Farmers choose to transition to organic agriculture for many reasons. These might include seeking a better price for their crops, or a desire to lessen their reliance on agricultural chemicals. Some are attracted to organic production methods, which use natural tools and the strengths of a farm’s own ecosystem to build a sustainable farming operation.

In the United States, agricultural products sold as organic must meet the requirements of the 1990 organic law and the organic regulation passed in 2002. These state that if a farm’s gross sales of organic products in one year are over $5000, or a crop is sold as livestock feed or for further processing, then the farm must be certified by an approved agency. See the MOSES Fact Sheet on organic certification or the Guidebook for Organic Certification for more information on certification.

Organic products are grown on land that has not had prohibited substances used on it for a minimum of three years prior to the harvest of the crop. Prohibited substances are typically synthetic substances that are not allowed under the law, and include chemical fertilizers, synthetic herbicides, and insecticides. It is important to document, as close as possible, the last date of prohibited substance application. This proves to the certification agency when 36 months without prohibited applications has passed, and when the crop can be harvested and sold as organic.

The use of all synthetic materials is prohibited unless they have been specially approved by the USDA National Organic Program and are written on the National List of substances for organic agriculture. All natural products are allowed, unless they are specifically listed as prohibited on this same list. This list can be found on the USDA National Organic Program website, www.ams.usda.gov/nop or from any organic certification agency. Prohibited substances also include items such as seeds treated with fungicides or insecticides such as captan, maxim or with genetically modified rhizobial bacteria.

Weed control can be a challenge, especially during the transition years. Crop rotation, including leguminous forages such as hay and small grains (both fall- and

Things like silage or hay inoculants also must be either natural or an approved synthetic. This is true for any other input used on land or crops that will be fed to transitioning livestock. During the years that a farmer is transitioning to organic, all organic regulations must be followed. Records must be kept that prove that no prohibited materials were used. Documentation such as seed tags or invoices showing the use of non-GMO and untreated seed is required.

Organic farming is about much more than what you cannot use. It is a proactive management system based on ecologically-sound practices along with the use of allowed inputs. Soil fertility is managed not only to feed the current year’s crop, but to continuously build organic matter and improve soil tilth. This can be done through the use of green manure plowdowns and crop rotations as well as the use of animal manures, plant materials and compost. The balancing of soil nutrients using natural, mined rocks (lime, rock phosphate, etc.) also is permitted. A good crop rotation as well as balanced, living soils, tends to produce healthy crops with minimal disease and insect problems.
spring-planted types), can go a long way to breaking weed cycles during the row crop years. Legumes offer an additional benefit of building organic matter and offering nitrogen credits when they are incorporated into the soil. Organic weed control options include the use of equipment such as the rotary hoe, tine weeder, many types of row cultivators (buffalo, Danish tine, lillisten) as well as flame weeder. System-based weed control methods such as no-till organic seeding into knocked down semi-mature rye as a mulch, or interseeding of rye or legumes at the last cultivation are also used by successful organic farmers.

The organic regulation mandates that each organic field has clear boundaries and borders, with the acreage defined. Once the field is eligible to produce a crop sold as organic, the farmer will need to manage the borders of the fields if the neighboring field has had substances applied that are not allowed under organic regulations. Buffer zones are necessary between an organic crop and a non-organic crop. There is no specific size of a buffer zone between organic crops and non-organic crops, but it must be of sufficient size to prevent drift or runoff of non-approved substances. Typically, a buffer zone is 25-30 feet. Road crews, utilities, aerial spray companies, etc., can be notified not to spray along an organic farmer’s field. If a no-spray agreement cannot be reached, then the organic farmer can grow non-organic crops in the buffer zone, or leave it fallow. If a crop is taken from the buffer zone it will need to be harvested separately from the organic crop and documented that it was harvested, stored and sold as non-organic. Given that your neighbor’s practices may change from year-to-year, a buffer may not be needed each year. However, your certifier may require more years of non-organic buffer zones even when no sprays were applied by a neighbor. So learn their policies before you make plans.

Organic seeds must be used when you are growing an organic crop. Seeds used to produce green manure crops that may not be harvested but are still grown on organic land also must be organic. If the specific variety or type of seed you wish to grow is not available as organic and you document a good-faith-effort to find organic seed, then you may use a non-organic, untreated seed. High price is not an acceptable reason to not buy organic seed. Organic seeds do not need to be planted while your farm is transitioning to organic, but synthetically treated seeds are not allowed. Non-approved synthetically treated seeds are viewed as a prohibited substance, meaning that you will start your 36 months of transition from the date you planted your last treated seed, or used your last synthetic input, such as an herbicide, whichever is later. All GMO seeds and nitrogen-fixing bacteria are prohibited in organic production.

Documentation is an important aspect of organic farming. During the transition years a record-keeping system should be developed to suit your operation. Small pocket calendars or spiral notebooks can be used to record field activities, inputs, storage and sales information that will be needed once the farm is certified organic. These records are a valuable historical reference detailing your farm’s unique growing conditions and will aid you in making yearly management decisions.

Most certification agencies recommend you contact them for a certification application packet at least six months before you expect to sell organic crops. This allows you time to complete the application, and allows the agency time to review your application and return with any questions. Time is needed for an inspector to visit your farm during the growing season to assure that you are abiding by the organic regulations. You will not be able to sell crops as organic until you receive your organic certificate from the certification agency.

Some farmers choose a certification agency early in their three-year transition and receive their certification application packet early so that they can more fully understand what certification entails. However, it is not necessary to apply for organic certification until the growing season when you are eligible to sell an organic crop.

Some farmers prefer to experiment with organic production practices on one or two fields. This allows them to develop an understanding of how organic works with their land and systems before they transition the whole farm. If you wish to start organic production slowly, you may certify your farm one or two fields at a time. However, running parallel organic and non-organic production involves increased complications of buffers, equipment clean-outs, and storage and sales records for both your organic and non-organic production.

The Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) provides education and resources to farmers to encourage organic and sustainable farming practices. To learn more, please see: www.mosesorganic.org

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