

Public Programs for Organic Operations

BY CISSY BOWMAN

Recent Farm Bills have established programs that provide financial assistance for organic folks, and there also are helpful services that are partly funded by United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The most recent USDA appropriations for organics show increased support and interest but, for many, seem to be a well-kept secret or very difficult to understand.

One of the things we have learned about getting assistance of any kind through government is that you won't get help unless you know how to ask. The purpose of this article is to provide some basic information for readers to use and share with growers and handlers so that current funds are accessible and these services are used.

Cost Share

The Organic Cost Share program was started at the dawn of the National Organic Program (NOP) and was continued in the 2008 Farm Bill. Federal funds are distributed through the individual state departments of agriculture to help offset the cost of organic certification. The Cost Share program offers certified farmers and handlers a reimbursement to offset 75 percent of the cost of their certification, with a reimbursement limit of \$750.

The process is relatively simple, and eligible operations should contact their state agriculture department for forms and details. Funds are limited and distributed on a first-come, first-served basis; therefore, early application is recommended.

ATTRA: Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas

ATTRA's National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service is managed by the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) and is funded under a grant from the USDA's Rural Business-Cooperative Service. It provides information and technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, extension agents, educators, and others involved in sustainable and organic agriculture in the U.S. Their resources offer guidance in preparing for certification and production methods for a range of organic crops and livestock. Many of their publications were developed in response to producer questions and with broad input from the NOP and the organic certification community. Their information is free and is available via their website at www.attra.org or by calling 800/346-9140. This wonderful service

is a valuable resource to the organic community and has been of immense help to everyone, from beginning organic farmers to organic certification agencies.

The Organic Initiative

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), part of National Resources Conservation Services (NCRS), was reauthorized in the 2002 Farm Bill to provide a voluntary conservation program for farmers and ranchers who promote agricultural production and environmental quality. EQIP offers financial and technical assistance to eligible participants who install or implement structural and management practices on eligible agricultural land. The 2008 Farm Bill included provisions for the use of EQIP to provide opportunities for organic growers, as well as requirements related to adherence to the NOP. "Eligible land" may include land that is organic or in transition to organic, making for some great opportunities for those who comply with the requirements.

EQIP funds are primarily used to provide financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices that address soil, water, air, plant, animal, and energy resources. The new Organic Initiative provision was created for organic producers and producers transitioning to organic production. Although application is not a simple process and the program is very young, the opportunity is there for those who are willing to jump through the hoops.

Under EQIP, funding assistance is limited to \$20,000 per year and \$80,000 during a six-year period. Producers are required to develop and carry out an Organic System Plan or use practices consistent with such a plan, and the producer must be pursuing an organic certification or be in compliance with their current organic certification.

Examples of eligible practices include:

Conservation Crop Rotation: Eligible acres are those where the current rotation is annual crops and is significantly changed to include two years or more of rotation legumes, grass and legume mixtures, and other approved green manure and cover crops.

Cover Crop: Includes the seeding of legumes, small grains, cocktail mixes and other cover crops. Cover crops cannot be mechanically harvested for grain or forage. They can be grazed if

that is detailed in the plan.

Nutrient Management: Includes managing the amount, source, placement, form, and timing of application of manure and/or soil amendments that meet organic requirements. Soil sampling is required, and records must be maintained.

Pest Management: Utilizing environmentally sensitive prevention, avoidance, monitoring, and suppression strategies that meet organic cropping requirements. Records must be maintained.

Prescribed Grazing: The controlled harvest of vegetation with grazing or browsing animals. This practice is only allowed for permanent pasture/grassland (not for hayland or cropland that is intermittently grazed). A detailed prescribed grazing plan is required.

Forage Harvest Management: This involves the timely cutting and removal of forages from the field as hay, greenchop, or ensilage. Producers are also eligible to apply for any of the other practices in the payment schedule that are needed on their operation. You are eligible to apply for any of these practices as long as you are making a change in your current operation, such as changing your crop rotation, adding a cover crop, making a change in your nutrient or pest management practices, etc.

The EQIP program is intended to assist producers with the implementation of conservation practices that address an identified and existing resource concern on their farm. Payments are limited to the implementation of newly applied conservation practices. EQIP is not a grant program and does not offer financial incentives for conservation practices that have already been established. Some longtime organic producers have found themselves ineligible for these funds because they have already established conservation methods on their farms.

Interested producers should contact their local NRCS office to inquire about eligibility. Transitioning farmers should contact a certification agency for information on developing an organic system plan.

For more information and updates about EQIP, see the NRCS website at www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmland/2008.

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program

Established in 1988, SARE provides grants and educational materials to help advance farming systems that are profitable, environmentally sound, and good for communities. The national outreach office of the SARE program is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) at the U.S. Department of

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Agriculture. The SARE competitive grants program provides grants to researchers, agricultural educators, farmers and ranchers, and students in the U.S. and includes:



Research and Education Grants: These range from \$30,000 to \$150,000 or more and fund projects that usually involve scientists, producers, and others in an interdisciplinary approach.

Professional Development Grants: These help to spread knowledge about sustainable concepts and practices. Funded projects educate Cooperative Extension Service staff and other ag professionals.

Producer Grants: Producers apply for grants that typically run between \$1,000 and \$15,000 to conduct research, marketing, and demonstration projects, which are then shared with other farmers and ranchers.

On Farm Research/Partnership: Supports on-farm research by Extension, NRCS, and/or nonprofit organizations.

Sustainable Community Innovation: Established to forge connections between sustainable agriculture and rural community development.

More information on SARE can be found at www.sare.org.

National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)

NIFA will release requests for applications for up to \$800 million of grant funds through the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative by mid-February 2010. These funds will allow organic researchers to tap research funds beyond the existing federal programs.

The 2010 Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) is NIFA's largest competitive research grants program. AFRI program areas are:

- Plant health, production, and plant products;
- Animal health, production, and animal products;
- Food safety, nutrition, and health, renewable energy, natural resources, and environment;
- Agriculture systems and technology;
- Agricultural economics and rural communities.

AFRI grants are designed to support these "societal challenge" areas:

- Keeping American agriculture competitive while ending world hunger;
- Improving nutrition and ending child obesity;
- Radically improving food safety for all Americans;
- Securing America's energy future through renewable biofuels;
- Mitigating and adapting agriculture to variations in climate.

NIFA will issue a series of requests for applications to address these priorities. Grants in 2010 will offer funding of up to \$25 million and for a duration of up to five years. Up to \$5 million in funding opportunities for pre- and postdoctoral fellowship grants will also be offered. This program area will create a cadre of "NIFA Fellows" poised to become the next generation of agricultural scientists, educators and practitioners.

Application requirements for the different program areas will vary, with some requiring letters of intent. The Organic Farming Research Foundation will send out special bulletins announcing release of the funding opportunities as soon as they are issued by USDA. For more information, visit the NIFA website at www.nifa.usda.gov/funding/afri/afri.html.

Although the focus of this article is on federal programs for organic operations, there are also many grant and educational services and opportunities available through state ag departments and private organizations/foundations. Application for assistance, where funding is involved, does take some work and follow-up.

All of these programs serve to help build a stronger and better organic community and offer some real assistance to those who are willing to go through the process and can comply. These are programs we can be proud of—after all, they are our tax dollars at work. Let's get the word out and help people take advantage of them! ■

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