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### New Funding Opportunities for Organic Production in Iowa

By Kathleen Delate, Departments of Agronomy and Horticulture

Farmers interested in transitioning into organic agriculture or expanding their organic acres in production have a three-week period to sign up for government support beginning May 11. This new initiative from Congress, announced May 5, addresses the special "organic conversion assistance" component of USDA-NRCS-EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program).

Funding under the organic conversion section of the farm bill is capped at \$20,000 per farm per year; and \$80,000 per farm in any 6-year period. The sign-up period runs Monday, May 11 through Friday, May 29 at local NRCS offices.

Six core conservation practices (conservation crop rotation, cover cropping, integrated pest management, nutrient management, rotational grazing, and forage harvest management) are being made available to transitioning organic farmers on a nationwide basis. Each state may then also add a variety of "facilitating" conservation practices specific to the type of agriculture in their region.

Organic farming has the potential to provide strong environmental benefits for soil and water quality, climate change mitigation, and biodiversity. In recognition of this fact, Congress retooled the EQIP program in the 2008 Farm Bill, providing an overall EQIP priority for organic farming, as well as a specific EQIP subcomponent for farms converting in whole or in part to organic farming. The new initiative addresses the special organic conversion assistance component of EQIP in particular.

Organic farmers may opt to compete in this special pool with the tighter payment caps, or may opt instead to compete in the regular EQIP pool for which the 6-year cap is \$300,000. However, under the new initiative, farmers will receive higher payments, relative to conventional EQIP rates, for five of the six national core practices for organic conversion option. The higher payment rates reflect the higher management costs associated with the mandatory three-year organic transition period and the higher ongoing management costs associated with organic farming.

For more information, contact Larry Beeler, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, Iowa NRCS at (515)284-4355.

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