that the farm is being managed according to the farmer's organic system plan. **Can GMOs be used in organic products?**

The use of genetic engineering, or genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is prohibited in organic products. This means an organic farmer can't plant GMO seeds, an organic cow can't eat GMO alfalfa or corn, and an organic soup producer can't use any GMO ingredients. To meet the USDA organic regulations, farmers and processors must show they aren't using GMOs and that they are protecting their products from contact with prohibited substances from farm to table.

## How does organic farming help the environment?

A high percentage of organic farms use production practices with environmental benefits such as water management practices, no-till or minimum tillage, habitat maintenance for beneficial insects and vertebrates, and biological pest control. These ecologically protective practices contribute to enhanced ecosystem services and benefit water quality, soil health, and biodiversity.

Conventional farming often uses minimal crop rotations, growing the same single crop year after year on the same land. This practice, known as mono cropping causes the depletion of nutrients and minerals. In order to continue growing crops in this depleted soil, nutrients and

minerals must be added back in the form of hydrocarbon based fertilizers and mined minerals such as phosphate. Conventional GM farming is dependent on earth-based non-renewable resources. Monocultures and the resulting poor health open the way for infestations of insects, diseases and weeds. Healthy bio-diverse soil keeps these infestations in check. The lack of biodiversity requires synthetic pesticides and herbicides to be used, further destroying the national soil biology

## How does organic farming improve soil and water quality?

Using biological forms of fertilizer such as compost, animal manures, and legume cover crops, builds soil organic matter, even when routine tillage is used for weed control. Building soil organic matter increases soil water retention and nurtures more active soil microbial communities that retain nitrogen in the soil longer and transform it into non-leachable gaseous forms. There is a small but telling body of research in the US that suggests that improved soil quality influences the ability of crops to withstand or repel insect attack and plant disease.

Organic biological fertilizer sources release their nutrients slowly over time, providing more opportunity for the nitrogen to be digested by soil organisms and taken up by crops before leaching below the root zone. Increased soil organic matter in the soil leads to tighter nutrient cycling and greater water holding capability in organically managed soils, with the result that nitrate leaching from groundwater is about half that of conventionally farmed soils. Recent data from a 12 year study shows that fields under organic management had half the annual nitrate leaching losses than fields under conventional management.

For additional information on this topic, download OFRF's educational guide: Soil Microbial Interactions and Organic Farming (available in both English and Spanish).

## What is the current demand for organic products?

According the 2015 Organic Production Survey released by USDA's National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS), the organic sector

grew from \$3.2B in 2008 to \$6.2B in 2015, demonstrating that there is increased demand for organic products and opportunities for growth.

- Milk and eggs were the top two commodities sold in 2015, valued at \$1.2B and \$0.7B, respectively, followed by broiler chickens valued at \$0.4B.

- Two sectors, vegetables grown in the open and fruits, tree nuts, and berries, together accounted for 42% of sales.

- Among crops, apples, lettuce, and grapes were the top-selling commodities, with \$302M, \$262M, and \$210M in 2015 sales, respectively.

## How many USDA certified organic farmers are there in the US?

According to the 2015 Organic Production Survey, in 2014 there were 14,093 organic farms producing on 3.7 million acres.

Certified organic farms operated 4.4M acres of certified land in 2015, up 20% from 2014. Ten states accounted for 78% of all certified organic sales. California, with \$2.4B in sales, accounted for 40% of the total value of U.S. certified organic sales.

## Which states have the most organic farms?

In 2014, California led the way with 2,805 organic farms. There are also large numbers of farms in northwestern, north central, and northeastern states.

## Are organic yields lower?

Farm data from USDA producer surveys show organic crop yields may be lower than those of conventional production. The yield differences estimated from USDA farm data are similar to those estimated by comparing USDA's 2011 Certified Organic Production Survey with USDA's 2011 Crop Production Report. The yield differences revealed by survey data may be due to the unique problems encountered by organic systems outside of the experimental setting, such as effective weed control.

However, while organic agriculture may produce lower yields when compared to conventional agriculture, organic farming is often more profitable, delivers more environmental benefits, and is healthier in terms of increased nutritional benefits and reduced dietary pesticide exposure.

## Why is it important to invest in organic research?

Extension Initiative (OREI), the flagship federal science program for organic farming. OREI currently funds \$20M per year in competitive grants for organic research, extension and education. HR2436 would increase the funding to \$50M per year. By reaching that level of funding the program acquires "baseline" status and is presumed to be a permanent part of the Farm Bill's Research Title.

## Why does organic cost more?

The cost of organic food is higher than that of conventional food because the organic price tag more closely reflects the true cost of growing the food: substituting labor and intensive management for chemicals. These costs may include cleanup of polluted water and remediation of pesticide contamination.

## Where can beginning organic farmers and farmers transitioning to organic get assistance?

USDA offers several programs and tools to support the success of organic farmers. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) from USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) helps producers plan and implement conservation practices to support the environmental sustainability of their organic operations.

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## MnDOT releases mowing, haying permit recommendations report

The Minnesota Department of Transportation has released a report with recommendations regarding the agency's mowing and haying permit process.

MnDOT developed the report, required by the 2017 Minnesota Legislature, with input from a stakeholder group of environmental, agricultural and other interests. In addition, MnDOT held nine listening sessions across the state during the past several months and took public comment via the website, email, regular mail and face-to-face. The information from the public engagement shaped the recommendations that were made available March 1.

"MnDOT is charged with managing and maintaining the roadway right of way," said MnDOT Commissioner Charlie Zelle.

The Legislature outlined specific elements for the recommendations, including:

- Ease of permit application or notification
- Frequency of permits or notification
- Priority given to the owner or occupant of private land adjacent to a state highway right of way
- Determination of authority to mow or hay state highway right of way in which adjacent land belongs to state or local government
- Recognition of differences in the amount of wildlife habitat based on geographic distribution across the state

The cover letter and the full report are available at [www.mndot.gov/govrel/reports.html](http://www.mndot.gov/govrel/reports.html) as well as on the

mowing/haying webpage.

The cover letter contains MnDOT's recommendations for changes to the permit process. The full report contains the recommendations as well as the feedback from the public meetings, including suggestions from the stakeholder group for changes in state law. It also details the process used by the stakeholder group to develop the recommendations.

Locations of the mowing/haying listening sessions and stakeholder meeting minutes can be found on the MnDOT mowing website at [www.mn-dot.gov/mowing](http://www.mn-dot.gov/mowing).

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