

OVERVIEW OF CALIFORNIA ORGANIC ALFALFA PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

California organic alfalfa production can be economically feasible. Production in a monoculture is possible but organic alfalfa can also be very beneficial in a crop rotation, soil enhancement program. Many producers find compost the most beneficial soil amendment and harvest hay early for pest control. Producers find the certification process difficult but once familiar with it, attainable. Consumer demand of organic products has stimulated rapid growth of the organic industry over the past ten years. This has been reflected in the doubling of sales revenues over multiple years for organic feed and dairy products.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to overview the production of organic alfalfa in California. Cultural practices, cost, marketing, certification, and a brief summary of the organic feed and dairy industry will be discussed.

Production of organic hay deals with the same issues as conventional hay yet uses a different set of tools to solve problems. Organic producers have the same fertilization, disease and pest concerns as conventional producers, yet must deal with the issues differently, which often requires non-traditional thinking.

The cost of producing organic alfalfa differs dramatically from the cost of conventional production because high priced commercial fertilizers and chemicals are not used. Yield and quality can be effected by this, but are offset by premiums of ten to twenty percent.

Certification of organic alfalfa is a time consuming process. Records are required, rules are to be followed and integrity must be maintained. Taking care of all these things is possible but requires a strong commitment from the producer.

The organic feed and dairy industries are servicing a niche market for organic milk and milk products. This “niche” market nets 500 million dollars in annual sales at only one and a half percent of total milk and milk product sales. Growth in organic feed and dairies in California over the past ten years has been remarkable.

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PROCEDURES

A list of several questions were assembled and distributed to a number of organic alfalfa growers. The growers surveyed were a network of producers that local organic dairymen knew of. Production questions ranged from new planting and seedbed preparations to pest control and fertilization needs. Cost, marketing, and premiums were also addressed, as well as what type of quality organic dairymen expected. Producers were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of producing organic hay, and what transition problems or obstacles they faced at start-up. Additionally, organic growers were asked what other crops they produce and how those crops fit in with their operation.

RESULTS

A person has to really want to make organic production work to be successful at it. Producers expressed that they were all willing to try different methods to make organic production work. For example, they established new plantings by pre-irrigating, turning weed sprouts under and then planting, and rotating crops with others that were conducive to a weed free bed (i.e. sweet potatoes). Producers also stressed the importance of soil fertility and timing of the first irrigation to establish a strong stand from the beginning, crowding out weeds early. Weed control in an established stand was accomplished by mowing borders, flaming, timely harvest and separation of less desirable hay from higher quality areas. Many practices reflect what conventional producers do in lean times.

Both pest and weed control rely on proper soil fertility to prevent invasion. Growers tried to establish strong, vigorous, stress free plants, through proper soil fertility and moisture, to crowd out weeds and deter invasion by pests. Dust control, beneficial insects, repellants (garlic, pepper, fish etc.), and close monitoring were also pest control tools growers used. They also had the option to harvest early. Location of their fields was also crucial. It was important that their fields were isolated from other fields or at least not next to poorly managed fields. Pest management programs that strive to reduce pesticides are also a helpful resource and widely available on the Internet.

Organic fertilizers are becoming more available as the size of farms increase and demand intensifies. Fertilizer must be approved by certifying agents and may be quite costly. Most producers seem to rely on properly composted material that adds proper nutrients and humus to the soil.

Most producers felt that they could receive a ten to fifteen percent premium for their organic hay. Buyers of organic hay in general were not as critical because organic hay is less available. Dairy producers were the most numerous buyers. Racehorse, organic beef and lamb producers were also buyers. Some producers actually started producing organically before a market was established because they felt so strongly about organic production.

Other producers found the market prior to production because they were attracted to the niche and meeting the needs of that market. The elimination of costly chemicals seems to be the economic advantage in organic hay production.

Major obstacles for growers in producing organically are not only adjusting to the physical changes from the way they previously farmed, but also mentally thinking about farming in an entirely different way. One of the biggest obstacles organic farmers face is the certification

process. They have to deal with a ton of paper work, figure out what materials they can use, and prepare for inspection of their farms and processing units (balers must be cleaned before used on organic fields). They have learned that they can no longer farm the way their neighbors do and that they are watched carefully by critical eyes. Additionally there are no silver bullets in organic farming. The system relies on building soil fertility, and problems take seasons rather than weeks to alleviate. Organic growers truly have to be good and patient “stewards of the land”.

CONCLUSION

Organic farming became one of the fastest growing segments of U.S. agriculture during the 1990's. Acres of certified organic hay and silage grew 51 percent during this period. Although becoming very popular and demand increasing substantially many conventional growers remain sceptical. Organic hay producer in California in general started producing because they believed in a more natural, sustainable way of farming and then made it work economically. To only farm organically for economic reasons would make it very difficult because there are many hurdles to overcome. On a large scale, organic hay should be grown in climates that have less insect pressure (i.e. northern California, Nevada). In regions of high conventional acreage, organic alfalfa would work well in a crop rotation with other high-income organic products.