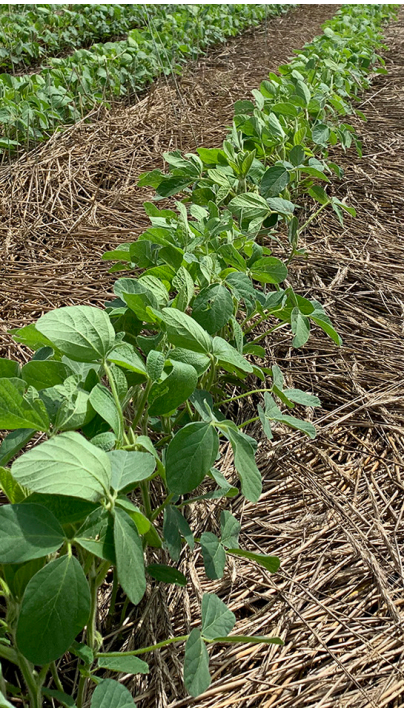
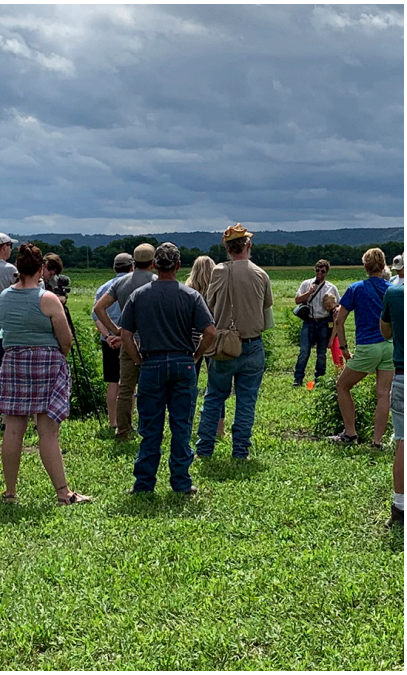
Organic Transition Series

FACT SHEET

The Organic Transition for Interested Clients: Questions to Consider





According to U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics, domestic organic field crop acreage is not meeting the increased consumer demand. Although organic commodity crops can be sold for double or triple the value of their conventional counterparts, the decision to transition to organic grain is more complex than simply considering the price at market. Farmers considering the transition to organic agriculture must be aware of the challenges, both mental and physical, that come with changing their production system. Below are some questions that should be considered when clients are thinking about pursuing organic certification.

What is their motivation?

Organic farmers have historically been rewarded with higher crop prices at market. However, prices for organic commodities vary annually, and the production of these crops involve additional time, labor, and input costs – thus, transitioning solely for the motivation of increased profits can be discouraging and counterproductive, and this may ultimately lead to failure and disillusionment.

Farmers who are most successful post-transition are individuals motivated by more than short-term profits. Instead, they are motivated by the sustained and continued projected growth in market and the role that organic agriculture can play in supporting their farm for their family and future generations. They also recognize the positive impact of these practices on the health and well-being of their environment and communities.

Are they open-minded and willing to try new things?

Organic agriculture is a different way of farming. A widespread misconception of organic agriculture is that it is "your grandfather's farming". However, organic agriculture is not a retreat backward in science and technology, but is rather increasingly aided by new developments in crop genetics, data, research, equipment, and products, as well as a recognition and re-adoption of historic practices that were successful in previous generations. Farmers considering a transition to organic production cannot go into the process assuming that they can substitute organic inputs for their usual conventional tools and be successful – this will not work from a practical nor economic standpoint. There is no prescription or recipe for a successful organic grain farmer because every farm will be a bit different depending on the soil, environment, markets, and available resources. Success instead relies on the farmer's willingness to observe, adjust, and adapt as conditions change and new knowledge is gained.

Organic farmers must be willing to learn and try new things. Whether it is talking to neighbors, networking, or attending workshops and conferences, successful organic farmers are constantly gaining and incorporating new knowledge, techniques, and skills to better manage their crops and land over the long-term. Many organic farmers view this challenge of life-long learning as making farming more fun!

Are they willing to put in the extra work and detail?

Organic farming requires paperwork. While the rigorous documentation required of organic certification helps maintain the integrity of the process and the organic label, it also can help document farm practices –including their impact on successes and failures–over the years to ultimately become a valuable tool for farm management. Organic certification per the USDA National Organic Program regulations 7 CFR 205, https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?c=ecfr&sid=3f34f4c22f9aa8e6d9864cc2683cea02&tpl=/ecfrbrowse/Title07/7cfr205_main_02.tpl requires an organic farmer to create an Organic System Plan that describes their organic farming practices and is the basis of organic certification. Further, receipts, seed tags and/or samples, clean-out logs, and calendars must be kept to document activities throughout each year.

Are they realistic about the rate of transition?

Organic production has a learning curve. A gradual transition (20 to 25% of a grower's total acreage per year) can help ease this learning curve, giving the farmer time to learn new skills, acquire equipment and storage facilities, build their markets, maintain cash flow, and reduce risk.

Do they have a transition strategy?

Farmers need a solid strategy that considers their ability to maintain cash flow as their operation goes through the transition process. They should choose a crop rotation that includes crops which best take advantage of local resources (e.g., nearby livestock farms that could purchase their transitional hay or provide manure), equipment needs, and the weed and fertility status of their fields. Although this seems counterintuitive, farmers may be more successful by transitioning their best fields first in order to maintain yields to assist with cash flow and avoid challenges and costly issues that may need to be fixed later while making headway through the learning curve.

What are their resources and supports?

Transitioning farmers need support – this can include a supportive family, a supportive lender, and a supportive network, either local or virtual. Farmers should consider their financial and capital resources needed to make the transition, as well as their access to financial markets and inputs. They should be knowledgeable of where they can go or of what information they can access if they need assistance, whether it be on-line or written resources, other farmers, trusted consultants, non-profit organizations, or Extension.

Are they willing to think long-term?

Success in organic production requires the farmer to take a wider view as opposed to making decisions driven by short-term gains. Decisions made in one season---whether it be related to weed management, fertility management, or crop selection---will likely have benefits and/or implications for years to come. Productivity and profitability need to be assessed over the entire system and over multiple years, instead of on the basis of an individual crop or year. There may be short-term trade-offs that reduce risk and maximize success over the long-term.

References and Further Resources:

University of Minnesota. Organic Transition Planner: A Business Planner for Farmers, Ranchers and Food Entrepreneurs. https://www.misa.umn.edu/publications/organictransitionplanner

eOrganic. Tools for Transition Project: Farmer Profiles. https://eorganic.info/index.php?q=toolsfortransition/farmers

www.northcentral.sare.org
www.agronomy.org

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