NRCS Offering New Practice for Transitioning Land to Organic

By Harriet Behar

NEW NRCS OFFERINGS

Cover cropping, crop rotations structured for building soil organic matter and carbon sequestration, as well as encouraging biodiversity with wildlife habitats or native prairies are all NRCS practices originally written to serve conventional systems of farming. In fact, many foundational organic activities are found within the practices cost-shared by NRCS.

While they are organic practices, the terms set forth practices designed for conventional farmers and made it difficult for organic farmers to access these government funds. Some of the terms required the use of herbicide or conventional fertilizer, others focused mostly on using less pesticides with improved spray nozzles, without any funding for ecosystem services provided by beneficials. The good news is that for over a decade, the NRCS has been making progress in their understanding of organic systems as well as improving their NRCS practices and conservation planning tools to more specifically address the needs of organic farmers, ranchers and agroforestry producers.

Current NRCS programs include cost share through the Organic Initiative under EQIP, which recognizes the higher costs of organic inputs and can provide higher payments for organic farmers. However, there is a limitation of $140,000 for each single or multi-year Organic Initiative contract, where nonorganic farmers using the same practices have a limitation of $450,000. Converting land to rotational grazing, which could need moveable fencing, watering systems, and non-erodible walkways can easily go over $140,000, especially if the contract also includes stream crossings or other engineered activities. The Organic Farmers Association is working to remove the lower Organic Initiative limitation in the upcoming farm bill.

NEW ORGANIC TRANSITION INITIATIVE

Late in 2023, the NRCS launched a new Organic Transition Initiative under EQIP, dedicating $70 million dollars nationwide to practices (Transition to Organic Practice # 823) and planning (Conservation Planning Activity and Design #138 and #140) to aid new-to-organic farmers in the transition to organic on nonorganic land. Existing organic producers transitioning new land to organic are also eligible to apply. This initiative provides both technical assistance as well as significant financial incentives.

The conservation professionals at the NRCS are gaining knowledge of organic systems, and their help in addressing specific concerns on each farm is another bonus of this initiative. Some standard NRCS practices have a higher payment to an organic or in-transition to organic producer, recognizing the loss of income from lowered yields when the farmer and the land are adjusting to a new system. All activities performed, and inputs used, during the transition must meet all National Organic Program regulations, with the goal of achieving organic certification. The payment contract can be 1-3 years, with the yearly payments on a per acre basis. The payment cap for a multi-year contract is the same as regular EQIP, $450,000.

This interim 823 Conservation Practice Standard (CPS) recognizes the holistic approach of organic management systems. CPS 823 provides funding for an overall plan including numerous practices that work together to promote ecosystem health. Over the next few years, the NRCS will be reviewing the implementation of CPS 823 and will be modifying it periodically so it can help many types and sizes of organic farms with their successful transition to certified organic production.

NEW TRANSITION TO ORGANIC MANAGEMENT PRACTICE 823

The new CPS 823 includes a suite of practices, such as Conservation Cover, Conservation Crop Rotation, Cover Crops, Field Borders and Nutrient Management. Windbreaks, native prairie plantings or wildlife habitats on field edges, filter strips through fields, and strip cropping are also encouraged. High tunnels, low tunnels, silvopasture systems and forest stand improvements, irrigation, raised beds, and mulching systems help specialty crop growers improve their production quality and yields while at the same time providing conservation benefits.

For livestock producers, access areas to pastures, forage management, heavy use area protection installations (roadways, barnyards), diversions to prevent erosion and more are also encouraged to be included with this CPS 823, when needed on the farm to meet specific conservation objectives.

HOW TO APPLY

When applying to the NRCS for any of their cost share programs under EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) or CSP (Conservation Stewardship Program), your application needs to address one or more natural resource concerns, such as soil erosion, protection of water quality of ground and surface waters through nutrient management, improvement of forages and more.

You can apply for both CPS 823 and a conservation plan activity (CPA) for the transition to organic CPA 138 under EQIP, which entails hiring an organic Technical Service Provider (TSP) with organic knowledge paid by the NRCS, or you can apply only for the CPS 823 and your county NRCS person will help you. Either way, those helping you will walk your farm and help you identify the various resource concerns. Applications are done through your county's NRCS office.

If your NRCS District Conservationist doesn't offer or understand Practice 823, have them contact their state office or Lindsay Haines (lindsay.haines@usda.gov) at the D.C. NRCS Office.

TERMS TO KNOW: EQIP PROGRAMS FOR ORGANIC PRODUCTION & TRANSITION

CSP 823: For Transition to Organic Management Practice with Cost Share Payments

CPA 138: Funding to hire a TSP to write a transition plan

DIA 140: Transition to Organic Design, written by TSP

TSP: Technical Service Provider, hired to write Transition to Organic Conservation Plan and Design CPA #138 and DIA #140

WHEN TO APPLY

The NRCS will take applications for any of their programs, any time of year, but there are deadline dates for "ranking" the applications. All applications are then ranked in that pool, and any applications received after that date, need to wait for the next "ranking" date. Sometimes there is only one application ranking date, and other times there are numerous per year. Each program may have its own ranking date, or all NRCS programs may all be the same day. In addition, each state determines their own ranking dates throughout the year.

Here is a resource to all of the application ranking dates for the various NRCS programs, state by state. Many states have a fall (at the beginning of the Federal Fiscal Year) and spring ranking date for these EQIP programs, but please confirm your specific program dates.

PAYMENT SCENARIOS

CPS 823 is a comprehensive, multi-practice standard, and with that comes some complexity when determining the farmer cost share payments. There are about 20 different scenarios when working through the eligibility. If you are an "underserved producer" which includes beginning farmers (farming less than 10 years), a veteran (served in the armed forces or reserves), socially disadvantaged (American Indian, African American, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian or Hispanic), or a limited resource farmer (income level below the national poverty level for a family of four for the two previous years, or less than 50 percent of your county's median income household income for the two previous years), your payment will be 90% of the cost determined to do the practice by the NRCS. If you do not fit into these categories, your cost-shared payment will be 75% of the cost of the practice implementation.

PAYMENTS ADDRESSING INCOME FOREGONE AND FARM TYPES

In addition, the NRCS increases payment for crops being grown, when the Risk Management Agency has documented a drop in yield in that county for that crop. If you are growing something unusual, you may not be able to obtain that "income foregone" extra payment since the RMA has not researched that crop. Lastly, they have a variety of scenarios for small scale farms, simple crops with or without livestock, and complex crops with or without livestock. Small scale farms under five acres in size growing specialty crops have the higher payments per acre, especially when addressing multiple resource concerns and the RMA has statistics that during transition, there is a loss of income. If you have a simple crop rotation with no livestock, then your payments would be less than the small-scale specialty crop grower. The payments range between $2,100 to $500, $350, or $250 per acre. Remember when you sign up for many activities, you are contractually required to do them all, so don't overcommit just to get a higher payment.

The current federal investment in transitioning to organic is unprecedented. For anyone who is transitioning land to organic, the CPS 823 offers a wide variety of technical assistance and funds to help lessen the financial burden to implement organic practices on the land. If you, or any of your neighbors are considering beginning or expanding organic production, now is the time to apply! We would be happy to talk through your ideas with you before you call or contact your NRCS office. In addition to the NRCS offerings, there is also targeted transition support available through the Risk Management Agency and agricultural groups across the nation. If you are considering transition and need help getting connected with these groups, please call OFA's Farmer Helpline at 833-724-3834.

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

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