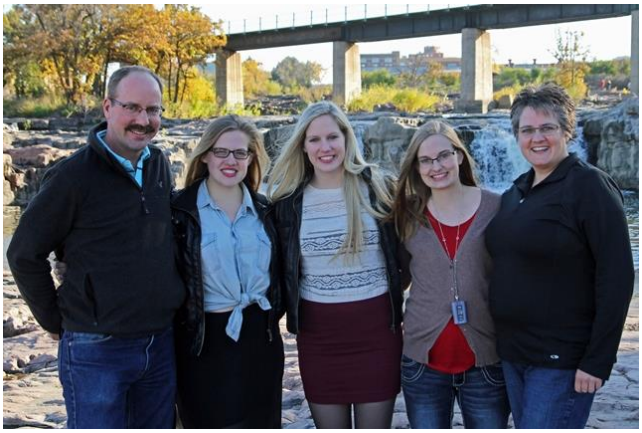
Tools for Transition

Update

Spring 2014

SEASONED ORGANIC FARMERS MAKE TRANSITIONING LOOK EASY!



Seasoned organic farmers Jonathan and Carolyn Olson make transitioning look easy. They started with a conventionally managed 300-acre farm in Southwestern Minnesota and now manage more than 1,100 acres of certified land. They love what they do and have become leaders in the organic community.

The Olson's decision to go organic began with a comment from their buyer in 1997. "My dad and I had been growing seed and food grade soybeans for a couple of years," recalls Jonathan, "when our buyer said to us, 'You should be growing organic – it pays more.'" The Olson's didn't know any organic growers at the time, so they did a lot of homework before making the transition. "We started out by going to Lamberton [Experiment Station]. We asked a lot of questions; tried to learn as much as we could," recalls Jonathan. "Going to events and conferences, we started to build contacts and have conversations with organic growers."

The Olsons gave organics a try by putting 40 acres from one of their cleanest fields into transition during spring of 1998. "The first couple of years seemed easy," says Jonathan. But, over time, weeds have begun to build in almost every field and the Olsons have had to experiment with management strategies that include altering planting dates, increasing mechanical and hand cultivation, and flaming. During the past 15 years, Jonathan and Carolyn gradually have transitioned 1,100 acres (much of the land is rented on long-term lease from family members). Throughout the transition, they maintained what's known as a "split operation" with some ground under organic and some under conventional management.

Reflecting on their transition strategy, the Olsons note important benefits associated with having run a split operation. Most important, they say, was the chance to learn while growing the farm business. "Gradually transitioning smaller acreages allowed us to learn," says Jonathan. "Fifteen years later, we're still learning. And just about the time you think it's getting easier, you do something like plant tillage radish in front of soybeans," he says with a smile.

Today the Olsons are busy almost full-time from mid-May, when planting begins, to November after harvest wraps up. Their three-year rotation includes corn, soybeans and, in year three, small grains followed by a cover crop. Fertility comes from the Olsons' 2,400-head conventional hog finishing enterprise. Their organic corn yields regularly equal or exceed conventional county averages while their organic soybeans yield slightly below conventional averages. With consistently good yields and premiums earned for organic crops, the Olsons are reaching their long-term goal of fully paying down farm debt. "Financially, the last couple of years have been very rewarding," says Jonathan.

The Olsons' dedication to organic farming and commitment to education has, in fact, earned them the well-deserved nomination for 2013 Organic Farmers of the Year from the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Services.

For More Information:

Read more about the Olsons transition experience online: http://eorganic.info/toolsfortransition/farmers.

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USDA
United States Department of Agriculture
National Institute of Food and Agriculture

RESOURCE: ARTICLE AND ADVICE ON TRANSITIONING CRP LAND

If you're thinking about transitioning land that's been enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and you missed the January-February *Organic Broadcaster* article titled "Evaluate CRP Land With 'Open Eyes' Before Converting to Organic" you'll want to read on!

According to author and experienced organic farmer, Gary Zimmer of Otter Creek Organic Farm, "It takes a lot of work to return the land to a productive state." One might assume that CRP land, acreage placed in permanent vegetative cover for a minimum of ten years, will be highly fertile after its long rest. This couldn't be further from the truth, according to Zimmer. CRP land tends to be low on mycorrhizal populations (fungi that work symbiotically with plants to provide water and minerals), high on woody plant matter which can tie up nutrients, and poor in nitrogen cycling due to the limited number of legumes found on CRP land. "Here at Otter Creek Organic Farm, we have taken land out of CRP and converted it to organic production more than once over the past 20 years … We spend two growing seasons providing mineral inputs, growing cover crops and getting plant diversity and soil health back in the land," Zimmer says. "Because of the time commitment, labor, and inputs required to transition CRP, we prefer to transition land from good conventional farms [rather than CRP acreage]."

If your transition plan is dependent on converting CRP land, Zimmer recommends the following:

1.Take a soil test to identify and address mineral deficiencies.
2. Work the land (with manure applications and a green manure crop) to begin the process of residue breakdown well before planting.
3. Address mineral deficiencies that remain after working the land.
4. Select crops for planting that best complement the current condition of soil, nutrient levels, and organic matter.

And, if you're looking for some good news, Zimmer has found that CRP fields are typically "almost weed-free." Read the full article by Zimmer at the MOSES website: http://mosesorganic.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Broadcaster22.1web.pdf.

ORGANIC FEED PRICES START THE YEAR OUT LOWER

Organic corn and soybeans are trading considerably lower in the cash market compared to a year ago. According to the USDA's *National Organic Grain and Feedstuffs B-Weekly Report*, food grade yellow corn is trading at $11.50-$12.00/bu and feed grade yellow corn at $10.00-$14.05/bu. (Prices are FOB the farm). The average price for food grade and feed grade corn one year ago was $16.16/bu and $14.37/bu, respectively. Feed grad soybean prices are also reported about $2/bu below last year's prices. For more information on organic prices, check out the National Organic Grain and Feedstuffs report online: http://www.ams.usda.gov/mnreports/lsbnof.pdf.