

The Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP)

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United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program
Transition to Organic Partnership Program



The Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP)

AN OVERVIEW OF AN EXCITING NEW PROGRAM THAT WILL HELP U.S. FARMERS TRANSITION TO CERTIFIED ORGANIC



When Bryan O’Hara moved onto his Connecticut farm over two decades ago, he gained an unexpected blessing in the form of his neighbor, an older man named Gilbert Risley. Risley had been a vegetable grower in the 1950s and 60s and remembered the old way of farming before synthetic fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides became mainstream. “For years and years Risley was a great mentor,” O’Hara says. “He started with horse-drawn equipment and understood cultural techniques from before the chemical period.” O’Hara was fortunate to have such wise counsel right next door; however, many organic farmers don’t have access to mentors or to experienced farmers who have been through

the ups and downs of growing crops or raising livestock organically, both from a production perspective and as a small business owner.

The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) is helping to change this narrative. Last fall, USDA announced an investment of up to \$300 million to launch the Organic Transition Initiative (OTI), a comprehensive suite of programs to support farmers transitioning to organic production. This initiative delivers wrap-around assistance including farmer-to-farmer mentoring and help with “education and technical assistance on agronomy, certification, extension, conservation planning, business development regulations, and marketing.”

TOPP is a key component of OTI and specifically invests up to \$100 million through cooperative agreements with nonprofit partner organizations to administer the program. TOPP helps aspiring and transitioning organic farmers by pairing them with experienced farmers and mentors.

In addition to TOPP, the mentoring arm of OTI, USDA will support new and transitioning organic farmers with financial and technical assistance through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Risk Management Agency (RMA). NRCS is developing new standards for conservation practices for organic operations and will be offering assistance — both technical and financial — for producers who implement the standards. RMA will help organic growers participate in crop insurance through its new Transitional and Organic Grower Assistance Program. The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) also just launched the Organic Market Development Program to help expand the organic agricultural supply chain.

HOW TOPP WORKS

The USDA, AMS National Organic Program has created partnership networks in six regions across the U.S. with trusted local organizations to ad-



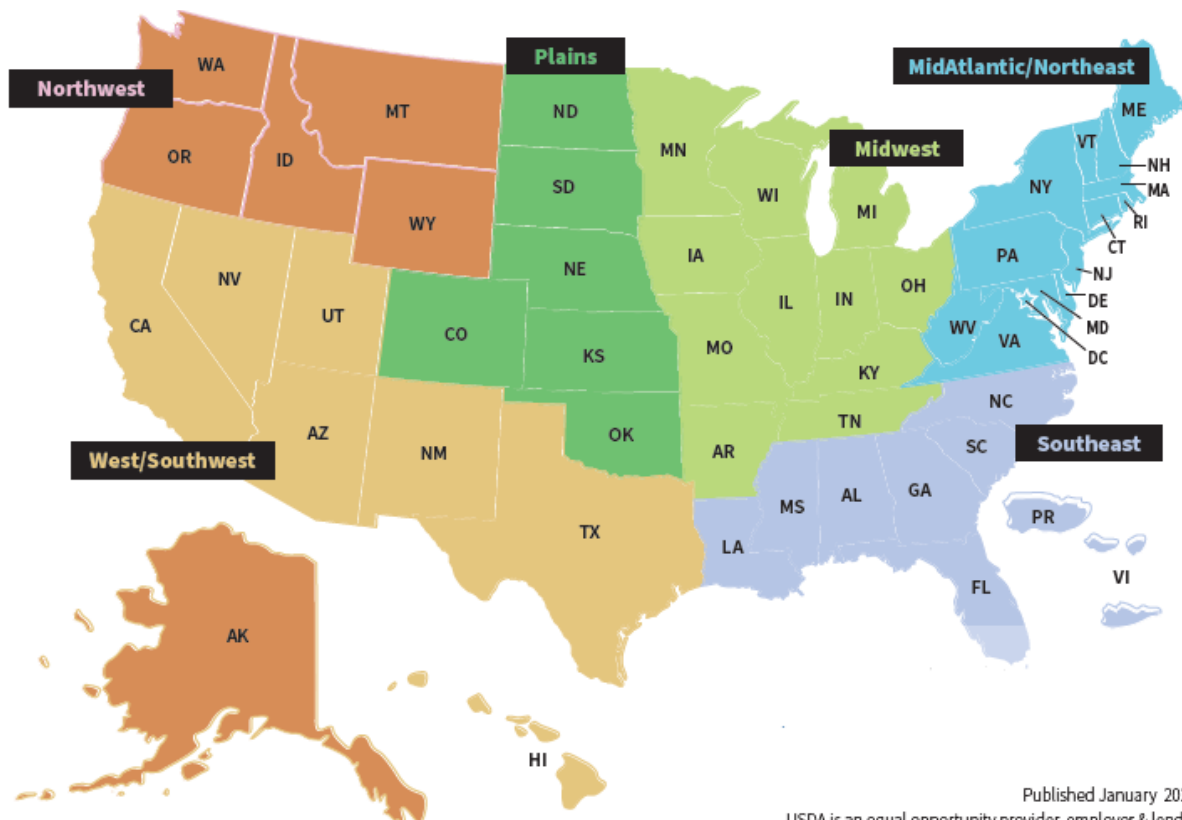
Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP)

TOPP is a network of organizations partnering to support transitioning and existing organic farmers.



Visit USDA's TOPP Webpage to:

- Sign up to **serve as a mentor**
- Tell us you want to **transition to organic**
- Express interest in **providing technical assistance**
- Find partners** in your local TOPP region



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minister TOPP. The six regions are (1) Mid-Atlantic/Northeast, (2) Southeast, (3) Midwest, (4) Plains, (5) Northwest, and (6) West/Southwest. Each regional team provides community-building, mentoring and advice.

The partner organizations in the six geographic regions are working to connect new and transitioning farmers with mentors for at least one year after initial organic certification. Mentors are paid to share their practical insights and advice (the exact payment schedules are due to be released later in 2023), and mentors can work with more than one new farmer.

Partner organizations also offer

community-building opportunities including technical assistance, workshops and field days. Topics covered include organic production practices, certification, conservation planning, business development and marketing.

TOPP will also train crop advisors and extension agents on the skills they need to help the growing organic industry.

Early organic pioneers like Bryan O'Hara survived through hard work and, often, serendipitous relationships with mentors who were able to help them learn how to grow crops without chemical inputs. Those who made it did so through a combination

of determination and good fortune. Thanks to USDA's new TOPP initiative, more new and transitioning organic farmers can succeed.

For anyone interested in additional information on TOPP, please visit: www.ams.usda.gov/services/organic-certification/topp

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