First Steps to Organic Certification

If you have thought about becoming a certified organic grower, you also have found that it can get quite complicated. Space here is not adequate to answer every question and I certainly am not an expert on the issue myself. However, as interest in organic production increases, I find myself learning a few things about it as well.

The National Organic Program Final Rule was developed by the USDDA to implement the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. The Final Rule contains an extensive list of definitions, organic production and processing standards, and the "National List" of allowed synthetic and prohibited natural substances. For those wanting to get into details of organic rules, go to http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop. In simplified terms, however, the following are requirements for crop farms only. Livestock and processing have other requirements.

National Organic Program standards require:

- 3 years (36 months prior to harvest) with no application of prohibited materials (no synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, or GMOs) prior to certification;
- distinct, defined boundaries for the operation;
- proactive steps to prevent contamination from adjoining land uses;
- implementation of an Organic System Plan, with proactive fertility management systems; conservation measures; and environmentally sound manure, weed, disease, and pest management practices;
- monitoring of the operation's management practices to assure compliance;
- use of natural inputs and/or approved synthetic substances on the National List, provided that proactive management practices are implemented prior to use of approved inputs;
- no use of prohibited substances;
- no use of genetically engineered organisms (GMOs), defined in the rule as "excluded methods";
- no use of sewage sludge or irradiation;
- use of organic seeds, when commercially available (must not use seeds treated with prohibited synthetic materials, such as fungicides);
- use of organic seedlings for annual crops;
- restrictions on the use of raw manure and compost;
- must maintain or improve the physical, chemical, and biological condition of the soil, minimize soil erosion, and implement soil building crop rotations;
- fertility management must not contaminate crops, soil, or water with plant nutrients, pathogens, heavy metals, or prohibited substances;
- maintenance of buffer zones, depending on risk of contamination;
- prevent commingling on split operations (the entire farm does not have to be converted to organic production, provided that sufficient measures are in place to segregate organic from non-organic crops and production inputs);
- no field burning to dispose of crop residues (may only burn to suppress disease or stimulate seed germination – flame weeding is allowed); and

- no residues of prohibited substances exceeding 5% of the EPA tolerance (certifier may require residue analysis if there is reason to believe that a crop has come in contact with prohibited substances or was produced using GMOs).

NOVEMBER EXTENSION CALENDAR

Organic Pesticides for Vegetables Class – Tuesday, November 16, 7 pm, Royston Public Library - whether you are working to become a certified organic grower or you are just interested in alternatives to traditional pesticides – Offered by the Franklin County Extension

Private Pesticide Applicators License Class – Tuesday, November 30, 6 pm, Franklin County Ag Center. For those producing ag products on your own land.