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Abstract
More than 400 Iowa organic farmers were asked how the implementation of the USDA-National Organic Program (NOP) rules in 2002 has affected their farming operations.

Keywords
Organic production practices and comparisons, Policy

Disciplines
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Abstract: More than 400 Iowa organic farmers were asked how the implementation of the USDA-National Organic Program (NOP) rules in 2002 has affected their farming operations.

Question & Answer

Q: Has the NOP helped Iowa farmers?

A: Yes, there have been many benefits of a national certification program: level playing field for all inputs, a more uniform system for marketing, and a national community of organic farmers has developed.

Background

The Organic Trade Association (OTA) is the business group representing the North American organic agriculture industry, and includes growers, shippers, processors, certifiers, farmers' associations, distributors, importers, exporters, consultants, retailers, and others. The OTA and the Iowa State University Organic Program were interested in knowing how Iowa organic producers viewed the 2002 USDA-National Organic Program (NOP) rules that affect all aspects of the organic production chain, from farmer to processor to retailer. Surveying these producers would yield information about aspects of the program that might hinder or bolster organic agriculture, and allow these organizations to respond in a way that would help farmers.

The project objective was to determine the impact of the USDA's National Organic Program on Iowa's organic farms.

Approach and methods

A survey of the impact of the NOP on Iowa farmers was conducted in 2003-2004 with the launch occurring at the November 2003 Iowa Organic Conference. More than 400 surveys were mailed to these conference participants and others on the ISU Organic Program mailing directory, and 120 surveys were returned. A majority of the survey questions had closed-ended responses with only a limited number of open-ended questions included.

Results and discussion

The average number of acres farmed by a survey respondent was 650 acres. Because Iowa is well suited for organic grain production, the majority of those crops grown in the state are corn, soybeans, oats, barley, and wheat. Among the organic fruit and vegetable crops were apples, grapes, raspberries, strawberries, sweet corn, green beans, and broccoli. Other organic farm products were alfalfa, nuts, flowers, herbs, poultry, eggs, and popcorn.

The NOP rule, in general, has not changed organic certification requirements developed by private and state certification agencies between 1973 and 2000. There was a fairly even split in farmers' opinions on the potential for problems with NOP rules, with only a slight majority citing difficulties. Among the problems (not all directly related to NOP rules) were marketing, competition, paperwork, increased workloads, and more difficult farm practices; enforcement of rules; high costs of certification; downgrading of standards; proliferation of loopholes; and attempts by special interest groups to "bend the rules."
Increasing challenges in paperwork, such as the detailed logs required for compost-making were considered onerous. The level of enforcement related to obtaining certified seed (or developing a record of non-availability of organic seed) may vary among certifiers. The new requirements for compost logs come in response to food safety concerns, while the organic seed requirement is connected to consumer demand for certifying the entire system from seed to post-harvest. The availability of organic seed currently is one of the most pressing needs in the organic industry.

The majority of respondents had not changed their farm size since the passage of the NOP rule. Only 4.3 percent had decreased their farm size, and 38.3 percent planned to increase their organic acres. Stated difficulties in locating NOP-compliant inputs may have more to do with organic production problems in general and not necessarily with NOP, since all certification agencies emphasize a “systems approach” based on on-farm inputs, rather than substitution of chemical inputs. While there were reports of increased labor and paperwork related to NOP rules, there has been no documentation to support such accounts. There also is no evidence to support the claim of additional weed management challenges that can be attributed to the NOP rule.

Nearly 80 percent of respondents saw no changes in profitability since passage of the NOP rules. Of the 20 percent citing changes, decreases of up to 20 percent and increases of about 20 percent were reported. The majority of respondents reported no increase in paperwork, but for the 39 percent with an increase, they handled it by working longer hours rather than engaging any assistance. Most of the respondents sell their crops to wholesale markets, which is typical for organic grain producers. Only 14.5 percent sell to direct market outlets.

Those who saw positive market changes attributed it to more consistency in organic certification requirements. Those with negative changes in their product markets related it to certification requirements, storage and delivery conflicts, retailers, and large companies. Most organic farmers do not consider themselves marketers, although they dedicate a great deal of time to contacting buyers. The lack of uniformity in standards among the United States, Japan, and the European Union was mentioned several times by producers as a barrier to trade. Thirty-seven percent felt that the NOP had helped in standardizing organic regulations, but 33 percent stated that the NOP had not aided them in any way.

Conclusions
Farmers surveyed voiced strong support for maintaining high standards for organic production and processing to ensure consumer confidence. Thirty-seven percent of those responding felt that NOP has helped in standardizing organic regulations. Some indicated that national organic standards have made it easier for beginning organic farmers and have been helpful in locating organic
grains for livestock. Farmers reported that, in general, the NOP rule has not drastically changed the organic certification requirements developed by private and state certification agencies between 1973 and 2000.

The overall average of acres farmed, both organic and conventional, was 775 acres. Fifty-one percent of respondents farmed 200 acres or less, and 1,050 acres was the highest organic total reported. Asked what their biggest marketing challenges were, 37 percent said “finding a market that will pay value-added costs of organic products” while 31.5 percent chose “growing enough product to meet the demand for organic products.”

When asked specifically about NOP, farmers noted that the new requirements for keeping logs concerning compost and the necessity of obtaining organic seed were their key concerns. Some of those responding pointed out the challenges of doing paperwork for organic certification, as well as marketing, competition, increased workloads, more difficult farm practices and enforcement.

Respondents indicated that the following changes are needed to improve the long-term economic sustainability of organic farms:

- More support of small farmers and less subsidization of large corporate farms
- More research dedicated to the harmful effects of genetically engineered crops
- More efforts to increase consumer awareness and demand for organic products
- Stricter standards for livestock housing
- Increasing cooperatives and creating viable cooperative structure
- Finding ways to reward producers more, such as through higher prices and contracted prices
- Making certification less complicated and expensive.

Nearly 40 percent of those responding said that they planned on increasing the number of organic acres they farmed, with the majority saying that they planned to increase their acreage by up to 25 percent.

**Impact of results**

The objectives of the survey were met. The OTA will use results from the survey to communicate the needs and opinions of organic farmers to the USDA-NOP.

**Education and outreach**

The project was the subject of 17 presentations from 2003 to 2005. The most comprehensive account of the results was given in the “Update on Organic Standards” presentation by Kathleen Delate at the 2004 Iowa Organic Conference. Detailed findings from the survey are posted on the OTA web site (www.ota.com).

**Leveraged funds**

No funds were leveraged for this particular project. However, the survey provided an opportunity for working with the NOP and OTA for future funding and projects.