



News Release

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June 17, 2008

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

ORGANIC PRODUCTION: A NICHE FOR FARMS

From the farm stand to the grocery store, organic agriculture products are becoming more popular. As agriculture looks for marketing niches to increase the potential for profits, organic certification and marketing is becoming a viable option for some farms. Nationally, the million acres of certified organic farms that were present when the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 was passed by Congress has doubled. Still, this accounts for on 0.5 percent of total cropland.

In 2002, the ISDA received its accreditation as an organic certifying agency by the United States Department of Agriculture National Organic Program. Idaho is a major national player in organic farming, ranking seventh in the nation with 81,220 acres. There is more organic hay produced in Idaho than in any other area in the country. There are more than 6,300 organic milk cows in Idaho. Idaho's Certified Organic applicants peaked in 2000 and dropped as a result of exempting farms with gross receipts under \$5000 per year. The values of Idaho's organic agricultural industry peaked in 2003 with 6.5 million in receipts and 50,000 acres. Crops grown organically in Idaho include alfalfa hay, apples, barley, beans, carrots, garlic, herbs and onions.

What exactly is organic agriculture? Organic agriculture uses naturally occurring substances and methods for controlling pests and fertility management, rather than relying on synthetically compounded chemicals. Anything labeled organic needs to be produced on land that has not had non-certified materials applied for at least 36 months. This includes all Idaho agricultural, horticultural, viticulture, apiary and apiary products, poultry and poultry products, livestock and livestock products, dairy products and aquaculture products.

Although similar in many states, organic practices can vary slightly. In Idaho, the Organic Food Products Law of 1990 administers the organic certification program, which is designed to give assurances to the consumer when the term "organic" is used in the marketing and labeling of

food products. There is also a “transitional” status for crops grown for at least 12 months but for less than 36 months with approved organic materials and practices. No prohibited substances can be used for 12 months prior to the appearance of flower buds for perennial crops. Those farms with over \$5000 in sales or less have two options: registration only or registration/certification. Registration only does not require on-site inspection or an organic system. Certification requires an organic system plan and an on-site inspection. Either option requires an application and applicable fees. Producers and handlers with gross sales over \$5000 must be certified.

An organic system plan consists of a written management plan as well as questionnaires and forms required by the ISDA, plans, field maps and field histories. The ISDA Organic recordkeeping Form contains information required for certification, including Field Number, date, Crop, Activity, Inputs, Harvest Date and Yield.

The materials and practices approved by the program include a list of naturally occurring substances. Keep in mind that naturally occurring materials approved by the program may also be hazardous in some situations. Many herbal extracts cannot be used if they have been extracted with synthetic solvents. Pyrethrums, natural insecticides derived from an African chrysanthemum, can be used, but synthetic counterparts such as bifenthrin are prohibited. Fungicides such as copper sulfate can be used, but there are restrictions on where they can be used.

Once certified, there are many venues through which to market organic products in Idaho. An organization called Rural Roots regularly publishes “a directory of Inland Northwest farms, ranches and value-added businesses that direct market sustainable agricultural products.” The guide is intended to increase local purchasing by environmentally and health conscious consumers by connecting them with local, sustainable, family farmers.

A Resource Guide outlining Idaho's organic rules, regulations, materials list and generally accepted cultural practices is available through the Idaho State Department of Agriculture for \$15.00. Contact: Idaho State Department of Agriculture, Division of Plant Industries, P.O. Box 790, Boise, ID 83701. Phone: (208) 332-8620. Web: <http://www.agri.idaho.gov/index.php>.

Rural Roots: www.ruralroots.org

Michael Bauer is the Extension Horticulture/Small Farms Educator for Bonner, Boundary, Kootenai and Benewah counties. Mike works with nursery, small farms, green industry and coordinates the Bonner County Master Gardener Program, in which trained volunteers provide gardening information to local residents.

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