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Organic Farming Continues to Expand

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When I worked on an organic farm in Okanogan County during the 1970s, organic farming represented a very small sliver of American agriculture. It was not clearly defined beyond the preference for natural techniques and materials and the avoidance of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. Soil and its organic matter were central concerns. Information on organic production was limited and often anecdotal. All of this relegated organic farmers to the fringe of Washington agriculture.

Mainstreaming Organics

Much has changed in the ensuing decades. Organic farming and processing methods have been codified by laws and through various certification organizations. In 1985, the Washington State Legislature passed the Organic Food Products Act, which led to the establishment of the Organic Food Program. This program, begun in 1988 within the Washington State Department of Agriculture, certifies organic products within Washington State. Across the country, demand for organic foods grew steadily during the 1980s and accelerated to a 20-30% increase per year

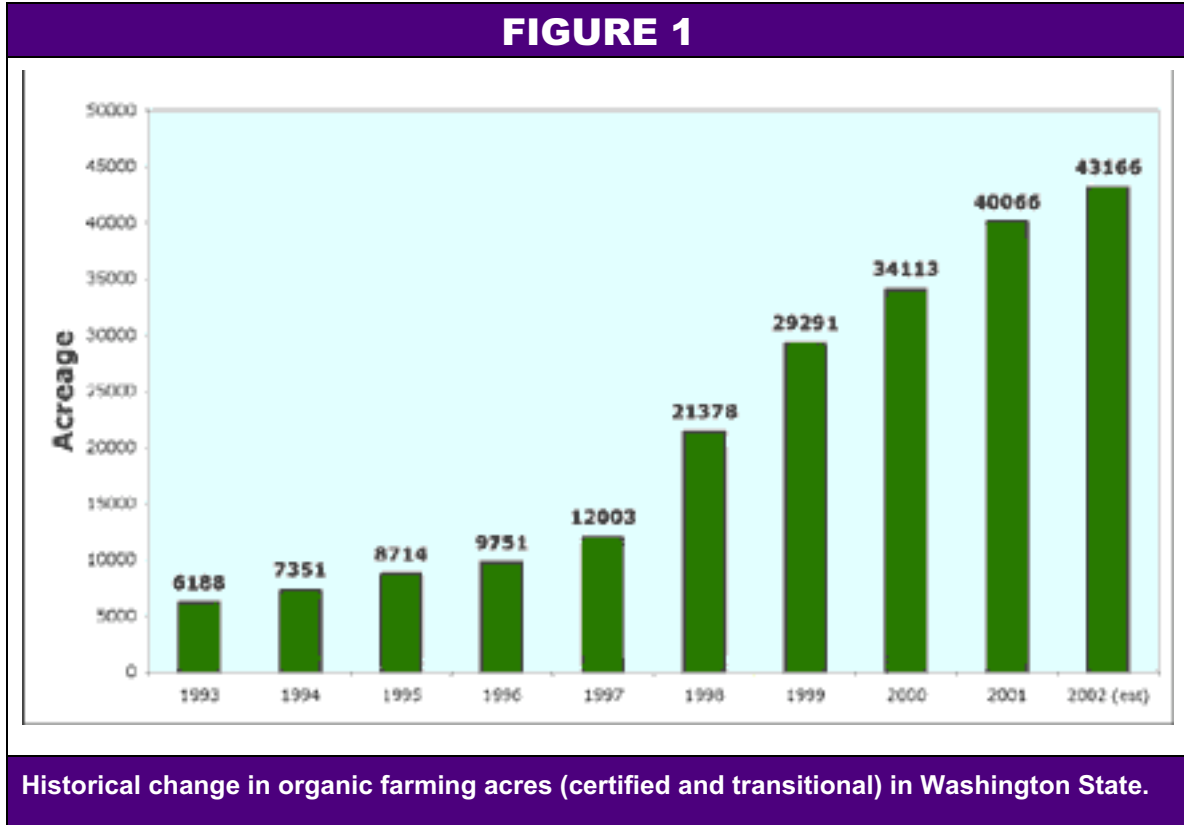


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during the 1990s. This market growth was accompanied by an increase in organic farm acreage nationally.

Washington State experienced more than a six-fold increase in organic acreage in less than a decade (Fig. 1). Organic farming has proven to be a biologically viable approach to farming and in many cases a more profitable one for growers. I remember when Earl Butz, former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, asked, “Which half of the world will starve if we switch to organic farming?” It looks like that was the wrong question.

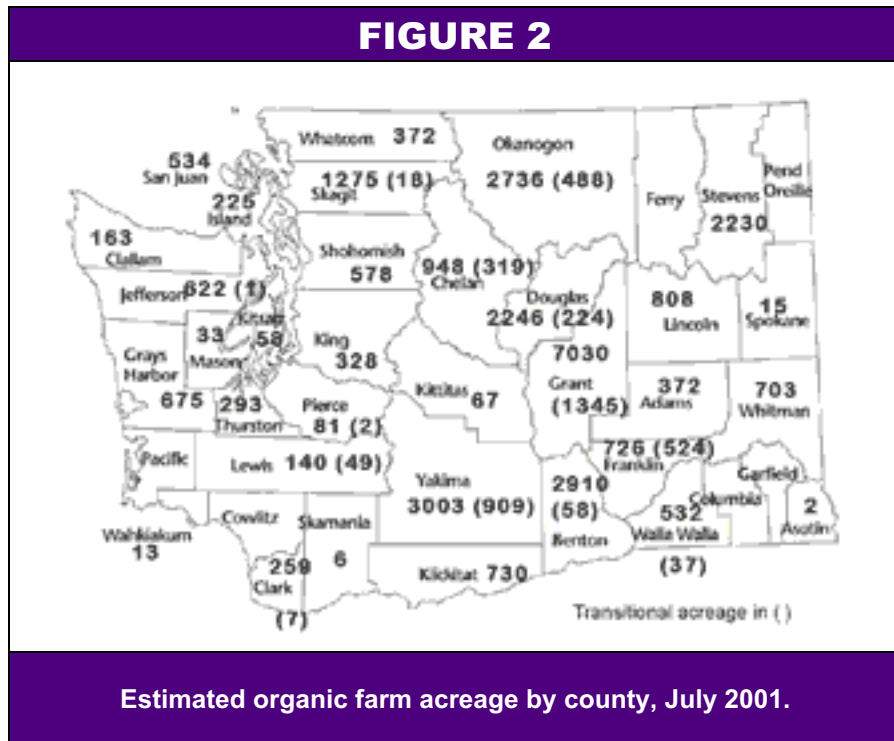


With expanded production, organic agriculture has moved into the mainstream. Many farms and food businesses ventured into organic to test the waters and to diversify their markets. Organic farms are no longer primarily small acreage, labor-intensive operations run by people with a particular philosophical view of agriculture. Large-scale, highly mechanized organic farms are

present in Washington and have increased the demand for products, support, and services (e.g., research, extension, promotion, marketing).

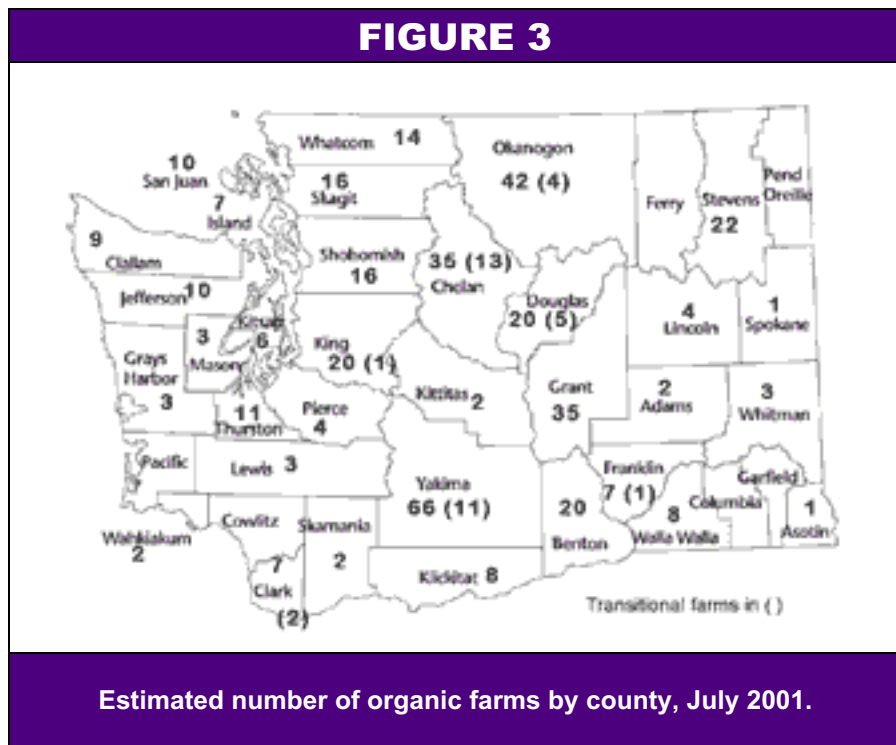
Washington's Organic Sector

Growers and others in the organic sector have indicated the need for a publicly available picture of the changes in organic farming. Since Washington State Agricultural Statistics Service currently does not break out organic farming as a separate category, I recently compiled some statistics that illustrate the status of organic farming today. Figure 2 portrays the reported acreage of organic farms by county as of July 2001, while Figure 3 shows the number of farms with certified land or in transition status. These numbers only reflect those farms certified by the WSDA Organic Food Program. While this program conducts nearly all the certification within the state, it does not include exempt growers (sales <\$5000/year) or growers that do not rely on certification for their local, direct marketing.



The majority of organic production in the state is located in the irrigated areas of central Washington. Grant County has the largest amount of certified acreage, while Yakima County

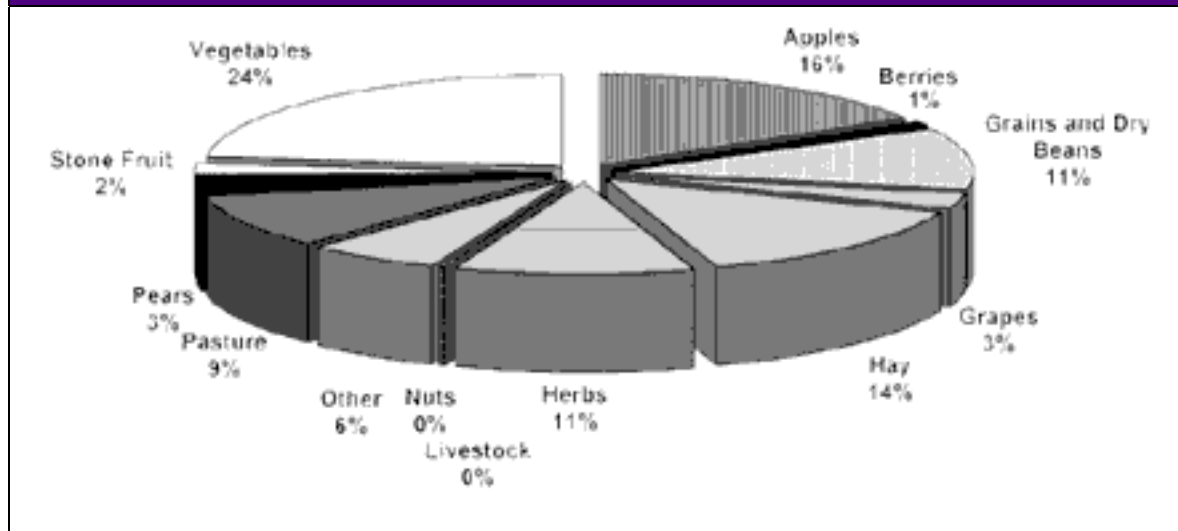
has the largest number of certified organic growers. Organic farming is thriving in western Washington as well. In 1988 there were 33 certified organic farms in western Washington; today there are 142. Acreage is smaller in western Washington, but an expanding number of farmers are doing quite well there, many utilizing direct marketing outlets.



Which Crops Are Going Organic?

The proportion of certified organic acreage in the state by crop type is illustrated in Figure 4, with vegetables, tree fruit, herbs, and forages as the leading segments.

FIGURE 4



Proportion of organic acreage by crop type, 2001.

These statistics indicate two very different organic farming sectors in the state. Larger scale farming in eastern Washington accounts for most of the organic acreage (82% of certified acres, 98% of transition acres) and a majority (66%) of organic growers. Average organic acreage per farm is about 92 acres in eastern Washington compared to 40 acres in western Washington. If the exempt growers were included, the numbers for western Washington would certainly increase. It will be important to understand the differing research and education needs of these two groups of organic growers.

For some crops, organic acreage is a minor factor. Organic grain production in the dryland regions of eastern Washington, for example, remains a challenge; participation there is small.

In other crops, organic acreage is now a significant portion of total production. For example, in 2001 there were about 6500 acres of certified organic apples in Washington, representing about 4% of the state's total apple acreage. Organic pears on 1300 acres represented about 5% of total pear acreage. Washington's organic apple acreage represents about 38% of the organic

apple acreage in the United States and 21% of worldwide acreage. However, the dramatic expansion of organic apple production here and around the world is increasing competition and changing market dynamics, especially the availability of organic fruit from the Southern Hemisphere. Some varieties have experienced price declines as growth in supply exceeded the growth in demand.

Grower Perspectives

Based on recent studies from Washington State University, an organic apple orchard can produce the same yield and quality as a conventional orchard at a 10-15% higher cost. Premium prices for organic apples generally lead to higher net returns. With ongoing research, cost savings are anticipated in the near future, especially for fruit thinning. And as conventional apple production shifts to more IPM and biological control, the difference between organic and conventional will be less clear.

Growers have several motivations to try organic farming. With low prices for most farm commodities, certified organic products may offer increased returns. Organic farming can be viewed as a risk management strategy, diversifying markets, reducing the impact of loss of pesticides and other regulatory changes, and reducing liability for worker exposure or contamination. In addition, recent changes in Federal farm policy may provide funds to growers using environmental conservation practices, such as organic farming. While research results are inconclusive about the influence of organic farming on the quality of food products, growers and consumers are increasingly reporting positive experiences with organic foods.

As more growers try their hand at organic production, many of them find that certain practices that were adopted to meet the organic rules are applicable across the whole farm. I hear about this “trickle-down” effect frequently from growers and field consultants. Examples are the use of compost and increased reliance on natural biological control. Thus, as agricultural researchers address more of the specific needs of organic growers, all growers stand to benefit.

CSANR's Role

Public agricultural institutions are responding to the increase in organic farming. The WSU Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources (CSANR) surveyed WSU faculty about

their involvement in research and education projects that were directly useful by organic growers. Over 50 faculty responded affirmatively regarding their programs, with the greatest amount of activity occurring in pest management and soil management. The results of this study, An Assessment of Organic Farming Research, Teaching, and Extension at Washington State University (CSANR Report No. 3), are available on-line at <http://csanr.wsu.edu/resources/OrganicReport.pdf>. A day-long symposium highlighting organic and biointensive research is being organized by the CSANR for November 8, 2002, in Yakima. This will be an excellent opportunity for growers, researchers, and ag industry representatives to learn about new developments and explore future collaboration. Details are on-line at <http://csanr.wsu.edu>.

The original mandate of CSANR was to support research and education on alternative practices, many of which form the foundation of organic farming. We are pursuing two funding initiatives to try to enhance WSU's capacity to support the needs of growers interested in organic and other biointensive approaches. One initiative is a request for \$510,000 for Organic Cropping Research and Education for the Northwest, submitted to the state Congressional delegation for special Federal funding similar to many other agricultural programs. Funding would help set up organic experimental land for major crops at WSU research locations, support the development of organic seed production in the region, explore organic weed control methods for annual crops, and examine the effect of production practices on food quality. These are all priority needs expressed by organic growers in the state and nationwide.

A separate proposal to the College of Agriculture and Home Economics called BIOAg (Biologically Intensive and Organic Agriculture) was chosen as one of three priorities for consideration as part of the next state funding request. The \$1.8 million request over two years would support research, extension, and development of new undergraduate programs in organic and biointensive farming. The proposal would build on the expertise of existing faculty and their programs and would position WSU to better support Washington farmers in coping with the changes in the organic and conventional food sectors.

Looking Ahead

There is no doubt that organic farming will continue to expand in our state. A number of researchers have estimated that organic foods might eventually expand to 10-15% of total food sales. Price premiums will influence the expansion, as will the continued shift of conventional farming to more sustainable approaches. It is not inconceivable that for certain crops organic production could become the norm if production costs are equal to or less than other systems. An increased investment in research on organic farming would make this more likely. Central Washington is ideally positioned for organic farming of many commodities with its combination of a semi-arid climate and irrigation water. Thus, organic farming, or whatever it evolves into, will likely influence agriculture in our state for years to come and may offer Washington agriculture a measure of increased sustainability, both environmentally and economically.

For information on the proposed funding initiatives, contact David Granatstein at 509-663-8181 x. 222; granats@wsu.edu, or Chris Feise, CSANR Director, at feise@wsu.edu.

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