

IMPACT

University of Idaho
Extension

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First Annual Southwest Idaho Organic Producers School Provides Training, Networking, and Assesses Needs

The Situation

Though only about half of one percent of cropland nationwide is certified, organic farming is one of the fastest growing segments of US agriculture. In 2007, the Idaho State Department of Agriculture reported 180 certified organic farms statewide comprising 112,000 organic acres, or nearly 2.3% of total planted acreage, and gross sales of Idaho organic agricultural products totaling over \$15,000,000. Organic certification may provide growers with a market advantage or premium price, especially among consumers who make food purchasing decisions based on values, and who perceive certain health, environmental or social qualities inferred by the organic label. As a result, organic production has emerged as a viable niche market for small and mid-scale Idaho producers.



In a regional survey of small to mid size producers in 2006, soil building and organic production methods were among the top five topics of most interest to those surveyed. A 2006 Rural Roots membership survey also placed organic production systems at the top of the interest list. Producers responding to both surveys indicated that in the interest of time, they were more likely to attend a one day workshop format compared with other types of scheduled education.

Our Response

Canyon County Extension collaborated with Margaret Misner, Organic Program Manager for the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, with input from Rural Roots, Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides and several certified organic Idaho producers to plan and deliver the first Annual Southwest Idaho Organic Producer's School in Caldwell. Goals for the one-day event were to introduce producers to a marketing option that has been proven to add value to some production enterprises and provide research-based information on sustainable and organic soil management and fertility practices.

Presentation topics included:

- Introduction to the National Organic Program and registration/certification through Idaho State Department of Agriculture
- Basics of soil fertility in an organic system

- Using a soil test to plan for soil and fertility management using organic amendments
- Certified organic growers panel sharing on-farm soil management practices
- Information on developing an organic mosquito abatement plan
- New production, marketing and funding resources available for producers



Program Outcomes

The school drew 54 participants from eight counties across the state. The registration fee was kept to \$5 to encourage growers to attend with their workers, interns or family members. Twenty-six participants completed full evaluations at the end of the program. These evaluations were designed to provide immediate feedback about the day's experience and also to serve as an assessment tool for the collaborators in developing future events.

Of participants who completed evaluations, 70% were currently farming in Idaho. Of these, 61% were operating certified organic enterprises. Perceived benefits of certification included "price of organic food," "assurance to customers that they are getting 'organic' food," and "benefits of sustainability for health of the land and the quality of food." Among perceived limitations were "certification cost," "paperwork," and "lack of market in my area."

Of the respondents, 96% rated the value of the entire school as "valuable" to "highly valuable." The average rating for all presenters was "highly valuable." When asked to list at least one principle learned at the workshop that they planned to put into practice, respondents referenced every presentation and gave answers ranging from "start testing my irrigation water" to "increase micronutrient levels in my soil" to "get in touch with ISDA to start organic certification process."

Participants were also asked what kind of University research related to organic production that they would consider beneficial. They supplied 16 topics, seven related to soil fertility. When asked what kinds of publications they would find useful, they suggested 11 topics, including weed suppression, marketing, variety testing/selection and finding resources for funding.

The Future

The positive response from participants and partners supports the continuation of this type of school. The participant's evaluations will be used to guide topic and speaker selection for future sessions. The evaluation responses may also be used to direct applied research and publication projects for this audience. Some producers indicated an interest in attending a similar school focused on organic livestock and dairy production in eastern Idaho.

Other Contributing Faculty

Mir Seyedbagheri, Elmore County Extension

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

Margaret Misner, Program Manager: Organic Program,
Idaho Department of Agriculture

John Taberna, Western Laboratories

Rural Roots, Inc.

Jennifer Miller, Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to
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Beth Rasgorshek, Canyon Bounty Farm

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