Resources for Conservation Planning on Organic and Transitioning-to-Organic Operations in Pennsylvania

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to discuss existing tools and resources that support successful conservation planning on organic and transitioning-to-organic operations. It also includes information about organic certification and the National Organic Program (NOP).

Organic Standards and Conservation Practices

NOP regulations define organic production as systems that respond "to site-specific conditions by integrating cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity." (7 CFR Part 205.2). Operations "must maintain or improve the natural resources of the operation, including soil and water quality." (NOP Regulation 205.200). To meet these standards, producers are subject to regulations that cover a range of topics related to conservation such as soil fertility, crop rotations, pest management, and biodiversity. NOP standards are broader than conservation-related practices and include aspects of production that are outside of the scope of NRCS. For example, NOP regulations cover the handling, labeling, and marketing of organic products.

While the NOP regulations cover a broad range of topics, they do not include prescriptions detailing how the standards should be met. For example, regulations state that a "producer must manage crop nutrients and soil fertility through rotations, cover crops, and the application of plant and animal materials" (NOP Regulations 205.203(b)). The regulations do not go on to stipulate specific crop rotations or cover crops. In contrast, the NRCS conservation planning process employs land-use specific tools and their interpretations to evaluate resource conditions and develop alternative practices for the landowner's consideration. NOP regulations fit into the NRCS conservation planning process as landowner objectives and should be considered in the alternatives developed for a producer.

It is important to have an awareness of NOP land requirements especially when working with producers transitioning to organic production. Any field or farm parcel from which harvested crops will be sold as organic must have "had no prohibited substances applied to it for a period of 3 years immediately preceding harvest of the crop." (NOP Regulations 205.202). Therefore, transitioning producers must

adhere to all regulations governing allowable substances. During this period, these producers are shifting from conventional to an integrated management approach of their soil fertility and pests. With this change in management, transitional producers are often faced with a steep learning curve and can benefit from NRCS technical expertise.

Despite different strategies and management activities in conventional and organic production systems, the operations face similar resource concerns. When working with organic and transitioning producers, the NRCS planning process is the same. In light of the USDA's goal to increase the number of organic operations, the department is investigating opportunities to streamline conservation planning and organic certification.

Resources

While not exhaustive, the following documents and online resources provide many tools to support conservation planning on organic and transitioning-to-organic operations.

Conservation Planning with Transitioning to Organic Producers

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ): Conservation Planning with Transitioning to Organic Producers
The FAQ provides guidance for conservation planners and includes:

- definitions of key NOP terms including "certified organic," "exempt producer," and "organic system plan";
- answers to key questions about the EQIP Organic Initiative including relationship to NOP, eligibility requirements, and related NRCS conservation practices;
- information on CAP 138 Transition to Organic Plans and their relationship to an OSP;
- explanation of Technical Service Provider (TSP) certification;
- description of the roles of TSPs and NRCS employees under CAP 138 Plans;
- information on technical assistance available to transitioning producers including NRCS practices that can be implemented on organic or transitioning operations; and
- discussion of the relationship between an NRCS conservation plan and an OSP.

Conservation Activity Plan Supporting Transition to Organic Production (CAP 138)
This document describes how a CAP 138 can be used to support producers transitioning to organic and provides a detailed look at the criteria required for completion of the plan including:

- the purpose of the plan;
- description of considerations when developing a plan;
- minimum criteria to be addressed;
- background and site information items;
- required elements of the final plan that must be delivered to the producer and NRCS, including practice implementation requirements;
- charts listing typical resource concerns for crop and grazing land that require evaluation;
- a CAP 138 template.

Practice Specific Resources

Oregon Tilth, the National Center for Appropriate Technology, and the Xerces Society partnered with NRCS to develop four guides that provide conservation planners with detailed information on NOP regulations, organic management practices, and technical guidance for NRCS practice design in an organic context. They include information about the different purposes for the practice's use, design considerations, and how installation might differ on organic operations:

- Nutrient Management Plan (590) for Organic Systems Implementation Guide
- Cover Crop (340) in Organic Systems Implementation Guide
- Conservation Buffers in Organic Systems Implementation Guide
- Common NRCS Practices Related to Pest Management on Organic Farms

A separate resource published by the Natural Resource, Agriculture and Engineering Service (NRAES; now Plant and Life Sciences Publishing) provides an in-depth review of purposes for crop rotation including improving soil quality and health, and managing pests, diseases, and weeds. The book includes instructions for making rotation plans, on-farm examples of specialty crop rotations, and discusses the transition to organic farming.

- Crop Rotation on Organic Farms: A Planning Manual

Biodiversity Resources

NOP regulations broadly require that producers "conserve biodiversity." (§ 205.2). While the NOP is in the process of developing specific guidance, other resources are available:

- Biodiversity Conservation: An Organic Farmer's Guide is a Wild Farm Alliance publication which provides a range of farm management practices that maintain and enhance biodiversity.
- Pollinator Habitat Assessment Form and Guide for Organic Farms is a Xerces Society guide that assesses pollinator habitat in orchards and field crop settings.

USDA Resources

USDA National Organic Program (NOP)
Main site has links and information including organic standards, organic certification, news, lists of certified operations, certifying agents, and more.

USDA NOP Organic Literacy Initiative
Many USDA resources: 'Is Organic an Option for me?' brochure, videos, organic certification guidebooks for producers, and AgLearn courses for USDA and the public (including Organic 101 and 201).

NRCS EQIP Organic Initiative
The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative provides technical and financial assistance to eligible organic, transitioning, and certain 'exempt' from certification operations to treat identified natural resource concerns in an organic production setting.

NRCS Science and Technology Training Library: Webinar Portal for Conservation of Natural Resources
Features upcoming and archived conservation webinars including an annual organic series.

Other Resources

eOrganic
A collection of land-grant university publications and webinars on different aspects of organic agriculture.

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service (ATTRA)
ATTRA is a premier source of information about sustainable agriculture for farmers and agriculturalists.

Oregon Tilth
Oregon Tilth is an international nonprofit organic certifier. The Organic Education Program works to advance and promote organic agriculture through training, information, research, technical assistance, and advocacy.

Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI)
OMRI provides a list and independent review of products allowed in certified organic production, handling, and processing.

Pennsylvania Certified Organic (PCO)
PCO is a nonprofit organic certification and education organization which serves producers in the Northeast and Southeast. Education programs include field days and workshops.

Pennsylvania State University (PSU)
PSU organic resources include research on organic cropping systems, extension and education programs such as the Organic Crop Producer Network Meetings and Study Circles.

Rodale Institute
A nonprofit organization focused on organic farming research and outreach. Rodale hosts the longest running side-by-side U.S. study comparing conventional agriculture and organic production systems. The institute has a free 15-hour Organic Transition Course.

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Acknowledgments

Authors Sarah Brown, Ben Bowell and Carrie Sendak (Oregon Tilth)
Reviewers Rex Dufour (National Center for Appropriate Technology), Jennifer Miller (Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides), Gwendolyn Crews and Denise Troxell (NRCS), Charles White (Pennsylvania State University Extension)
Design and layout Tim Kirkpatrick, Wonder Parade, LLC

Funded by a grant from Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (WSARE).

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