OREGON TILTH®

TRANSITIONING TO ORGANIC

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

AGRI-STAR FARMS

NORTH POWDER, OREGON

"The exposure to chemicals is tremendous here," says Doug Lewis, owner of Agri-Star Farms. In the summertime, many neighboring farms are sprayed with pesticides weekly by planes, exposing farm workers and residents via wind drift. Doug was motivated to transition to organic production, committing himself to reduction of chemical use in this small rural community.

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WHAT STARTED AS A CHALLENGE, TRANSITIONING SMALL PLOTS OF CONVENTIONAL LAND IN 1999, WILL RESULT IN NEARLY 800 ACRES OF CERTIFIED ORGANIC LAND BY OREGON TILTH IN 2015.

Initially, fields were fallow and relatively easy to transition. Over time, Doug increased expansion to organic farmland, adding areas previously dedicated to alfalfa production that had few weeds and better than expected soil fertility.

Doug believes that organic limits exposure to chemicals, a healthier option for rural communities and consumers. As an organic potato producer working side-by-side with conventional farmers, Doug sees firsthand why the Environmental Working Group includes potatoes on its 'Dirty Dozen' list – a guideline for avoiding fruits and vegetables with the highest levels of chemical pesticide residues.

Throughout the process, Doug faced several challenges common to transitional organic producers. For example, he continues to learn about weed control options in organic systems with limited options. In fact, when offering advice to producers considering transitioning land to organic, he says, "It is critical to understand weed science."

For support during the transition, Doug contacted USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to inquire about the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative. He has worked with NRCS for the past four years and received both financial and technical assistance along the way. NRCS staff were enthusiastic helpers, providing support on several issues including cover crops and fertility management. The financial assistance helps offset the lack of an organic premium in the market during transitional years.

Providing adequate fertility for his crops—organic barley, wheat, oats, potatoes and yellow mustard seed—was also a challenge when transitioning to organic. Chicken manure is readily available but expensive, and repeated applications can lead to excessive levels of phosphorus and potassium in the soil. With NRCS support, Doug is now exploring nutrient cycling with legumes such as alfalfa and using longer crop rotations to provide needed nitrogen without increasing other nutrients. Innovative rotation planning also provides benefits such as weed suppression and reduction of tillage.

NRCS works with producers on a range of practices integral to organic systems such as crop rotation, cover cropping, nutrient management, composting facilities, wildlife and pollinator habitats, mulching and grazing systems. In addition to technical assistance and based on eligibility, producers may receive funding to cover up to 90 percent of the cost of implementing each practice. Growers interested in learning more about opportunities to use EQIP as well as other financial and technical assistance, should contact their local NRCS field office.

BRIEDE FAMILY VINEYARDS

WINCHESTER, VIRGINA

Paul and Loretta Briedé of Winchester, Virginia are dedicated consumers and advocates of organic food production. Although they owned farmable land for years, it remained idle or used as horse pasture. Loretta said, "We had land, had a tractor and wanted to do something with it." So, the two self-described amateur wine lovers decided to transition the land to certified organic grape production. And in 2013, they established Briedé Family Vineyards, Virginia's second organic vineyard.

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BY AVOIDING HARMFUL CHEMICALS AND FOCUSING ON BUILDING HEALTHY SOILS, THE BRIEDE FAMILY BELIEVES THEY WILL GET A HEALTHIER, BETTER TASTING CROP.

The Briedés are committed to organic production, which Loretta says, "It's not only better for people, but also for the plants." The Briedés had never grown grapes, but learned by starting with a test plot and attending seminars at Virginia Tech.

"Growing grapes has been one of the hardest things we have done," says Loretta. Establishing the vineyard was a monumental task; thousands of hours went into planting 1,500 grape plants by hand over two acres. The Briedés didn't anticipate the scope of the work and had difficulty in finding help. Weeds were another big labor intensive challenge, including ongoing maintenance to keep the vineyard floor clear.

Matching passion with practice, Paul and Loretta were eager to establish habitat for beneficial insects to help manage vineyard pests. They contacted the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and learned about the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative. NRCS support through EQIP assisted the Briedés removal of nonnative plants along the edges of fields. Funding also supported creation of a half-acre area of native warm season grasses and forbs. providing prime habitat for pollinators and natural enemies of crop pests. Loretta says, "NRCS was really helpful and knowledgeable about what needed to be planted." The habitat plantings also helped them to meet several National Organic Program (NOP) requirements, including one that specifies that producers must maintain or improve the natural resources of their operation.

In August 2014, Briedé Family Vineyards had their first organic inspection and will be certified by Pennsylvania Certified Organic. Their ability to transition to organic production was accelerated since the land had not been managed with prohibited materials in over three years.

Looking forward, the Briedés plan to expand the vineyard in small increments of up to one acre at a time as they learn and the initial workload lessens. They expect to harvest a small crop of grapes and begin winemaking in their third year of production.

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GRINNELL HERITAGE FARM

GRINNELL, IOWA

In 2007, Andrew Dunham moved to central Iowa to become a 5th generation Iowa farmer on Grinnell Heritage Farm. The farmland has been in his family for over 150 years. Andrew's education in ecology and experience from working with subsistence farmers in the Peace Crops in East Africa furthered his passion for organic farming. "No debate," he says. "I would either be an organic farmer or not a farmer at all. I have no interest in farming conventionally."

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ANDREW IS STRONGLY COMMITTED TO NOT USING HARMFUL CHEMICALS ON THE FARM. AS A FARM WORKER, HE DOES NOT WANT THE EXPOSURE TO CHEMICAL PESTICIDES.

He and co-workers harvest many vegetables by hand. Andrew emphasizes he doesn't want any farm staff to spend hours each day handling produce treated with chemicals that could put them at risk for cancer or other diseases.

When Andrew and his family arrived at the farm, they began to transition the land from conventionally farmed corn and soybeans to producing organic vegetables, flowers and herbs. During the transition period, the Dunhams faced a steep learning curve around organic methods that required patience. Initially, the soil was in poor health; it was compacted, tight and prone to crusting over. Now, Andrew can see real results of how organic farming practices have revitalized the farm. "Life is coming back into the system," he said.

Andrew encountered another issue common to new organic producers: weeds. The farm had a substantial bank of weed seeds present and it took time to gain control. When farming organically, Andrew says, "You need to be patient; you can't just try for one year. It takes several years to create a successful management system."

For support during the transition, Andrew contacted the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to inquire about the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative. Through the program, he received both financial and technical assistance on a range of farming practices such as cover crops, crop rotations and nutrient management. The program provided Andrew with essential resources to manage the transition period. And applying these farming practices have dramatically improved the health of Grinnell Heritage Farm's soil. Visitors to the farm have told him that a stroll in the fields feels like walking on pillows.

For Andrew, one of the biggest benefits of working with NRCS was the opportunity to plant native shrubs for wildlife habitat immediately. He was interested in planting habitat, but would have been forced to wait several years to increase farm sales and afford the investment. With NRCS's financial support, Andrew planted habitat areas during the transition period and saw immediate benefits. After a few years without any sightings, he has documented the reappearance of snakes – in fact,

Andrew keeps a running list of encounters. "This year we saw six snakes so far," he said. "Just to be clear, I want snakes. They take care of rodents and are wonderful to have on the farm." Andrew directly attributes the return of these slithering farm hands because of the wildlife habitat planted with NRCS support.

After his positive experiences, Andrew is encouraging more organic producers to work with NRCS. He also hosts farm tours for NRCS employees to learn more about organic production. Andrew believes helping increase NRCS staff's knowledge and comfort with organic production supports positive working relationships with organic farmers.

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