

BREAKING NEW GROUND:

farmer perspectives on organic transition



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Organic transition is a hot topic: despite increasing consumer demand for organic food and farm products and double-digit annual sales growth, U.S. organic production is currently flat and unable to meet demand. Organic food manufacturers and other buyers have reported difficulty sourcing enough certified organic food ingredients domestically.

In response, the organic industry, nonprofit organizations, universities, and public agencies are working on multiple levels to support farmers choosing to access the expanding organic market.

In this report, we offer one piece of the puzzle: findings from a national survey of

farmers about their experiences with organic transition. We asked farmers about their motivations to transition, the obstacles they face in doing so, and the resources and support that are most helpful during the transition process.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS REPORT?

What we learned should be of interest to a wide range of stakeholders and service providers, including organic sector businesses, organic certifiers, academic and agency researchers, Cooperative Extension, organic advocates, and policymakers.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

The farms and farmers represented in this study cover a wide range of farm sizes, crop types, farming experience, age, and approach to organic farming. The structure of our survey allowed us to identify and compare results for four categories of farmers that together improve our understanding of the transition process:

- Farmers who have successfully been through the process of transition and are 100% certified organic.
- Farmers who are currently in the midst of transitioning to organic certification.
- Farmers with split certified organic and non-organic operations.
- Farmers who have decided not to pursue organic farming.

We found useful differences among these categories regarding motivations, resources, and support. However, our most compelling findings arose regarding obstacles – including those within a farm’s sphere of influence and those beyond the farmer’s control – and whether these groups of farmers view them as major, minor, or not an obstacle at all.

Farmers in our study echo long-standing concerns about costs, recordkeeping, on-farm production challenges, infrastructure, and access to profitable markets. Our results make it clear that there is plenty of work to do by a wide variety of organizations and agencies that specialize in crop research, infrastructure development, market development, and policy development related to the organic sector. Guided by compelling survey findings, this report recommends strategies to support the success of farmers who chose organic.

We suggest that those interested and invested in organic transition look closely at the information in this report and identify what they can do to provide support, overcome obstacles, or promote policy to support transition and retain certified organic farmers.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The survey was a collaboration between Oregon State University’s Center for Small Farms & Community Food Systems and Oregon Tilth, Inc. We surveyed more than 1800 farmers who participated in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative between 2010 and 2015, with a focus on transition. The survey’s response rate was more than 34% and represents more than 600 producers.