

Fact Sheet:
Environmental Quality
Incentives Program
Organic Initiative

January 2012

Overview

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary program that offers financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers through contracts up to a maximum term of ten years in length. These contracts provide assistance to plan and implement conservation practices that improve soil, water, plant, animal, air, energy conservation, and related resources on agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland. In addition, EQIP can help producers meet federal, state, Tribal and local environmental regulations.

Organic Initiative

The 2008 Farm Bill includes provisions for the use of EQIP to assist organic producers with natural resource concerns and requirements for the National Organic Program (NOP). The EQIP Organic Initiative provides financial and technical assistance to implement approved conservation practices that address significant natural resource concerns, and develop and implement conservation plans that assist with transitioning to organic production.

Each fiscal year, the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will focus financial and technical assistance through the EQIP Organic Initiative to applicants who are:

- Certified organic producers
- Transitioning to organic production, or
- Producers selling less than \$5,000 in organic products annually

This assistance helps producers plan and implement conservation practices for the environmental sustainability of their organic operations. Highlights of the organic provisions in the 2008 Farm Bill and associated regulatory changes include:

- Assistance is available for planning and implementing conservation practices to address resource concerns associated with organic production
- Assistance is limited to \$20,000 per year and \$80,000 during a six-year period
- Producers will develop and work toward implementing an Organic System Plan (OSP)
- Producers must be certified organic or be transitioning to organic

The Organic Initiative provides financial assistance to implement a broad set of conservation practices to assist organic producers with meeting their resource concerns and fulfilling many of the requirements in an Organic System Plan (OSP) including, but not limited to assistance with:

- Developing a conservation plan
- Developing a plan for transitioning to organic production
- Establishing boundaries and buffer zones
- Improving soil quality and organic matter while minimizing erosion
- Improving pest management



- Developing a grazing plan and improving grazing resources
- Improving waste utilization and composting
- Improving irrigation efficiency
- Enhancing cropping systems and nutrient management

A correlation matrix which compares the OSP and organic certification requirements with NRCS practices is available at www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs. Not all practices are appropriate in all areas; for a list of the specific practices offered in your state as part of the Organic Initiative, see that state's organic website.

Eligibility

Eligible applicants include individuals, legal entities, Indian Tribes or joint operations engaged in agricultural production. Organic producers who grow agricultural commodities on eligible land and have resource concerns which may be addressed by organic initiative conservation practices may participate in the Organic Initiative.

Eligible producers interested in entering into a financial assistance agreement with NRCS for EQIP assistance may file an application at their local USDA Service Center at any time. Your local office can be found at <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app>.

Applicants must:

- Be an agricultural producer and have control of eligible land for the term of the proposed contract period.
- Be in control of eligible land such as cropland, pasture, rangeland and headquarters.
- Be in compliance with the provisions for protecting the interests of tenants and sharecroppers, including the provisions for sharing EQIP payments on a fair and equitable basis.
- Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation compliance provisions of the 2008 Farm Bill.

- Be within appropriate payment limitation requirements, as specified in the 2008 Farm Bill.
- Be in compliance with adjusted gross income requirements of the 2008 Farm Bill.

How EQIP Works

NRCS staff will work with the applicant to develop a conservation plan and an EQIP plan of operations. This plan becomes the basis of the EQIP contract between NRCS and the participant.

NRCS may also provide financial assistance to participants for conservation planning services through a Technical Service Provider (TSP). These services are utilized to develop Conservation Activity Plans (CAP) which will be included in the plan of operations as they provide in depth analysis of specific resource concerns.

Applications submitted for the Organic Initiative are accepted on a continuous basis throughout the year. Applications are evaluated and ranked according to environmental benefits expected through implementation of approved conservation practices.

For fiscal year 2012, NRCS has established application deadlines where eligible applications will be ranked and considered for funding as follows:

- Application Period 1
Submission Deadline: Friday, February 3, 2012
- Application Period 2
Submission Deadline: Friday, March 30, 2012
- Application Period 3
Submission Deadline: Friday, June 1, 2012

Applications submitted after the deadlines will be evaluated and considered for later funding opportunities.

New for fiscal year 2012: Organic Initiative applicants will be evaluated continuously during the ranking periods. Applications meeting or exceeding a threshold score may

be approved for an EQIP contract before the end of the ranking period. Applications rating below the threshold score will be deferred to the next ranking period. A new threshold score will be established at the beginning of each ranking period. This new scoring process allows organic producers to implement conservation practices in a more timely manner.

Payment Limitations

Program payments are limited to \$300,000 a person or entity for all contracts entered into during any six-year period. This limitation includes unpaid prior year contract obligations as of October 1, 2008, as well as new contract obligations. For the purpose of applying this requirement, the six-year period will include those payments made in fiscal years 2009-2014. Payments received for technical assistance are excluded from this limitation. Organic Initiative contracts are further limited by the Farm Bill to \$20,000 per year and \$80,000 during a six-year period.

More Information

For more information and updates about the EQIP Initiatives and other 2008 Farm Bill topics, please visit the NRCS website at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/eqip>.