

Organic Initiative Working Group

December 13, 9-11 am

Meeting was attended by Julie Elmore, Josh Spencer, Terri Ruch and Dana Ashford-Kornburger (SO, NRCS), Karen McSwain (CFSA Organic Liaison), Jeana Myers (NCDA Soil Testing Lab), Lisa Fine (NCDA, ACSP), Keith Baldwin (N C A & T), Mary Wilks (Crop Consultant), Themis Stone (Statesville FO, NRCS)

Meeting started at 9 am with a brief thank you and welcome to the attendees. Also the group was reminded of the purpose of the Working Groups (discussion, ideas, and constructive feedback).

The meeting attendees each provided a brief introduction to the group.

Brief Review of the NRCS Organic Initiative

This review was given by Dana. In summary, the purpose of the organic initiative is to reach out to non-traditional farmers. Organic farmers across the country can apply for cost share assistance in EQIP and there is a batch of money that is set aside for the funding of these applications. The Organic Initiative covers three groups of organic farmers: farmers transitioning to organic, certified organic farmers, and those that are “exempt” from certification due to the dollar value of their sales. One reason for the initiative is to make sure small farms can get funded, since there has been concern that some of the ranking criteria of traditional EQIP leans toward large conventional farms. Organic Initiative applications are ranked in their own pool. Organic farms can apply for any of our programs (EQIP, WHIP, CRP, CSP, etc); this just gives them a special pool to compete with each other for certain practices.

Unofficial data for EQIP in North Carolina contracted practices and dollar values for FY2011 were provided to the group. There were 49 contracts funded in 2011 totaling approximately \$400K+. Of those 49 contracts, 32% went to operations that were classified as certified (includes certified and exempt).

The most often contracted practices were: #1 Seasonal High Tunnel Systems (SHTS) which was included in 33 contracts, #2 Conservation Crop Rotation (which includes two different scenarios: organic soil quality is a rotation that enhances the soil quality and increases the soil conditioning index and a sod based rotation), #3 Cover Crops We hope to see an increase in the use of this practice with the addition of new scenarios this FY, #4: Critical area planting to address erosion concerns (most, if not all of these were used to address erosion around SHTS), and #5 Nutrient Management, this was contracted to pay towards soil sampling.

Other practices that were contracted last year included: field borders, grassed waterways, fencing, access roads, pest management, brush management, access control (fencing for livestock exclusion), mulching, and prescribed grazing. These are practices that address resource concerns that are found on all types of farms, not just organic.

As far as money associated with the contracts, approximately \$200K was used for SHTS, with the average SHTS receiving cost share of \$4-5K. The average contract value in the Organic Initiative was \$8500.

Review of the CAP – Conservation Activity Plan concept was covered. We fund these contracts for organic farmers to assist them with identifying future conservation needs as they transition to organic.

Karen: She has heard negative feedback from folks trying to become a TSP. NRCS changed their main website and changed the Tech Reg website, but no one has gone in and changed the training requirements or courses in AgLearn. If the modules listed on Tech Reg don't match up with what is offered in AgLearn, then it takes twice as long to try and match up what you are supposed to be doing. I would also recommend a manual for what TSP's are supposed to be doing and where we go to get the information. A listing of what modules in AgLearn that I have to be taken. The lingo in some of the information is hard to match as well. Names of courses, practices, etc are different. Learning RUSLE 2 and Win-PST. Where can TSPs get training on these tools? (ACTION ITEM: Dana will follow up with Robert to see that the discrepancies are sent to NHQ; completed 12/19/11 Robert sent email to NHQ TSP POC)

Josh: Organic is being transitioned to the National Level. At some point in the near future, the TSP certification process will be done completely at the national level. One of the reasons is so everybody (all TSPs) are doing the same thing to get certified and to have consistency across the states.

Dana: We do teach RUSLE and RUSLE2 twice a year as a component of the Nutrient Management Training (offered by NCSU). We've also talked about hosting "boot camps" for TSP's. But the general expectation of TSPs are that they are crop professionals or engineers already who can self study as needed. We are not to the point where we know how to train TSPs (what do they need, what is the best format, do we offer this or will National). Our own staff and partners are lagging in their understanding of RUSLE 2. They aren't using it as much as they should be doing in some offices. We will be rolling out more training in 2012 and continue to try to offer what is requested. Some states have invited TSP's to participate in their version of Basics of Conservation Planning Courses. This course walks a new planner through everything. How do you do the inventory on the farm and use of the evaluation tools once you've identified a resource concern?

Keith: Be sure to announce the trainings if/when they happen.

Dana: Yes, we always send things out via our website and through the District listserv. We have one TSP in the state for the Transition to Organic CAP. Robert Horton is the contact for anyone interested and for specific TSP questions and concerns. We will share Karen's concerns with him. But do note that the process is becoming nationalized, so there will be changes occurring in the near future. (ACTION ITEM: Dana will send out to the group the FY2012 ENTSC Webinar Schedule; completed 12/19/11 via email)

Highlight of Organic EQIP changes for FY2012 (provided by Dana, Josh, and Terri)

Dana: Long term no-till will require implementation of at least 3 years under the Organic Initiative compared to 5 years in regular EQIP.

Dana: Green manure cover crop practice scenario added. This practice resulted from last April's meeting and the request for us to investigate using cover crops to reduce nematode populations in soils (and cost share on this practice). Since the effectiveness of the green manure on nematode populations depends on crop productivity (biomass produced) and the variety of cover crop along with other factors, we did not have the science to know this was in fact a viable option in North Carolina. However having added this scenario as a cover crop option, farmers can select this as a method of "control" and also a soil building practice.

Josh: Practice guidelines provide technical guidelines for a specific practice scenario and provide parameters that once satisfied allow for program payment. You'll see on practice guides at the certification section there

is a note that states the standard is met as well as the technical requirements of the practice (as set forth on the guideline). The Organic Green Manure practice does have a practice standard (Cover Crop). We are trying to develop a few more cover crop scenarios. States can develop organic scenarios. New ones we hoped to have for 2012 were somewhat adjusted when our practice payment schedule for EQIP was being regionalized. We have not seen the final version for payment cost list. This lets us verify that practices are actually on there. Practice scenarios are being regionalized as well. We are paired up with TN, VA, WV, KY. States got together to develop scenarios, with a maximum limit of 8 per practice. **(ACTION ITEM: Josh will send out to the group the FY2012 practice guides and a link to eFOTG.)**

Josh: Hedgerow practice developed to protect organic crops from chemical spray drift. Vegetative hedgerow established in organic or transition buffer zones where chemical drift may affect the organic crops.

Josh: Mulching scenario also developed. We have reinforced to the field that they should remind farmers to verify with their certifiers the mulch they would like to use is ok.

Josh: Basic Nutrient Management Strategy on Organic Cropland was developed as a result of Karen's discussions and recommendation. This came directly out of the working group meeting in April. N, P, and K are included. The only thing about this one is NRCS has a national nutrient management strategy that requires crop rotation and cover crop requirements. This is explained in the practice guidance that was developed.

Josh: Organic soil phosphorus soil management practice also is available. This is important with the heavy use of poultry litter for organic fertilization that goes on in NC. We ask that people use the phosphorus loss planning tool (PLAT) and also to determine the composition of the fertilizer they use on organic cropland.

Josh: Integrated Pest Management for cropland for organic is available. Our standard is mis-named by being called IPM. It is really pesticide risk mitigation. When you talk about trying to apply this to organic it gets a bit tricky. If there are resource concerns from pest suppression on organic, we can identify this. Erosion from excessive tillage for weed suppression. We are trying to come up with ways to incorporate organic into this. We are still trying to iron out the guidance.

Josh: Other conventional farm practices are also applicable, such as legumes/small grain mix which can be a magic bullet when you talk about soil fertility and weed suppression concerns. When the payment schedule comes out all practices with vegetation establishment will have an organic seed payment rate (whenever applicable).

Terri: provided a highlight for Organic Updates for Structural Practices. Some changes were made to accommodate organic operations. FY2012 offerings are extensive in the Organic Initiative. For example related to grazing, there are livestock exclusion practices and prescribed grazing offered under the Organic Initiative. No changes from traditional to organic for several of the structural practices, such as water and erosion control practices; terraces, structures for water control, diversions, water ways, water and sediment control basin. There are also some additional engineering practices: microirrigation system (not sure we have all the answers, but there are a number of scenarios for microirrigation. The producer must have an irrigation system in place and used 2 of the last 5 years to be eligible for any irrigation cost share). Question about many small organic farms that have portable hose systems that are used to get a bed/patch to germinate, but then may be moved or used on an as-needed basis (not a permanent irrigation system). Animal mortality

facility (gasifier, incinerator, composting facility). Composting facility is for treating ag waste material it must be stabilized prior to utilization to reduce leachate. We don't have answers for those producers bringing in composting materials. We are trying to be proactive and solve situations as we go.

Discussion and Input:

Karen: In FY2013 all conservation practices will be regionalized? Right now is a key time for those of us in the organic community to provide input. What are the resource concerns that organic farmers are faced with and what are the conservation standards that helps address those concerns? Having worked with the EQIP program for a year, we basically just picked up conservation standards that are designed for large scale production and see how they fit into organic. I think it would be better to take a step back and say, is there a need to develop new conservation standards and job standards. And see if we can't make some better fit.

Karen: There is a lot of interest from Organic Farmers interested in energy audits.

Karen: There should be increased outreach to farmers. North Carolina's farmer numbers have decreased a little bit. We would like to get our numbers back up, especially in the Organic and Transitioning to Organic. I think because \$200K was spent on high tunnels, SHTS will have its own initiative (It does). NRCS can rank in both SHTS and Organic pools. Both are national pools.

Jeana: Interested in looking more at composting and animal waste. Zinc is a big concern with compost: it can build up zinc levels in soils. Encourage farmers to have soils tested and/or ensure that there are good compost resources. I don't know how broad this problem is, but herbicide resistant weeds and persistent pesticides being found in hay and showing up in other areas. (Mary Wilks noted--Chemicals are so persistent that they are making it through the cow and where cow paddies were located on the soil plants are not growing in the future crop.) Plant tissue sampling may be of some use (and is available from NCDA lab). Not many farmers are taking advantage of this from the lab. Nitrogen management in general with cover crops is not well established (credit for N). We (NCDA) will be simplifying our reports to see if we can make our summaries easier to read. In NC soil samples are free. Just getting people doing basic testing would be an accomplishment.

Josh: Reminded everyone about CSP – Conservation Stewardship Program which has enhancement activities. Farmers can sign up for enhancements that go above and beyond our standards. Producers can get payments if they do those. Takes people that are already doing a good job and asks them to go above and beyond.

Themis: I see a need for more P management and we should encourage the available practice. Litter is cheap and plentiful, but many farmers do not realize they may be over-applying P. We should encourage soil testing and using legumes when they don't have a phosphorus need.

Keith: #1 problem for organic growers is weed management (mostly managed by tillage). Mulches may offer some solution. Somewhat controversial among Organic growers on whether or not that is a sound practice. Certainly reduces passes through the field. Another practice that is gaining use is the double cropping of plastic mulch, white washing black plastic for second crop. Keith also noted the use of flame weeders, vegetative mulches, use of continuous cover crops, strip tillage and residue management for vegetables (transplants).

Josh: We do have a crop roller scenario (under 340-cover crop). This can help facilitate strip cropping transplant vegetables, but we don't currently have anything directly for strip till and transplanting (residue management). This may be worth investigating for the next program year.

Keith: equipment exists for transplanting into residue, but it is really big and our farmers tend to be really small. The interpretation sometimes doesn't work. There needs to be strip till instead of a no till particularly in the Piedmont.

Karen: Irrigation Water Management is something that would be of interest to a lot of farmers. Terri talked about the IWM CAP and implementation options. Karen also brought up the \$20,000 annual cost share limit under the Organic pools, this can be a potential problem with composters or other structural practices.

Thank you all so much for your input and discussion. There will be some organic training for our staff and partners going on in NC January 17-19 (3 locations throughout state). This would be a great training for potential TSPs. Next spring we will follow up with a field high tunnel layout and design. **(ACTION ITEM: Dana will send out to the group the NC NRCS Organic Training Info; completed 12/13/11 via email)**