

Organic Farming: Is It For Me?

Brad Brummond

Extension Agent, Cropping Systems – Walsh County

The first thing a farmer considering switching to organic production needs to understand is what organic farming is and what it is not. Organic farming is working in partnership with nature to produce food. Organic farming is much more than selling your farm products for premiums and having not used prohibited substances in your farming practices now and in the past three years. How will this affect your approach to farming? What will this mean to your family?

Organic farmers do not claim their product is chemical free. No one can make that statement in today's world. All you are certifying is that the product was handled in a manner consistent with the rules and standards of the certification organization to which you belong.

Organic farming requires developing and maintaining an ecological system where nature solves problems with proper management. It also involves keeping good records of production practices and yields. Consumers can be assured the product is organic, as labeled, through records and a tracking system that allows tracing the

product back to the very field or farm on which it was produced.

Record keeping for the organic certifying agency is required and extensive. There are no quick fixes in organic production, and the best control is prevention. The best strategy is to create a system where no one pest can gain a competitive advantage within your system. Pests are not unlike ourselves. We need food, a favorable place to live, and the ability to reproduce ourselves. Making your cropping system diverse through rotations and alternative pest control strategies will reduce weeds, insects and diseases to acceptable economic levels, while not eliminating every pest in the field if properly done. Developing and maintaining this system is part of the attraction for some producers and frustration for others.

Before you change the way you farm, think about what the change will mean to you and your family. Visit with successful organic farmers. Contact organic certifying organizations to understand the requirements for certification. Talk it over with the people who have a financial stake in the farm and spend time researching and reading everything you can on the subject. It is recommended that this process be initiated a year before the first crop you plan to produce organically, since some certifiers require that land be inspected the year before it goes into organic production. More time spent preparing for the change will result in less stress and anxiety when you begin the transition.



North Dakota State University
Fargo, North Dakota 58105

AUGUST 1999

Reviewed and Reprinted April 2002

What are your goals?

Characteristics of successful organic farmers

While not all successful organic farmers have these characteristics, they are common to many of them:

- They farm organically because they seek a safer food supply and a better environment, not because of the hope for premiums. Those producers who get into organic farming just for the premiums generally last less than two years.
- They are very observant and patient.
- They have a good understanding of the ecological system they have created.
- They have developed extremely good marketing skills and devote much effort and time in seeking out strong market outlets.
- They are a very open and caring people who are usually willing to share stories of success and failure.
- They are people who have incorporated their faith and beliefs into their production practices.

Organic farming will require you to prevent the problem from happening, not treat the problem once it emerges. This is what most new producers find most difficult to manage and accept. Sometimes organic producers accept losses, gain experience, and salvage what is left of the crop for livestock feed or other uses.

There are two major types of risk in organic farming: pest outbreaks, resulting in lower yield and inferior products, and marketing and financial risks. Prevention of pest outbreaks through managing your ecological system cannot be stressed enough. If a pest gains a major advantage in your system, there are going to be yield and quality losses, some of which can be substantial. Examples of this are getting a heavy grasshopper infestation in your organic flax when it is setting bolls, or getting a major wild mustard outbreak in your organic soybeans. While there are some solutions to these problems, they are not nearly as effective as conventional remedies and tend to be more expensive.

Marketing is one of the final challenges and turns some producers back to conventional production. Much of the organic production in North Dakota is sold to organic grain companies or grain buyers. These entities tend to be smaller than the buyers in the conventional market and sometimes are not bonded. Many long term organic producers can relate stories of selling some of their grain to a company and never receiving payment for it. Know the buyers in the market and seek out those with a good reputation. Payment for your grain can be received on the spot or delayed for six months or longer. Marketing your own grain involves calling the buyers, sending samples, getting quotes and sometimes arranging the transportation for it. It does pay financial dividends to develop good marketing skills.

There is usually a three year educational process that takes place with the switch to organic production, and you usually pay for the education. If there is a financial struggle with conventional farming, this switch could hasten the process of financial deterioration.

Organic certification organizations and certification

It is difficult if not impossible to sell organic grain without being certified organic by a recognized certification organization. Each organization has its own rules and standards but most agree on the main points. It is important to find one that you will feel comfortable with and follow their rules closely. When in doubt ask.

Two organic certification organizations certify the bulk of the organic acres in North Dakota. These are Farm Verified Organic (FVO) and Organic Crop Improvement Association International (OCIA).

The OCIA requires that the total farm be in organic production, or at least in transition, within five years. The one exemption may be rented land. Different crops may have to be grown on this land to prove it can be kept separate.

Certification begins by becoming a member of a certification group and applying for certification of your agricultural commodities. The application and initial document review takes place in the spring, so application completion and compiling the required documents is necessary before that time. After the application has been approved and required fees paid, you are ready to proceed with certification. Your farm and paper work will be inspected some time during the growing period for your crop. Inspectors are typically hired by the certifying group, and they will contact you for an inspection. You are expected to be present at the inspection and answer any questions relating to certification. Typically an inspection involves going over your records and inspecting the land and crops to be certified, grain bins, equipment and facilities. Inspections are a chance for producers to showcase the farm and learn something at the same time.

Organic producers are also expected to keep an audit trail of the grain produced. This consists of marking your bins and keeping records of where the grain was produced, when it was produced, the quantity of grain sold, and who purchased it. It is also common to keep samples of the grain sold for several years so if there is a question of contamination a base sample will be available. The key to the organic marketing system is to be able to verify production practices and to be able to trace the product in an unbroken line from the field it was produced to the final consumer.

Keys to a successful conversion

- Talk to successful producers and take their advice in the beginning.
- Be willing to spend some time in learning the systems approach.
- A mind switch must occur from treating the problem to treating the cause of the problem. This becomes prevention. Some well intentioned farmers never do entirely comprehend this approach.
- Marketing of organic production needs special attention and knowledge.