

# The EQIP Initiative for Organic Agriculture Fact Sheet

## Overview

The NRCS EQIP Organic Initiative is a program for organic growers who wish to improve the conservation practices and expand the environmental protection of their organic system. Enhancing environmental protection is the goal of EQIP. For those organic producers with farming practices that currently conserve and adequately protect natural resources to a high degree, EQIP may not be the best program.

## What is EQIP

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary conservation program administered and carried out through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. EQIP was originally established under the 1996 Farm Bill and is reauthorized in the 2008 Farm Bill. It supports agriculture production and environmental quality as compatible goals.

Through EQIP, land users may receive financial and technical help to voluntarily address soil, water and related natural resource concerns on private lands with structural and management conservation practices.

EQIP provides technical assistance and financial payments to assist crop, livestock, forestland and other agricultural producers with the implementation of environmental and conservation improvements to their operations.

In general, the EQIP program is intended to assist producers with the implementation of conservation practices that address an identified resource concern on their farm. In other words, EQIP is a “fix it” program assisting landowners to solve existing resource problems. EQIP rules specify that payments are limited to the implementation of newly applied conservation practices that have not been previously established.

Conservation practices eligible to receive financial assistance are listed in the EQIP payment schedule and are limited to those practices contained in the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide.

EQIP is NOT a grant program. The program does not offer financial incentives for conservation practices that have already been established.

## What is the Organic Initiative

EQIP has a newly announced Organic Initiative as a part of the EQIP. Through this initiative currently certified organic producers and those transitioning to organic production can submit applications for the implementation of new conservation practices on their land that will help solve an identified resource problem. These applications will be ranked and funded from a special funding pool for organic producers and will be competing only against others in this special pool for funding.

This EQIP Organic Initiative does NOT offer financial incentives for the production of organic products or for the transition from conventional agricultural production to organic production.

The initiative allows producers to receive up to \$20,000 per year or \$80,000 over six years. EQIP payments are set up by a contract that can last over several years.



*Cover crop planted after corn silage harvest*

## Who Is Eligible

To be eligible to participate in EQIP, an applicant must be an individual, entity or joint operation who meets the definition of an agricultural producer who is engaged in livestock or agricultural production. In order to be considered an agricultural producer there must be an annual minimum of \$1,000 of agricultural products produced and/or sold from the operation two out of the last five years.

To be eligible for the Organic Initiative, producers are also required to develop and carry out an organic system plan

(OSP) and they must be pursuing organic certification or be in compliance with their current organic certification through the National Organic Program (NOP). Applicants with certified organic operations and those who are not required to be certified (less than \$5,000 of annual sales) must submit a copy of their current OSP before funding can be considered.

Producers who are in the process of transitioning to organic production will be required to submit a self certification letter to NRCS stating they will implement conservation practices consistent with an organic system plan. Applicants who fail to provide the self certification letter or an organic system plan will not be eligible for the organic EQIP initiative pool of funding.

## Eligible Practices and Payments

Under the initiative, six core conservation practices will be offered with a higher payment rate to address specific resource concerns. A farmer can choose to implement any number of the following practices, and the more practices that a farmer plans to implement the higher priority the application will be. Payment rates for each practice are available from your local NRCS office.

The “Core 6” practices are:

- \* **Conservation Crop Rotation:** Eligible acres are those where the current rotation is annual crops and is significantly changed to include at least two years or more of rotation legumes, grass and legume mixtures and other approved green manure and cover crops.
- \* **Cover Crop:** This practice includes the seeding of legumes, small grains, cocktail mixes and other cover crops per the cover crop standard. Cover crops cannot be mechanically harvested for grain or forage. They can be grazed if it is detailed in the plan.
- \* **Nutrient Management:** This includes managing the amount, source, placement, form and timing of application of manure and/or soil amendments that meet organic requirements. Soil sampling is required and records must be maintained.
- \* **Pest Management:** Utilizing environmentally sensitive prevention, avoidance, monitoring and suppression strategies (including crop scouting) that meet organic cropping requirements. Records must be maintained.
- \* **Prescribed Grazing:** The controlled harvest of vegetation with grazing or browsing animals. This practice is only eligible for permanent pasture / grassland (not for hayland or cropland that is intermittently grazed). A detailed prescribed grazing plan is required.

- \* **Forage Harvest management:** This practice involves the timely cutting and removal of forages from the field as hay, greenchop or ensilage.

Producers are also eligible to apply for any of the other practices in the practice payment schedule that are needed on their operation. You are eligible to apply for any of these practices as long as you are making a change in your current operation: changing your crop rotation, adding a cover crop, making a change in your nutrient or pest management practices, etc.

## Timing and Deadlines

This initiative is in its pilot year. To apply for funds this year, farmers must sign up between May 11 and June 30th at the local service center.

When applying for EQIP, especially when applying for the first time, producers should be mindful that they will need to fill out forms providing USDA with information that confirms that they are eligible to participate in these public-funded programs. NRCS staff will be available in the service center to help producers through this application process.

## More Information

For more information about the organic initiative, visit your local **USDA service center**, or check on the Minnesota NRCS web site at [www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov).

USDA Is An Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer