NRCS ASSISTANCE FOR ORGANIC FARMERS

Natural Resources Conservation Service
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GROWING ORGANIC
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www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic

featuring information artworks by DOUGLAS GAYETON
GROWING ORGANIC
NRCS ASSISTANCE FOR ORGANIC FARMERS

WHAT IS NRCS?

WHAT IS ORGANIC?

NRCS & TRANSITION TO ORGANIC

HEALTHY SOIL

cover crops | crop rotation | compost | no till
conservation tillage | soil organic matter

WEED & PEST MANAGEMENT

insectaries | beneficial insects | companion planting | mulch | cover crops

HABITAT

biodiversity | conservation corridor | hedgerows | buffer strips | fish and wildlife habitat management

IRRIGATION

drip irrigation | irrigation water management | rainwater | soil moisture sensor | water quality

HIGH TUNNELS

season extension | climate control | drip irrigation | plant health and vigor | energy savings | local food

LIVESTOCK & PASTURE MANAGEMENT

diverse pasture plantings | moveable fences | watering | fencing | rotational grazing | nutrient management

5 STEPS TO NRCS ASSISTANCE

1. Identify your farm’s needs and goals
2. Contact your NRCS district office
3. Develop a management plan
4. Implement conservation practices
5. Monitor and evaluate results
NRCS is a great resource for understanding some baseline things, like soil types and characteristics of a particular growing environment right up through supporting cover cropping, high tunnels and a whole range of technical assistance and financial support.”

— Jack Hedin, Certified Organic Farmer
Featherstone Farms, Rushford, MN

“I look at what an agricultural producer is passionate about. Since a conservation plan is voluntary, it’s important to get their feedback and buy-in on a plan that can protect resources and help them with their agricultural production. It’s rewarding when agricultural producers are happy with changes they’ve been able to make with our practices.”

— Jennifer Walser, NRCS District Conservationist
Sonoma County, CA

What is NRCS?

Since 1932, the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has provided assistance to agricultural producers to conserve the soil, water, air, plants, and animals. NRCS experts work with producers in their local area to help them address their specific conservation needs.

Through offices in nearly every county across the U.S., NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help agricultural producers — including certified organic and transitioning producers — plan and implement voluntary, science-based conservation practices.

NRCS experts, such as district conservationists, soil conservationists, engineers, biologists, botanists, and others, work together to help producers find and apply conservation solutions while ensuring their working lands remain productive. Staff often live and work in the counties that they serve, and thereby understand local issues and challenges.

Organic agriculture and NRCS’ goals are well aligned. Many of the USDA Organic regulations can be achieved using NRCS conservation practices, which reflect these shared goals.

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— USDA Organic

NRCS helps people help the land by supporting a variety of regionally-adapted conservation stewardship and resource management programs.
What is Organic?

Organic farming is one of the fastest growing segments of agriculture. To be “certified organic,” producers must follow regulations outlined by the USDA National Organic Program (NOP). Managed by USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service, the NOP develops, implements and administers national organic production, handling, and labeling standards.

Organic agriculture is an ecologically based system that relies on preventative practices to deal with weeds, insects, and disease, using nontoxic methods for any problems that arise. Organic practices require the use of cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and preserve biodiversity. Organic producers avoid synthetic fertilizers and do not use sewage, sludge, irradiation, or genetic engineering on their operations.

Healthy soil is the foundation of organic farming. Early leaders of the organic farming movement emphasized that successful farming depends on the health of all natural resources on the farm and in its surroundings. Organic producers strive to develop farming systems that mimic nature and utilize natural processes.

More and more farmers and ranchers will be transitioning to organic to meet growing consumer demand, which currently outpaces U.S. grower supply. NRCS looks forward to providing conservation assistance to today’s and tomorrow’s organic producers.

“We are very rooted in doing a type of farming that respects biodiversity and the health of the planet. The more we learn about natural systems and how we can work with them and enhance them in order to produce food, the more excited we are. You just feel really good to be part of a larger system.”

— Harriet Behar, Certified Organic Farmer

NRCS & Transition

To be considered organic and to use the USDA Organic seal, all operations with more than $5,000 in organic sales must be certified independent, third-party USDA-accredited organizations certify farms and ranches as organic. The application to become certified organic and use the USDA Organic seal includes:

1. Detailed description of the operation
2. History of substances applied over past three years
3. Organic products grown, raised or processed
4. Organic System Plan describing practices and substances used

It takes three years to transition land to an organic system that was previously farmed conventionally. Farmers may choose to leave both organic and non-organic fields, but must create buffer zones between them.

NRCS Technical Service Providers (TSP) can help producers develop a Conservation Activity Plan for Organic Transition (CAP 138). CAP 138 consists of three sections: Resource Inventory, Erosion Control Inventory, and Summary Record of Planned NRCS Conservation Practices. The Resource Inventory section may serve as a portion of the Organic System Plan, which is required for certification.

Farmers and ranchers should begin by working with NRCS to develop a conservation plan for their operation. Then, a TSP can develop a CAP 138 for transition and producers can apply for financial assistance to implement conservation practices or enhancements.

Additionally, farmers may apply for up to 75 percent — up to a maximum of $750 per year — reimbursement of organic certification costs.

“I would say to farmers thinking about transitioning to organic, that you really have to be open to experimentation. There’s no substitute for trying different methods on your farm under the exact conditions that exist where you’re farming and to experiment. Be willing to be flexible and to adopt new methods and try things differently every single season.”

— Stephen Pedersen, Certified Organic Farmer
High Ground Organics, Watsonville, CA

“The most important thing is to have conservation plans that help transition to organic. They can address concerns while also moving a farm toward the regulations and requirements of organic certification.”

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NRCS can help farmers and ranchers with a number of conservation practices that build healthy soil. Diverse crop rotations, cover crops, nutrient management, and conservation tillage are examples of practices that feed the soil, reduce erosion, improve soil structure, and enhance nutrient cycling and water retention.

NRCS follows four soil health principles:

1. Use plant diversity to increase diversity in the soil.
2. Manage soils more by disturbing them less.
3. Keep plants growing throughout the year to feed the soil.
4. Keep the soil covered as much as possible.

By rotating crops across their fields from season to season, organic farmers add biodiversity and increase resilience in their operations while increasing their soil’s organic matter. Instead of leaving fields fallow after each harvest, organic farmers keep the ground covered with cover crops. Throughout the growing season, the cover crops act as a green manure, providing an additional source of nutrients that build soil organic matter and reduce the need to bring in additional inputs from off-farm sources.

If crops need additional nutrients, NRCS can help producers develop a nutrient management plan that incorporates organic plant, animal, and natural mineral-based fertilizers, most of which release nutrients gradually through the action of soil organisms.

Organic no-till systems, such as the roller-crimper, have also helped organic producers reduce the intensity of soil disturbance in annual crop rotations.

By using NRCS soil health principles and systems, farmers can sequester more carbon, increase water infiltration, and improve wildlife and pollinator habitat—all while harvesting better profits and offer better yields.

“The soil is a biological engine. By growing cover crops and turning them back into the soil, we’re giving fuel to that engine so the microbes can give our plants what they need to be successful. We also end up increasing the amount of carbon within the soil as well.”

— Joe Reynolds, Certified Organic Farmer
Tox Corner, Charlotte, VA

“On organic farming systems, we offer assistance with nutrient management plans. These look at nutrient cycles on the whole farm, including what is already available within the soil and what the plants need to take up. Then we look at what is being applied to see if there are any deficits or excess nutrients. NRCS has a staff of agronomists and nutrient management specialists and conservation planners that can help to provide the technical assistance needed to take the science one step further and understand what the data can tell us about working lands.”

— Jennifer Walser, NRCS District Conservationist
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Watch “Healthy Soil: NRCS Assistance for Organic Farmers” at www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic
COVER CROP

An essential element of any organic farmers' cropping rotation system, cover crops improve soil and organic matter in the ground by preventing weeds and controlling pests. Enhancing water availability, they degrade and provide significant contributions to a balanced ecosystem.

COFFEE GROWERS

In exchange for a living wage, a support system, and opportunities for training, the coffee workers are able to grow the coffee in a sustainable manner.

SOIL ORGANIC MATTER

Using farming methods to enrich soil and improve water retention, coffee farmers maintain the soil and plants sustainably improve the soil's quality and build soil health.

COVER CROPS

Degraded coffee grounds are used as the substrate for growing cover crops and soil health.

CROP RESIDUE

Vegetation intentionally left to decay in the field begins a burning process to keep soil covered and prevent erosion and later becomes a valuable component that builds and organizes organic matter.

HOW DO CERTIFIED ORGANIC FARMERS LIKE SIMON BUILD SOIL FERTILITY WITHOUT THE USE OF CHEMICAL FERTILIZERS BY PLANTING COVER CROPS?
Weed & Pest Management

One of the greatest challenges organic farmers face is weed management. A single weed can produce more than 10 million seeds, and if they're not dealt with in time, they can present farmers with challenges for years to come. Instead of using chemical herbicides, organic farmers can work with NRCS to implement a variety of conservation practices that suppress weeds while building soil health.

Cover crops are one of the most effective tools for suppressing weeds, and they work in three ways.

1. When alive, they outcompete weeds for water, nutrients, and sunlight.
2. As mulch, they minimize weed growth by physically preventing the germination of weed seeds, cutting off access to light and warmer temperatures.
3. When certain legumes, cereals or brassicas decompose, they produce natural herbicides that can suppress weed seed while sequestering carbon.

Rotating crops and timing planting dates to avoid weed germination windows are other effective weed suppression strategies.

NRCS can also help growers implement conservation tillage practices. Organic no-till uses tools like the roller crimper to kill cover crops while leaving their residue as a green mulch that feeds the soil and suppresses weeds. Farmers can use a variety of other mulches made from natural materials, paper or plastic. These are installed at the beginning of the growing season and trap soil moisture while preventing sunlight and weed growth.

Pest management on organic and transitioning farms requires a holistic approach. It relies primarily on preventing and avoiding pests with cultural and mechanical suppression. NRCS coordinates conservation plans with farmers' Integrated Pest Management plans to protect natural resources and benefit the ecosystem.

For example, organic farmers can plant insectaries to attract beneficial insects, like ladybugs, that biologically control pests. They can use companion planting to draw pests away from crops. Biodiversity, including bees, as well as birds and owls can also help manage pests. Cover crops naturally break the cycle of soil-borne diseases, and some soil-dwelling insects, while increasing the soil's organic matter.

"We farm organically by dealing with erosion and insects and weed problems using non-synthetic measures. We also deal with intercropping and crop rotations. It's a high dissipation that makes it difficult to farm organically than it is to farm using conventional methods."

— Gene Thomas, Farmer
Sneaky Crow Farm, Roanoke, AL

"At NRCS we always want to reduce tillage. Tillage destroys the structure of your soil. It burns up your organic matter. But if you're an organic producer, and you want to control weeds and don't spray, that's an issue. How can we work on controlling weeds without tillage? Cover crops are perfect because now we're building soil health... and we're controlling weeds. We're addressing your problem and we're also meeting our goal!"

— Cullen McGovern, NRCS Soil Conservationist
Longmont, CO

Watch "Weed Management: NRCS Assistance for Organic Farmers" at www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic

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“Diversity is the rule of the game now. We’ve got diverse people, flowers, plants, animals, you name it. Biodiversity, in my case, would mean that we try to mimic Mother Nature.”—Gene Thornton, Certified Organic Farmer, Sneaky Crow Farm, Roanoke, AL

“Farmers are dealing with nature all the time. If it’s always a combative stance and you’re just trying to fight off every pest or every rainstorm or every drought without using what nature has to offer, then you’re missing out on half of what you could be using to be a good farmer.”—Jeanne Byrne, Certified Organic Farmer, High Ground Organics, Watsonville, CA

“The core is always going to be the conservation plan. We go out on the land and meet with the producer, identify any resource concerns, then find a program that helps accomplish the practices we see need to be done... everything from nutrient management to pest management, even putting in insectaries to help with the pollinators.”—Glenn L. Riehle, NRCS Resource Conservationist, Paso, WA

NRCS can help organic farmers work with nature instead of against it, building and conserving vital habitat for pollinators, beneficial insects, and wildlife.

Conservation plantings such as field borders, hedgerows, and buffer strips can help protect water and soil resources and provide wildlife and pollinator habitat. These may also harbor natural enemies of pests and insects and help intercept pesticide and GMO pollen drift from neighboring non-organic farms.

NRCS can also provide assistance with biodiversity practices that include stream habitat restoration, rime and shad establishment, wetland wildlife habitat management, prairie restoration, riparian corridor enhancement, and terrestrial and aquatic wildlife habitat, and prescribed grazing management.

NRCS not only helps to create wildlife habitat on a farm-by-farm basis, but the agency also targets at-risk species on a landscape scale. NRCS works with partners and landowners to conserve targeted species in specific areas, realizing that many farmers and ranchers working together can make a difference.
CONSERVATION CORRIDOR

How can farmers manage water security and meet their irrigation demands while protecting fish at the same time?

FISH AND WILDLIFE HABITAT MANAGEMENT PLAN

In 2017, the Nature Conservancy, the UC Davis Soil and Water Conservation Research Farm, and the Fish and Wildlife Habitat Management Plan, in collaboration with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, conducted a study to evaluate the effectiveness of various buffer strip configurations for improving fish habitat. The study found that buffer strips with a combination of native plants and irrigation water sources can significantly improve fish habitat and water quality in the region.

Native Forecasts

These native forecasts were created using data from the California Department of Water Resources and the USGS, providing insights into historical water flow and temperature patterns.

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Buffer strip

Buffer strips are areas of land that are protected from direct contact with water bodies, such as rivers, streams, and lakes. They act as a natural filter, preventing pollutants and nutrients from entering the water and improving water quality. Buffer strips can also provide habitat for wildlife, including fish, and help maintain water temperature and quality.
Irrigation

NRCS can help organic farmers with irrigation water management strategies tailored to their farm’s specific needs. Conservation practices can also protect water quality in the surrounding ecosystem.

Water quantity.

Irrigation management plans combine conservation principles with efficiency, balancing the farm’s water needs with those of nature. Tools like drip irrigation, which provides water precisely where and when it’s needed, can achieve greater precision with flow meters and soil moisture sensors.

Farmers can also conserve water by increasing their soil’s water holding capacity and using conservation tillage to keep the ground covered, reducing water loss through transpiration and evaporation.

A one percent increase in soil organic matter can help the soil retain an additional 20,000 gallons of water per acre. NRCS agricultural engineers can use satellite-tracking tools to conduct precise topographic surveys, then design complete site-specific irrigation systems, from wells to pumps to pipes to hookups out in the field, saving water by improving irrigation efficiency. In combinations, these practices add up and make a huge difference.

“...establishing of the well in the upper fields. Up until that point, we had to chuck water into massive containers and then feed it to the lines for drip irrigation, which took a lot of time out of the day...”

— Mark Lui, Certified Organic Farmer
Crystal Organic Farms, Newborn, GA

“...tracking the soil moisture that’s available to plants multiple times per week... It’s important not only for soil quality, but to benefit water quality and water conservation through efficient irrigation, and these benefits also come across in the quality of the produce grown here...”

— Ryan Power, Certified Organic Farmer
New Family Farm, Sebastopol, CA

Watch “Irrigation and Water Management: NRCS Assistance for Organic Farmers” at www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic

Water quality.

Well-managed organic systems rely on slow-release forms of nutrients, which reduce the risk of nutrient runoff and leaching. These practices help maintain water quality, while enhanced soil structure, water infiltration, and better nutrient retention also protect water quality. NRCS-developed nutrient management plans, cover crops, and buffers keep soil and nutrients in place and filter runoff water.

“...NRCS-developed nutrient management plans, cover crops, and buffers keep soil and nutrients in place and filter runoff water...

“One of the most profound things NRCS has been able to help us with is the establishing of the well in the upper fields. Up until that point, we had to chuck water into massive containers and then feed it to the lines for drip irrigation, which took a lot of time out of the day. Getting that well installed was a massive improvement.”

— Mark Lui, Certified Organic Farmer
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“We’ve used the NRCS program for intermediate water management, so we’re actually tracking the soil moisture that’s available to plants multiple times per week. Now, we’re only waking when it’s necessary. It’s important, not only for soil quality, but to benefit water quality and water conservation through efficient irrigation, and these benefits also come across in the quality of the produce grown here.”

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NRCS can help farmers secure quality water sources and optimize their use to grow a better crop, while maintaining good conservation practices.
IRRIGATION WATER MANAGEMENT PLAN

NCECS Conservation Extension Service offers a Farm-Specific Water Needs Model that employs the optimal irrigation water frequency and schedule to achieve maximum crop yield and return on investment. The model incorporates historical weather data and soil characteristics to determine the most efficient water management strategy.

NCECS can work with farmers to develop irrigation water management plans that use sensing tools to conserve water and save money.
Across the U.S., farmers are discovering the benefits of high tunnels. NRCS can help producers integrate high tunnels into their operations. While they may look like greenhouses, high tunnels are actually quite different. Greenhouses are usually constructed of glass and metal, with plants grown in pots above the ground. High tunnels are polyethylene, plastic or fabric covered hoop structures that can be assembled for a fraction of the cost, with plants grown in raised beds or grown directly in the ground. Because the growing conditions are controlled, plant health is optimized. High tunnels protect plants from severe weather and allow farmers to extend their growing seasons — growing earlier into the spring, later into the fall and sometimes, year-round. And because high tunnels prevent direct rainfall from reaching plants, farmers can use precise tools like drip irrigation to efficiently deliver water and nutrients to plants. High tunnels also offer farmers a greater ability to control pests and can even protect plants from pollination and pest damage.

A number of soil health practices can be used in high tunnels, including cover crops and crop rotations, which also prevent erosion, suppress weeds, increase soil water content, and break pest cycles. Perhaps the best thing about high tunnels is that they help farmers provide their communities with healthy local food for much of the year — food that requires less energy and transportation inputs and provides communities with greater food security.

“We have really cold, wet springs with a lot of rain. High tunnels allow people to get into the ground and start producing crops earlier. They can also help people extend the growing season later as we go into the rains in the fall.”
— Danny Perich, Certified Organic Farmer
Full Plate Farm, Ridgefield, WA

“We got assistance from the NRCS to put in the high tunnel and it’s completely changed the way we farm tomatoes. We were able to get 103 tomato plants in there and before, we would do maybe 40 to 50 plants. So it’s double production for us. We’re also able to grow things during the winter, which we’ve never been able to do before.”
— Stacey Givens, Urban Farmer
Side Yard Farm, Portland, OR

Watch “Growing All Seasons: NRCS Assistance with High Tunnels” at www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic
Livestock & Pasture Management

Organic livestock producers provide living areas that encourage the health and natural behavior of their animals. They use only certified organic feed, provide year-round access to the outdoors and access to pasture for ruminants and don't use antibiotics or growth hormones.

NRCS can help organic livestock producers with practices such as pasture and grazing management, diverse pasture plantings, fencing, and walkways, watering facilities, and shelters for animals.

Pastures, regardless of organic status, can become overgrazed, which can harm animal health and damage natural resources. USDA organic standards require producers to maintain pasture in a state of good health through management strategies that promote good forage quality and quantity, weed control, infiltration of precipitation, and erosion control.

One key practice is rotational grazing. This approach separates open fields into a series of closed paddocks that regularly directs animals to fresh pasture. The size of these paddocks is determined by the number of animals, time of year, grazing duration, and quality of available forage. Proper fencing and adequate water supplies are features of these intensively managed grazing systems.

Fences can control erosion or impede animal access to sensitive areas like ponds, streams, wellheads or protected habitat, while gated paddocks can be opened and closed to provide cattle access to fresh pasture. Diverse pasture plantings can provide livestock with well-balanced, nutritious forage that keeps them healthy. Using season-specific plantings is also good for the entire ecosystem.

“With a comprehensive nutrient management plan, livestock producers can use a system of practices to manage livestock waste on the farm. In particular, soil health practices in the plan include Rotational Grazing, testing soils and placing nutrients as fertilizer to minimize effects to sensitive areas such as adjoining streams, habitats, and buffers.”

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CERTIFIED ORGANIC

The USDA Organic Certification inspection by Portland
State University staff ensures the highest quality of
organic produce. The organic practices include:

- Rotational grazing
- Diverse pasture
- Planning

As more consumers go organic, car organic poultry producers keep up with demand. Jesse says, “Yes, the secret family-scale farms.”

ROTATIONAL GRAZING

Raising cattle on grass

The more you raise and sell grass-fed beef, the better your business will be. Building a sustainable food system requires a commitment to organic practices. The USDA Organic Certification is the gold standard for organic farming.

MORE WAYS TO SOURCED

Additional pastures

Diverse pasture combines

Plan your grazing system

The brass helps Marc and Cheryl raise grass-fed cattle using conservation practices that reduce their dependence on off-farm inputs while enhancing soil health.

NOTES FROM THE FARMERS

Planning and management practices are critical to the success of your organic farm.

- Diverse pasture
- Planning
- Rotational grazing

The USDA Organic Certification is the gold standard for organic farming.
Five Steps to NRCS Assistance

Here’s what to expect:

1. PLANNING. NRCS technical assistance is free and voluntary. The first step is to visit your local field office and work with a conservationist on a conservation plan that meets the goals of your operation. Ask your conservationist if financial assistance is available to implement any of the practices outlined in your conservation plan.

2. APPLICATION. NRCS can help you fill out the right forms for the application process. Applications for most programs are accepted on a continuous basis, but they’re considered for funding in different ranking periods. Ask your local NRCS conservationist about the deadline for the ranking period to ensure you turn in your application in time. You can also apply for financial assistance and manage applications, contracts, and conservation plans online through the NRCS’ Conservation Client Gateway.

3. ELIGIBILITY. To determine eligibility, you’ll need an official tax ID (Social Security number or an employer ID). You’ll also need property deeds or lease agreements to show you have control of the property. You’ll also need a farm and tract number. If you don’t have a farm and tract number, you can get one from USDA’s Farm Service Agency (www.fsa.usda.gov). Typically, the local FSA office is located in the same building as the local NRCS office.

4. RANKING. The NRCS will take a look at the applications and rank them according to local resource concerns, the amount of conservation benefits the work will provide and the needs of applicants.

5. IMPLEMENTATION. If you’re selected, your next step is to sign the contract. You’ll then be provided standards and specifications for completing the practice or practices, and you’ll have a specified amount of time to implement. Once the work is implemented and inspected, you’ll be paid the rate of compensation for the work if it meets the NRCS standards and specifications.

For more information on how NRCS can help you, visit your local NRCS field office, or: www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic

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