



MIDWEST
TRANSITION TO ORGANIC
PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

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INCLUDING NRCS IN YOUR TOPP PROJECTS

CONNECTING NRCS ORGANIC PROGRAMS WITH GROWERS

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There's a lot going on in NRCS (USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service) these days to support farmers transitioning to organic ag, and for those already using certified organic practices. Ideally, your local and/or state NRCS should be included in all your TOPP projects, since they have a mandate to work with producers to conserve soil, water, air, plants, and animals on their land, which directly corresponds to organic ag's mission. This is the umbrella webpage for all of NRCS' organic programs: [NRCS - Organic](#)

The Organic Transition Initiative is a new, multi-agency initiative aimed to ensure that farmers transitioning to organic have maximum support to navigate organic transition and beyond. Thanks to the CARES and ARPA Acts and the Biden/Vilsack administrations, this initiative ushers in one of the highest levels of government support for organic farmers in U.S. history. The Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) is part of this Initiative, designed to provide comprehensive support for farmers transitioning to organic production, and deliver technical assistance, including farmer-to-farmer mentoring. There will also be direct support through conservation technical assistance at NRCS and financial assistance through their EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program): [EQIP - Organic](#)

The beauty of the NRCS offerings is that they will provide free technical assistance for conservation plans, plus assist eligible farmers with applying for funds in their various conservation programs. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a “voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to help plan and implement conservation practices that address natural resource concerns and for opportunities to improve soil, water, plant, animal, air and related resources on agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland.” In addition to traditional EQIP-supported practices, since 2009, the EQIP-Organic Initiative funds directly target organic ag.

The first step is a visit to your local NRCS office to determine your eligibility for funding. It is the responsibility of the producer to provide sufficient documentation to prove that no prohibited substances have been applied for 3 years, and that they can demonstrate compliance with all applicable USDA-NOP organic regulations. A site visit with an NRCS conservationist will help identify conservation resource needs on your farm. Examples that can be supported through NRCS programs include Crop Rotation, Cover Crops, and Residue and Tillage Management (which could include organic no-till). A conservation plan can be developed by NRCS staff, or producers can work with a TSP (Technical Service Provider), to develop a Conservation Planning Activity, called a CPA 138-Conservation Plan Supporting Organic Transition. Both types of conservation plans can be used as an opportunity to learn transition requirements and become the foundation for an organic system plan. The CPA 138 is a plan to transition some or all of the farm to organic production and will address conservation concerns on your farm. The final product is conservation plan or an NRCS-approved Conservation Planning Activity (CPA) that supports the Organic System Plan (OSP).

A new Conservation Practice Standard (CPS), **Organic Management (Code 823)**, has been released, with sign-up for transitioning and certified organic farmers. Check with your local state NRCS office for deadlines for applications. The organic system can cover any type of transitioning enterprise and includes cash row crops, hay or pasture, perennial crops, cover crops and livestock. This CPS may be part of a conservation management system to address all identified resource concerns for your land transitioning to organic production.

To implement the interim standard, farms must:

- Engage organic experts
- Follow NOP standards

- Not apply prohibited substances
- Access and address all natural resource concerns
- Include complementary conservation practices, such as Nutrient and Pest Management
- If livestock are present, you must follow a pasture and grazing management plan (528)

This program, once finalized, appears to offer significant cost-share for organic practices; contracts adhere to the EQIP \$450,000 payment limitation. Currently, there is an opportunity for feedback on this new CPS. A national webinar, which has been archived, was held on May 22, 2023: [Webinar - NRCS CPS 823](#)

In addition, an all-day training on the NRCS organic practice standards was held at Iowa State University on September 12, 2023, for NRCS staff and organic farmers to encourage EQIP sign-ups: [ISU-NRCS Training](#) An archived video of the training and supplemental materials are available by contacting Josiah Pollock at ISU: josiahp@iastate.edu

There is also the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP): [CSP - Organic](#) available to organic producers, but it differs a bit from EQIP, which organic farmers currently use more than CSP. The CSP is based on a 5-year contract, with annual payments, and includes whole farm planning. Farm site visits will determine if applicants meet or exceed addressing resource concerns on their farm at the beginning and the end of the contract. For CSP general applications, an applicant must meet or exceed the stewardship threshold on all land uses included in the operation for both of the following:

- At least two resource concerns at the time of contract offer
- At least one additional resource concern by the end of the contract

The minimum contract payment is \$1,500 per year, with the maximum \$200,000 for a 5-yr contract per individual. The higher the performance, the higher the payment. Examples of CSP Practice Activities include Conservation Crop Rotation (328), Cover Crop (340), Field Border (386), and Tree and Shrub Establishment (612). There are also Enhancements, like the Crop Bundles No. 21 and 22 for Organic, to take practices as a group to a higher level of conservation. As an example, the Crop Bundle No. 22 is called

the Erosion bundle for Organic and includes the following Conservation Practices: Conservation Crop Rotation (328), Nutrient Management (590), Integrated Pest Management (595), Residue and Tillage Management (345), Cover Crop (340), Conservation Cover (327), and Wildlife Habitat Planting (420).

Additional conservation support for organic farmers will occur starting in 2023/2024 with the six new Regional Organic Specialists and one Organic Research Specialist to “help expand NRCS’ existing organic expertise through relationships within the organic community. Through this collaboration the agency wants to increase conservation assistance to organic producers and those transitioning to organic production in the United States and the Pacific Islands and Caribbean areas through improved partnerships with organizations.” The new Specialists will develop technical information for agency staff; increase knowledge of the NRCS conservation planning process and how it correlates to the organic system plan; and enable more strategically focused and effective outreach efforts to increase conservation assistance to organic producers. The organic research specialist will review, develop, and disseminate research and technical guidance for organic agriculture. These positions will create a robust core of organic specialists that state NRCS personnel can utilize for help with their organic programming.

The main take-home message for transitioning and organic producers is that the NRCS is there to support organic farmers. Please visit your local NRCS service center for free technical assistance and a determination if financial assistance is right for you. Applications are taken on a continuous basis but evaluated and ranked on a certain schedule, so ask what those are for your specific program. Chances are – NRCS will be prove to be a good choice to support the many conservation practices organic farmers utilize as stewards of the land.