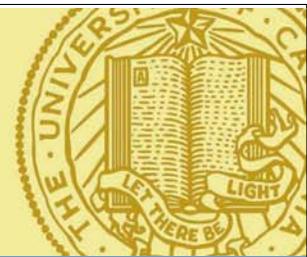


Transitioning to Organic Practices: A Marin County Case Study



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Introduction

Organic production continues to grow in Marin County as more conventional and first time growers transition to certified organic operations. Consumer demand is fueling increases in certified organic acreage, registered growers and gross value. In a recent survey conducted by UCCE Marin, 61 percent of growers surveyed indicated an interest in transitioning to organic practices. Responding to the grower interest in transitioning to organic practices, the Marin Agricultural Commissioner created a USDA-approved organic certification program in 2001, and Cooperative Extension created a new position, Organic and Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator in 2002. Farmed organic acreage in Marin has increased dramatically from 2000 to 2003. The overall picture for continued growth of organic agriculture is getting a further boost from more conventional farmers and ranchers who are interested in organic practices.

Methods

In 2002, Cooperative Extension received a grant from the Marin Community Foundation to survey the 186 agricultural producers in Marin County to assess current practices and needs (Rilla 2003). Ninety-five producers responded for a 51 percent response. A portion of the survey dealt with organic practice and transition. We drew on data from the Marin Agricultural Commissioner's Office, an accredited USDA certifier, which tracks and records organic certification, organic acreage and gross values in the annual county crop report.

UCCE offers workshops on organic and sustainable farming development from which evaluation survey results are recorded and analyzed. A bi-county (Marin and Sonoma) grass-fed and transitional organic beef workgroup has been meeting since 2002. UCCE staff also assisted local organic producers in developing a marketing and association incorporation plan.

Results

A total of 590 farmers have attended 13 UCCE *Grown in Marin* workshops since 2002 with a satisfaction rate of 88 percent. Eighty-one percent of the respondents indicated that they intended to use the knowledge gained in their operations. As shown in Figure 1, farmed organic acreage in Marin has increased from 357 acres in 2000 to 2,330 in 2003 (Marin Crop Report 2003). Certified organic growers increased from 23 in 2001 to 35 in 2004, an increase of 50 percent. Organic production (includes animal and crop production) gross values increased from \$3.2 million in 2000 to \$3.96 million in 2003 (see Figure 2). Membership in *Marin Organic*, a local organic farmers' guild and marketing label, increased from six in 2001 to 40 today. The efforts of the grass-fed workgroup, facilitated by UCCE and the Agricultural Commissioner's offices, have resulted in the first county certified grass-fed ordinance in California and, perhaps, the nation.

Fig. 1. Farmed organic acreage in Marin County from 1997 to 2003.*
*(Not all organic pasture was reported in the years 1997 to 2000.)

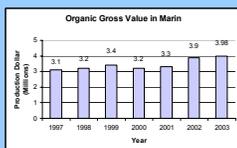
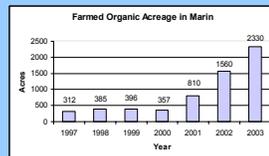
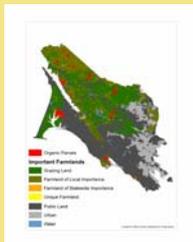


Fig. 2. Total organic gross value from registered organic growers in Marin.

Marin County Organic Map



This map of Marin County depicts the various land uses. The red areas represent land that has transitioned to organic agriculture.

Case Studies



Transition #1 – Lunny Ranch, Point Reyes

Historic "G Ranch" is located on the Point Reyes peninsula within the Point Reyes National Seashore. The Lunny family ranch is currently transitioning its 300 pair beef operation to organic, beginning with recent certification of 1,400 acres of prime coastal pasture. Three generations of the Lunny family are diversifying the entire operation, including the recent trial planting of four acres of organic heirloom green globe artichokes, cane berries, and mixed vegetables. The farm marketing plan includes an educational farm stand.

Transition #2 - Sartori Ranch, Tomales

The Sartori Ranch has been a family dairy for four generations. The dairy was closed in 2000 and converted to a replacement heifer operation. In 2002, Russ Sartori decided to transition eight acres of prime, fertile, alluvial pasture to organic strawberry production. The combination of cool coastal Mediterranean climate, lack of traditional pests and pathogens, and a close-by market hungry for premium quality organic produce has made the operation a profitable and successful example of transitional organic agriculture.



Transition #3 - Poncia Ranch, Fallon

Al Poncia runs a 900 acre cattle and sheep ranch in northern Marin County. Al has fostered a profitable and environmentally sound alliance with organic potato grower David Little by leasing certified pasture for farming. When the spring grass dries out, David plants his potatoes, harvests in 80 days, and then reseeds for winter cover. In the spring, the cows come back to graze the cover crop. David moves to another field, allowing for a three-year rotational program. This combination of rotational grazing, row crop production, and reseeding make for an ideal situation for both the farmer and the rancher.



Acknowledgements

Thanks to the assistance and participation of the Marin farmers and ranchers who completed the 2002 survey. Funding support comes from UC SAREP, the CE Heller Foundation, the Marin Community Foundation, and the County of Marin. Crop report statistics were generously supplied by Juan Hidalgo, Marin County Agricultural Commissioner's Office.