



# Helping to Institutionalize Organics as a Conservation Practice in Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)



**Western SARE PDP Project Title:** Field Course for Agricultural Professionals on the Common Goals and Strategies of USDA's National Organic Standards and Resource Conservation Programs **Project Number:** EW03-004

The purpose of this project was to help NRCS and RCD staff in California better understand organic practices and the common ground that exists between NRCS and RCD missions and organic agriculture.



Four NRCS workshops, 10 workshops for Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs).

## 1. TOOLS DEVELOPED FOR THE PROJECT

- Organic Jeopardy game (effective & fun review tool)
- Fieldwork on soils at organic farms
- Powerpoint presentations about organics and natural resource conservation of the Big Five (plant, animal, air, water, and soil)
- Soil quality demonstrations (organic vs. conventional soils—seeing is believing)
- NRCS-Organics Conservation Practices Cross-Compliance Chart (a.k.a. The Rosetta Stone)

Organic Rules and Regulations	Organic Soil Management	Organic Cropping Practices	Organic Pest Management	Organic Miscellaneous
100 pt	100 pt	100 pt	100 pt	100 pt
200 pt	200 pt	200pt	200 pt	200 pt
300 pt	300 pt	300 pt	300 pt	300 pt
400 pt	400 pt	400 pt	400 pt	400 pt
500 pt	500 pt	500 pt	500 pt	500 pt

## 3. OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT

- Trained 396 NRCS and RCD personnel in California about organic certification and practices.
- Development of a NRCS/California Organics Cost Share under the IPM Practice Standard (EQIP) which pays organic growers \$100/acre (up to \$10,000) to underwrite transition costs.
- NCAT invited to become a member of the NRCS Soil Quality Cadre
- Ongoing relationships with NRCS at federal, state and county levels.
- Additional NRCS training (post project) in 2007 for 30 CA staff

**NRCS-Organics Conservation Practices Cross-Compliance Chart**  
Examples from California NRCS Field Office Technical Guide and USDA's National Organic Program (NOP) Standards

Production Practice	NOP Final Rule 7 CFR Part 205 Section and Practice Standard	wording in NOP Final Rule (Key phrases from the National Organic Standards)	NRCS Practice Standard (Name and Number)	Definition/Purposes (Highlights from the practice standards)
Cover Crops	205.203 Soil Fertility and Plant Nutrient Management	The producer must select and implement tillage and cultivation practices that maintain or improve the physical, chemical and biological condition of the soil, manage soil fertility through rotations, cover crops, manure or improve soil organic matter.	340 Cover Crop	Seasonal cover to reduce erosion, increase soil organic matter, manage excess nutrients, promote biological nitrogen fixation, increase biodiversity, suppress weeds, manage soil moisture.

This is a 5 page document



## 2. APPROACHES OF THE PROJECT

- Build relationships at all NRCS levels
- This happens *before and after* project is completed
- Understand NRCS priorities & relate them to Organic Production Systems
- Educate NRCS staff with scientific documentation about organics
- Provide hands-on demos & field work on organic farms whenever possible
- Understand other states' approaches to cost-sharing organics
- Make NRCS the "good guys"

### Effects of organic and conventional farming on beneficial invertebrates (review 41 studies)

Animal group	Abundance – number of individuals		Species diversity: species number			
	ORG > CON	ORG = CON	ORG > CON	ORG = CON	ORG > CON	ORG = CON
Earthworms	17	1	4	3		
Carabids	13	2	6	2		
Spider	6	1		0		
Diplopods	4	0	1	1		
Bugs	2	1	1	1		
Mites	2	0	1	1		
Total	44	5	13	8		

ORG > CON: Better performance in organic farming  
 ORG = CON: No significant difference  
 ORG < CON: Better in conventional farming



NRCS can come to the aid of farmers transitioning to organics by providing cost share.  
 NRCS can help support a market-driven, consumer-supported, conservation program.

EQIP Forms

**Environmental & Cost Efficiency Score Summary**

Factor	Resource Concern - Environmental Benefit	Maximum Points	Earned Points
1 National Resource Concerns (Pages 3-4)		120	
3 Local Resource Concerns (If Applicable)		90	
<i>Select and complete only one factor from the following sections.</i>			
2a Irrigated Cropland SWAPA Resource Concerns		90	
2b Dryland Pasture/Hayland SWAPA Resource Concerns		90	
2c Dryland Cropland SWAPA Resource Concerns		90	
2d Grand Land SWAPA Resource Concerns		90	
2e Non-industrial Forest SWAPA		90	
2f Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations SWAPA		90	

**Total Environmental Score: Environmental Points / Total Possible Points**

**Cost Efficiency Score Summary**

Cost Efficiency Score	Environmental Score	Total Estimated Project Cost*	Primary Practice Enterprise**	Number of Acres	Cost per Acre
+	+	\$	X	100	\$/acre

**Total Practice Score**

**2a Irrigated Cropland** Client Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Practice	12 points	6 points	3 points	0 points
1 EQIP Contact address	12 points	6 points	3 points	0 points
2 EQIP contact address	12 points	6 points	3 points	0 points
3 EQIP contact address	12 points	6 points	3 points	0 points
4 EQIP contact address	12 points	6 points	3 points	0 points
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