



The Experiences and Perspectives of Idaho's Certified Organic Producers: Results from a Statewide Survey

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Organic farming is one of the fastest growing segments of U.S. agriculture. Among U.S. states, Idaho ranks ninth in organic acreage with 148,425 organic acres (USDA-NASS, 2010). In 2008, 219 certified organic and 35 exempt organic farms in Idaho sold over \$71 million in organically produced commodities (USDA-NASS, 2010). It is important to understand the characteristics, marketing strategies, information sources, challenges, and opinions of the state's organic producers. Therefore, representatives from Washington State University and the Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides (NCAP) recently conducted a survey of all certified organic producers in Idaho. The survey results will help NCAP, the University of Idaho, the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, the Idaho Natural Resources Conservation Service, and other service providers better meet the needs of the state's certified organic producers.

Survey Methods

With funding from a 2009 Extension Risk Management Education Grant from the Western Center for Risk Management Education, a survey of all certified organic producers in Idaho was conducted from October through December 2009. Survey participants included producers certified by the Idaho State Department of Agriculture (ISDA), Oregon Tilth, CCOF, OCIA, and QAI. The survey was implemented with the assistance of Washington State University's Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC).

The project's sampling population included 221 certified organic producers (208 certified by ISDA, 10 by Oregon Tilth, one by CCOF, one by OCIA, and one by QAI). Eleven (11) individuals were excluded from the sample because of ineligibility (e.g., producers in transition to organic but not yet certified) and bad addresses. Individuals were contacted three times by mail: an initial mailing with questionnaire, a reminder postcard, and one

follow-up mailing with questionnaire. A link to an online version of the survey was provided in each mailing. One hundred fourteen (114) individuals completed the survey for a response rate of 54 percent.

Who are Idaho's Certified Organic Producers?

Approximately 85% of the survey respondents were male, while 15% were female. Most respondents (97%) were Caucasian. Over 93% lived with a spouse or domestic partner. Slightly over half (53%) described their role on the farm as "the primary decision-maker," while 43% shared decision making with a spouse, relative, or non-family business partner.

Respondents ranged in age from 27 to 85 with a mean age of 55 years. Respondents had spent 20 years, on average, as a farm owner, manager, or primary decision-maker and over two thirds (69%) had parents who farmed. Almost half (48%) had a four-year college degree and 13% had a graduate degree. Almost half (47%) worked at a regular off-farm job and 51% had a spouse or domestic partner with an off-farm job. Children under the age of 18 years lived with almost 39% of respondents.

Survey respondents belonged to many different types of agriculture-related organizations. Over one third (37%) claimed membership in the Farm Bureau. Approximately one-fifth belonged to organic-specific growers' associations, farmers' market associations, and marketing cooperatives. Ten percent of respondents held leadership positions in organic or sustainable agriculture organizations.

Table 1: Mean Acreage of Respondents

| Region | Respondents | Certified Organic Acres | Transitional Acres | Non-Organic Acres |
|---------------|-------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| North | 13 | 71 | 0 | 0 |
| East | 22 | 391 | 22 | 537 |
| Southwest | 22 | 397 | 48 | 114 |
| South-Central | 46 | 1,861 | 58 | 644 |
| All Regions | 103 | 999 | 40 | 423 |

Characteristics of Idaho's Certified Organic Farms

Two-thirds of respondents (65%) transitioned from conventional (non-organic) farming methods to organic methods, while 26% indicated they had always farmed organically. On average, respondents had been farming organically for nine years and respondents' farms had been certified organic for six years. Most respondents (90%) planned to maintain their organic certification for the next five years despite the fact that approximately two-thirds of respondents reported lower market demand and prices in 2009 compared to the previous three years.

Respondents operated, on average, 291 certified organic cropland acres, 708 certified organic pastureland or rangeland acres, 28 transitional cropland acres, 12 transitional pastureland or rangeland acres, 370 non-organic cropland acres, and 53 non-organic pastureland or

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rangeland acres. Average certified organic acreage varied substantially by region: 71 acres (North), 391 acres (East), 397 acres (Southwest), and 1,861 acres (South-central). One quarter (27%) of respondents had some of their certified organic acres (322 acres on average) covered under a crop insurance policy in 2009.

Respondents produced an impressive diversity of organically certified products during 2009. The most common products included: forage (60% of farms); grains and oilseeds (47%); vegetables and melons (26%); potatoes (20%); small berries and grapes (18%); herbs (18%); nursery, greenhouse, and floriculture (14%); dry beans and dry peas (13%); tree fruit (13%); cattle and calves (12%); and milk and other dairy products from cows (11%). When asked which product contributed most to their 2009 gross organic farm income, 31% of respondents selected forage, 16% selected vegetables and melons, 14% selected grains and oilseeds, and 11% selected milk and other dairy products from cows.

These aggregate results, however, mask regional differences in organic crop production. The most common products in the northern region were vegetables (71% of farms), potatoes (64%), and small berries and grapes (64%). South-central respondents produced primarily forage (78% of farms) and grains and oilseeds (59%). Eastern growers produced forage (58% of farms), grains and oilseeds (58%), and milk or other dairy products from cows (25%). The primary crops in the southwestern region were forage (50% of farms), vegetables (46%), potatoes (33%), and herbs (33%).

Reasons for Farming Organically

Table 2 presents respondents' top ten reasons (out of 21 possible reasons listed in the questionnaire) for farming organically. Organic price premiums and environmental and economic sustainability ranked highest. Produce quality, consumer health, consumer demand, and community values also ranked highly. Respondents in the northern region, however, were motivated more by environmental and social factors and less by economic factors compared to respondents in the other three regions.

Less highly ranked reasons for farming organically (with mean scores less than 3.0) included customer or buyer required organic certification, opportunities to network with other farmers, social justice concerns, and overseas marketing opportunities.

Marketing Practices

Over two-thirds (68%) of respondents used direct-to-consumer marketing channels for their certified organic products in 2009, while 42% used direct-to-retail and 76% used wholesale marketing channels.

Table 2: Reasons Idaho Certified Organic Producers Farm Organically

| Rank | Reason | Mean Score* |
|------|--|-------------|
| 1 | Price premiums for certified organic products | 4.2 |
| 2 | Land stewardship / environmental sustainability | 4.1 |
| 3 | Economic sustainability of farm | 4.1 |
| 4 | Quality of organically grown produce | 3.9 |
| 5 | Health of consumers | 3.8 |
| 6 | Consumer demand for organic products | 3.7 |
| 7 | Community values / quality of life | 3.6 |
| 8 | Reduced dependency on large corporations | 3.6 |
| 9 | Personal, family, or farm worker health | 3.6 |
| 10 | Local marketing opportunities for certified organic products | 3.5 |

*1 (Not Important) to 5 (Very Important)

When asked about the use of specific types of marketing channels, respondents relied most on other farmers (43%); natural food stores and food cooperatives (34%); independent brokers (29%); farmers' markets (28%); distributors and handlers (27%); websites and catalogs (26%); restaurants and caterers (26%); and processors, millers, and packers (26%) (Table 3).

Table 3: Marketing Channels for Idaho Certified Organic Producers in 2009

| Rank | Marketing Channel | %* |
|------|---|----|
| 1 | Other farmers | 43 |
| 2 | Natural food stores and food cooperatives | 34 |
| 3 | Independent brokers | 29 |
| 4 | Farmers' markets | 28 |
| 5 | Distributors and handlers | 27 |
| 6 | Websites and catalogs | 26 |
| 7 | Restaurants and caterers | 26 |
| 8 | Processors, millers, and packers | 26 |
| 9 | Private grain elevators | 19 |
| 10 | CSA and other subscription services | 15 |

* % of respondents who used marketing channel.

One-fifth (21%) of respondents made value-added products (e.g., jam, salad mix, dried herbs, bread, packaged meat, and livestock feed) from their certified organic products. The average percentage of gross farm sales from these value-added products was 26%. Value-added production was much more common in the northern region (57% of respondents) compared to the other three regions (17% of respondents).

Nearly half (49%) of respondents' certified organic products were marketed locally (within 100 miles). Over one fifth (22%) of products were marketed regionally (between 101 and 499 miles) and 17% were marketed nationally (500 miles or more).

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The remaining certified organic products were handled by intermediaries (11%) or sold internationally (1%).

Over one quarter (27%) of survey respondents sold all their certified organic products at an organic price premium in 2009. An additional 38% sold at least half of their certified organic products at a price premium. Nearly two-fifths (38%) of respondents derived all of their 2009 total farm sales from the sale of certified organic products (including value-added products made from their certified organic products). One-fourth (28%) of respondents derived at least half of their farm sales from certified organic products.

In 2009, 17% of respondents had a written marketing plan for their certified organic products. Approximately one third (32%) produced certified organic products under marketing/production contract arrangements. The extent of contract arrangements differed by region: none of the northern respondents and 37% of the remaining respondents had marketing/production contracts.

Sources of Organic Farming Information

The most important sources of information about organic production practices, farm management, and marketing strategies were farmers' own experimentation, other farmers, newsletters and magazines, conferences and workshops, Internet-based resources, and the Idaho State Department of Agriculture (ISDA).

Most respondents (88%) believed that the ISDA has been "somewhat" or "very" successful in serving the needs of Idaho's organic producers. Percentages were slightly lower for the University of Idaho (72%) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (52%).

A majority of respondents (59%) were familiar with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services' (NCRS') Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiation. A smaller percentage (43%) knew about the NCRS' Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

Organic Farming Challenges

When asked to indicate the degree to which 39 factors hindered overall organic farming success, respondents listed the limited demand for organic products as their biggest challenge. Other major challenges included the high cost of organic inputs, weather-related production losses, difficulty in obtaining organic price premiums, limited distribution opportunities, unstable organic prices, high labor costs, and flooded organic markets (Table 4).

The top challenges varied by region: high cost of organic inputs and weather-related production losses (North), obtaining organic price premiums and limited distribution opportunities (Southwest), unstable organic prices and limited demand for organic products (South-central), and limited demand for organic products, limited distribution opportunities, and flooded organic markets (East).

Sustainability of Organic Farming

Table 4: Challenges Faced by Idaho Certified Organic Producers

| Rank | Challenge | %* |
|------|---|----|
| 1 | Limited demand for organic products | 65 |
| 2 | High cost of organic inputs | 64 |
| 3 | Weather-related production problems | 60 |
| 4 | Obtaining organic price premiums | 59 |
| 5 | Limited distribution opportunities | 58 |
| 6 | Unstable organic prices | 56 |
| 7 | High labor costs | 53 |
| 8 | Existing organic markets flooded | 53 |
| 9 | Weed-related production losses | 51 |
| 10 | Customer volume requirement limits sales in certain markets | 51 |

* % of respondents who indicated factor was a "moderate" or "considerable" problem.

Nearly 72% of survey respondents agreed organic farming is more environmentally sustainable than conventional farming, 57% agreed organic farming is more socially sustainable, and 49% agreed organic farming is more economically sustainable.

To measure the sustainability of Idaho's certified organic farms, survey respondents were presented with a list of 22 potential goals for sustainable agriculture and asked the degree to which their farms contributed to each goal. Table 5 lists the sustainable agriculture goals with the highest contributions. The surveyed farms contributed most to environmental sustainability (e.g., promoting soil conservation, reducing toxins released

Table 5: Idaho Certified Organic Farmers Contribution to Sustainable Agriculture Goals

| Rank | Sustainable Agriculture Goal | Mean Score* |
|------|---|-------------|
| 1 | Promote soil conservation | 4.1 |
| 2 | Protect human health | 4 |
| 3 | Reduce toxins released into environment | 3.9 |
| 4 | Increase the sustainability of agriculture | 3.8 |
| 5 | Establish relationships of trust with consumers | 3.8 |
| 6 | Provide wildlife habitat | 3.8 |
| 7 | Protect water resources | 3.8 |
| 8 | Protect biodiversity | 3.7 |
| 9 | Make efficient use of nonrenewable resources | 3.7 |
| 10 | Reduce dependence on large corporations | 3.7 |

* Mean score on scale from 1 (No Contribution) to 5 (Significant Contribution).

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into the environment, providing wildlife habitat, and protecting water resources and biodiversity) and social sustainability (e.g., protecting human health, establishing relationships of trust, and reducing dependence on large corporations). Idaho's certified organic farms made smaller contributions to economic sustainability (e.g., providing adequate farm income, supporting local businesses, enhancing rural economic development, and providing living wages to farm workers).

Conclusion

The survey results reported above provide invaluable information about the characteristics, marketing strategies, information sources, challenges, and opinions of Idaho's certified organic producers. A key finding shows that while certified organic producers farm primarily for economic reasons (e.g., organic price premiums and economic sustainability), only one-half believe organic farming is more economically sustainable than conventional farming. Moreover, Idaho's certified organic farms contribute more to environmental and social sustainability goals than economic sustainability goals. Certified organic producers see limited demand for organic products and high input costs as their biggest challenges to achieving organic farming success. These findings are similar to survey results from Washington State (Goldberger, 2008).

Results also demonstrate that Idaho's certified organic producers rely on many different marketing channels as well as value-added production. Strengthening these marketing channels is essential for future growth of certified organic agriculture in the state. Most survey respondents believe the Idaho State Department of Agriculture (the state's primary organic certifier) and the University of Idaho have been successful in serving the needs of organic producers. However, nearly half of respondents do not believe the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service has been a successful resource for organic producers. This finding might be related to the fact that many

respondents are not familiar with NRCS's EQIP Organic Initiative and Conservation Stewardship Program.

Aggregate survey results mask quite striking regional differences in the characteristics, marketing strategies, information sources, challenges, and opinions of Idaho's certified organic producers. Northern producers, for example, are more likely than producers in other regions to have always farmed organically (primarily for environmental and social reasons), operate fewer certified organic acres, produce vegetables, rely on value-added production, and participate in direct marketing to local consumers. Further analysis is needed to fully understand the implications of these geographic differences among Idaho's certified organic producers. Nonetheless, preliminary results suggest the need for regionally-specific research and outreach strategies.

References

- Goldberger, Jessica. 2008. *The Experiences and Perspectives of Washington's Certified Organic Producers: Results from a Statewide Survey*. Sustaining the Pacific Northwest. 6(3): 5-8.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture - National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA-NASS). 2010. *Organic Production Survey - 2008*. Washington, DC.



Announcements

Organic Grains for Food, Feed and Malt- 2010 Tilth Conference

WSU will be holding an all-day symposium on *Organic Grains for Food, Feed and Malt* at the Washington Tilth Conference in Port Townsend, WA on Friday, November 12, 2010. Presentations will include integrating grains with vegetable crops for improved soil health, meeting livestock feed needs, and finding new markets for bread flours and for other baked goods. Learn about production practices, suitable varieties, equipment

needs and new market opportunities from organic growers, millers, bakers, and university scientists. To register and for more information, go to the Tilth Producers of Washington [Conference web page](#).



Tidbits

Honey Bee Pest and Disease Survey Underway

USDA. The U.S. Department of Agriculture today announced the beginning of a 13-state survey of honey bee pests and diseases conducted cooperatively by USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and Pennsylvania State University (PSU). The survey will help USDA scientists to determine the prevalence of parasites and disease-causing microorganisms that may be contributing to the decline of honey bee colonies nationwide.

USDA Announces Availability of Compliance Guide for Mobile Slaughter Units

eXtension. As part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 'Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food' initiative, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) today announced the availability of the [compliance guide](#) for mobile slaughter units. This document presents recommendations and is not a regulatory requirement. "USDA is excited to offer this help to small producers and encourages establishments who own or manage mobile slaughter units to use this guidance document to help meet

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