



\$50 Million Available for Transitioning and Organic Farmers.

**Applications for funding accepted May 11 - May 29, 2009
(WINDOW TO APPLY EXTENDED IN SOME STATES)**

50 million dollars is available nationwide to organic farmers or those transitioning to organic agriculture, under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) of the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Deadline for applications is June 12th in Wisconsin and South Dakota, and June 30th in Minnesota, extended from its original May 29th deadline. Other states may extend their deadlines and producers should check with their state NRCS offices for more information.

(<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/organization/regions.html>)

The Midwest Organic Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) has been following the development of this organic initiative and can aid farmers to understand what would be funded and how best to apply for these funds. MOSES provides educational opportunities about organic farming including workshops, field days and hosts the largest organic farming conference in the US every February in La Crosse, WI. For more information about MOSES and this initiative, see our website <http://www.mosesorganic.org> or call 715-778-5775.

The NRCS EQIP Organic Initiative is a funding program for growers who wish to improve their conservation practices and expand their organic system. Enhancing environmental protection is the goal of EQIP. For those whose farming practices currently conserve and protect natural resources to a high degree, EQIP may not be the best program. (The new Conservation Stewardship program may be a better fit, with criteria for this program expected in the next few months.)

Funds for this program focus on six core practices.

(A short summary on each practice is included in this document.)

1. Conservation Crop Rotation
2. Cover Crops
3. Nutrient Management
4. Pest Management
5. Prescribed Grazing
6. Forage Harvest Management

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Who is eligible for EQIP Organic Initiative funds?

- 1) Growers and/or livestock producers who are starting or in the process of transition to organic production.
- 2) Growers and/or livestock producers who are currently certified organic and are transitioning new land to organic production.
- 3) Growers and/or livestock producers who are currently certified organic and are implementing new conservation practices on their farm.

There is a requirement that the land is currently certified or in the process of becoming certified.

Payments are related to resource conservation and are not SOLELY for production enhancement. If the producer does not maintain their adherence to the organic foods production act and could no longer be considered as pursuing organic certification, the EQIP contract would be terminated. If producers who sell less than \$5,000 in agricultural products elect to pursue organic certification and voluntarily transition to organic certification, they are eligible to participate in this signup.

Transitioning organic producers must sign a self certification form detailing their intention to develop and implement an approved organic system plan. The NRCS will evaluate transitioning farmers annually to verify they are following their plan as submitted in their application. If they do not complete their organic transition, some funding dollars may need to be repaid.

Certified organic farmers are required to submit their approved organic system plan to the NRCS. The NRCS will verify current organic status with the National Organic Program on an annual basis.

What if the eligibility requirements don't seem to apply to my farm?

Although EQIP is a program that offers conservation dollars as an incentive to install or adopt new practices, **there are still ways for existing organic farmers to receive money under this program.** If a farmer has been planting a rye cover crop on some of his fields, he may be eligible to receive a payment to plant rye on fields that he has not planted to rye before, or if he adds hairy vetch (or other legume) to the mix, then this is considered a new practice and he can receive dollars for this rye/vetch mix. He cannot receive dollars for doing the same practices that he has already been doing, and the new practice should show an enhanced environmental benefit based on NRCS conservation planning criteria. Adding a legume to a cereal cover crop adds this benefit.

How much paperwork is required?

The application is not long or difficult and should be fairly straight forward for all categories of farmers to apply within the time frame. (MAY 11-29, 2009)

A more detailed workplan can be submitted **AFTER** the contract has been accepted by the NRCS.

Can I apply after May 29, 2009?

While there is no guarantee funds will be available after this cutoff date, farmers could still put in their applications in case more money becomes available from their state NRCS office. That said, if you're serious, you can and should apply on or before May 29th – **however please note that some states have extended their deadline into June.** Check with your state NRCS offices to find out if your state has an extension. (<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/organization/regions.html>)

Why such a short window to apply?

The short signup period for this organic initiative program is due to the late passage of the 2008 farm bill, and the need to disperse dollars by the end of the fiscal year.

Why applying is important.

There is 50 million dollars available nationwide and if certain states do not use up their funds, those monies will become available to other states that have applications pending.

What if I already applied to an earlier EQIP program?

If the organic producer has already put in a funding application for transition to organic production with their state or local NRCS office under the earlier EQIP program NRCS will, with the producer's concurrence, transfer the application to the organic sign up funding pool.

While the six core practices offer more dollars to those enrolled in the organic initiative program than those who are in EQIP and not part of the organic initiative, farmers can work with their states and receive further funding for any other NRCS practice standard that their state chooses to allow as "facilitating practice standards" to this program. There are not enhanced payments or "multipliers" for these facilitating practice standards, but these do offer farmers more options to receive increased payments under this program.

How much funding could I qualify for annually?

Each state or local NRCS office has specific dollars per acre offered for specific NRCS conservation practices. Under this program, organic producers can receive higher dollars than usually offered for the six core practices identified as being important to both organic agriculture and the NRCS. To determine their payments, the producer will need to obtain the dollars per acre offered for these practices in their region (either from their local NRCS office or the NRCS website <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov>) and then use the following information to multiply the locally set numbers by the multiplier listed to learn what they are eligible to receive as organic producers. **This organic initiative funding is limited to \$20,000 per farm per year, and up to \$80,000 over six years.**

Usually funding is 75% of the cost of the practice. Some states list the full cost of the practice on their websites, and some list the 75% rate.

If you qualify as a Beginning Farmer or Rancher or as a Limited Resource Farmer, you can receive an extra 15% above the money you would have otherwise received. Contact your local NRCS office to see if you qualify for these two special categories.

How can I improve my chances of qualifying for funds?

Each organic farmer can, and is highly encouraged, to institute as many of the six core conservation practices as possible, enabling them to both receive more dollars under this program as well as increasing their ranking in NRCS decision making of who receives these dollars, since this is a competitive program. Most organic farmers and transitioning to organic farmers should be able to obtain funds for at least two of these six core practices, and perhaps a few other facilitating practices.

Short Summary of the six core practice standards for the organic initiative 2009

- 1) *Conservation Crop Rotation NRCS 328 practice standard*
(multiply the typical amount your state offers by 1.34%)

Must be done on land that is typically cropped, not for land that is typically hay or pasture, and it is just being renovated. Cropping system must improve organic matter, break pest and weed cycles and include enough residue to prevent erosion. Cover crops included in the rotation fit this practice standard.

- 2) Cover Crops NRCS 340 practice standard
(multiply the typical amount your state offers by 1.46%)

Cover crops are not to be harvested and they are to have a positive impact on biodiversity and soil organic matter. Biological nitrogen fixation, weed suppression, erosion control and moisture management are some criteria to use when choosing cover crops to be planted. This is an excellent opportunity for existing organic farmers to experiment with new types or diverse mixes of cover crops, as well as aiding transitioning farmers to begin including this valuable practice in their cropping system.

- 3) Nutrient Management NRCS 590 Practice Standard
(multiply the typical amount your state offers by 1.30%)

Plant nutrients or soil amendments must be applied to a specific field, with the types and amounts determined by soil testing to determine a baseline concentration, crop yield goals to be achieved by using these inputs, and timing of the application of the nutrients/amendments. Nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and others are to be tracked as well as starter fertilizers. The main purpose of this practice standard is to minimize nutrient losses to ground or surface waters or to the air. This is an excellent opportunity for farmers to obtain significant funding to help with the development and implementation of a nutrient management system, which in many states is becoming mandatory.

- 4) Pest Management NRCS 595 Practice Standard
(multiply the typical amount your state offers by 1.60%)

This practice standard funds environmentally sensitive management, prevention, monitoring and suppression strategies for weeds, insects, diseases and animals include invasive and noninvasive species that directly cause damage to crops. While equipment cannot be purchased, the time spent scouting can be paid, as well as the cost of monitoring traps and pheromone releases. This is most useful for the transitioning to organic producer where resource protection is the goal. For organic producers who are not currently using materials that are risky to the environment, this program would not offer any financial reimbursements.

- 5) Prescribed Grazing NRCS 528 Practice Standard
(multiply the typical amount your state offers by 1.02%)

Land where grazing or browsing animals are managed is covered by this standard, and includes the planning and implementation of a system that maintains or improves the quantity or quality of the forage, improves soil condition and lessens risk of soil erosion, and improves water quality.

- 6) Forage Harvest Management NRCS 511 Practice Standard
(multiply the typical amount your state offers by 1.02%)

The management of land where machine harvested forage crops are grown is covered by this standard. Planning for yield, quality, plant regrowth, maintenance of the stand over time and provision of wildlife habitat as appropriate would be funded. This includes hay, green chop or silage forages.

Links to help you complete the application by May 29th:

- 1) Fill out the basic application form ASAP and get this into the NRCS office before May 29th.
APPLICATION FORM: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/PDFs/Blank_EQIP_CCC1200.pdf
- 2) Get cumbersome eligibility requirements (explained below) out of the way ASAP. This is important because you don't want to go through the work without knowing you are eligible AND you don't want to miss the deadline.
- 3) Ask questions of your local NRCS field staff. If they do not know about this organic initiative, ask them to contact their state office to get more information. Make sure you mention the specific NRCS conservation

practice standards you wish to implement, as this helps them understand what type of activities you want to include in your application.

NRCS CONTACT NUMBERS BY STATE

Wisconsin NRCS - (608) 662-4422

Iowa NRCS – (515) 284-6655

Illinois NRCS – (217) 353-6601

South Dakota NRCS – (605) 352-1200

North Dakota NRCS - (701) 530-2000

Michigan NRCS - (517) 324-5270

Minnesota NRCS - (651) 602-7900

(MN EQIP program manager, Tim Koehler, Tim.Koehler@mn.usda.gov)

For other states go to: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/contact/>

If you have additional questions NRCS can't answer, contact:

WISCONSIN

Contact MOSES Organic Specialist Harriet Behar at 1-888-551-4769.

IOWA

Contact Sarah Carlson at Practical Farmers of Iowa, 515-232-5661.

OTHER STATES

Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF)

OFRF is maintaining a list of organizations that can assist farmers who want to apply for this special EQIP initiative but aren't sure where to start.

http://ofrf.org/policy/federal_legislation/farm_bill_implementation/eqip_oi_resource_page.html

Basic Eligibility and FORMS

- 1) If you intend to apply for more than \$25,000 in benefits, get a DUNS number. It takes a day.
DUNS online application: <http://fedgov.dnb.com/webform/displayHomePage.do>
- 2) You must be part of the Farm Service Agency (FSA) database and file some level of farm records. Most commodity growers who access FSA program already are part of this database. A web-based fact sheet for accessing this is http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/july_attachment.pdf
- 3) Conservation Crop Rotation
Code: Practice Number 328
NRCS Conservation Crop Rotation Practice Standard
<ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NHQ/practice-standards/standards/328.pdf>
- 4) Cover Crop
Code: Practice Number 340
NRCS Cover Crop Practice Standard
<ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NHQ/practice-standards/standards/340.pdf>
- 5) Nutrient Management
Code: Practice Number 590
NRCS Nutrient Management Practice Standard
<ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NHQ/practice-standards/standards/590.pdf>
Job Sheet: <ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NHQ/practice-standards/jobsheets/590js.pdf>

- 6) Pest Management
Code: Practice Number 595
NRCS Pest Management Practice Standard
<ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NHQ/practice-standards/standards/595.pdf>
Job Sheet: <ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NHQ/practice-standards/jobsheets/595js.pdf>
- 7) Prescribed Grazing
Code: Practice Number 528
NRCS Prescribed Grazing Practice Standard
<ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NHQ/practice-standards/standards/528.pdf>
- 8) Forage Harvest Management
Code: Practice Number 511
NRCS Forage Harvest Management
<ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NHQ/practice-standards/standards/511.pdf>

Other sources with good information

Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

<http://sustainableagriculture.net/our-work/conservation-environment/organic-initiative/>

ATTRA <http://attra.ncat.org/eqip/>

NEW!

NRCS List of Eligible Practices and Payment Schedule for EQIP. Download the 74 page pdf at <http://www.mosesorganic.org/attachments/projects/6.12nrcspractices.pdf>

NEW!

Download a listing of all approved NRCS practices under the organic initiative at <http://www.mosesorganic.org/attachments/projects/6.12approvedpractices.xls>