

**ORGANIC FARMING IN CANADA:
AN OVERVIEW**

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ORGANIC FARMING IN CANADA: AN OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, organic farming was limited to small groups of producers, processors and consumers; however, substantial growth has occurred over the past few years. The recent interest in organic products has been heightened by consumers' increased expectations regarding their food and the environment, especially following a number of crises or controversies involving conventional agriculture – mad cow disease in Europe, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), etc.

In 1998, the Canadian Organic Advisory Board (COAB) announced that the organic food market represented approximately 1% of the total retail food market and estimated that annual sales were increasing by between 15% and 25%.⁽¹⁾ The COAB also reported that Canadian production was worth almost \$1 billion each year.

After a brief review of the concept of organic farming and its status in Canada, this paper describes the various government measures that impact on this sector of the agro-industry and discusses organic farming as a model for sustainable agriculture.

DEFINITION OF AND TRENDS IN CANADIAN ORGANIC FARMING

A. Origins

The origins of organic farming can be found in two sources. The first source is “biodynamics,” the principles of which were enunciated by R. Steiner, an Austrian thinker, in the 1920s. It is claimed that this form of agriculture, which draws upon “cosmic and telluric forces,” forms part of a broader concept of human nature and living things. In 1928, the biodynamic movement was the first to establish a brand name, “Demeter,” certifying the origin of its products. The second source is “Organic Agriculture” of the British *Soil Association* (based on the 1940 writings of Sir Albert Howard), which advocates composting and a return to an independent, farm-based agriculture. Both movements put the emphasis on soil life, i.e., fertilization, and include a strong ideological component.

B. Definition

Organic farming is based on a simple principle, namely strict respect for the links and natural balances between the soil, plants and animals (animals nourish the soil, which nourishes plants), to which is added the constraint of a prohibition against synthetic chemicals.[\(2\)](#)

From this principle and this constraint follow a number of agricultural practices which distinguish organic from conventional farming, including:

- a prohibition against chemical fertilizers and pesticides, plant and animal growth regulators, hormones, antibiotics, preservatives, etc.;
- a prohibition against genetically modified organisms;
- a prohibition against soilless culture (which does not exclude greenhouse growing);
- the requirement, in the case of animal production, to allow free ranging, to use organically produced feed, to limit animal density in buildings, etc.; and
- the requirement to observe conversion periods in crop production before any “organic” commercial exploitation, etc.

The supporters of organic farming add a social and ethical aspect to the definition of organic farming, because they see in it a means of preserving a human dimension in agriculture, one that is respectful of the environment and in touch with the consumer.

C. The Standards of Organic Farming

Because it is virtually impossible to distinguish a product produced by organic farming from one produced by conventional farming, organic farms must be certified by appropriate regulatory bodies. The certification allows the producer to sell his or her production under the designation “organic.” This provides the consumer with a guarantee that the product purchased is genuinely the result of organic farming. The certification body validates the farm on the basis of standards, which determine the technical requirements, e.g., which products may be used for fertilization and processing, and what are the conversion periods.

The proliferation of standards can be a source of confusion for the consumer. In 1980, the Organic Food Production Association of North America listed approximately 50 organic standards drawn up by various

certification bodies.⁽³⁾ In 2000, Canada had more than 40 certification bodies. Although the various standards have more shared than divergent points, the industry – out of a concern to preserve the integrity of the “organic” label – is seeking to make these standards uniform in various countries. In Canada, the provinces of Quebec and British Columbia have each established minimum provincial standards, as well as a procedure for accrediting organic farming certification bodies. In June 1999, the Government of Canada introduced a national standard for organic farming, which represents a first step toward the adoption of Canada-wide standards for organic farming. (See the section “Government Measures on Behalf of Organic Farming.”)

D. Organic Farming Trends in Canada

The organic farming movement in Canada emerged in the 1950s, but significant development occurred only in the 1970s. During that decade, six provinces had organizations uniting organic farmers; in 1974, McGill University set up the Ecological Agriculture Projects program, which later became an information clearinghouse for the whole of Canada. Certification bodies were developed in the 1980s, and various levels of government increased their involvement in research and development in this sector of the farming industry.

In 1999, it was estimated that there were between 1,500 and 2,000 certified farmers in Canada,⁽⁴⁾ but there is little data on their production. Nevertheless, since the year 2000, Statistics Canada has been gathering data on organic fruit and vegetable production. The statistics show that approximately 4.9% of Canadian fruit and vegetable growers consider themselves to be organic farmers. This amounts to approximately 640 farms,⁽⁵⁾ which account for almost 2% of the land area used for commercial vegetable growing in Canada. The farms are generally small – less than 5 acres in size.⁽⁶⁾

The organic food industry is dominated by imports from the United States and the European Union, which account for 80% of the Canadian market. Even though local sales are one of the cornerstones of organic farming, international trade is becoming increasingly important. It is estimated that 85% of Canadian organic production is exported and that the demand for such products as cereals and oilseeds is steadily increasing.

GOVERNMENT MEASURES ON BEHALF OF ORGANIC FARMING

A. A Specific Organic Farming Policy

Because organic farming is a “sector within a sector,” it is affected by most of the programs and regulations implemented by the federal government for Canada’s agricultural sector. For example, federal income support programs such as the Net Income Stabilization Account (NISA), crop insurance or the disaster assistance program are made available to both conventional and organic farmers. There is no federal policy directed specifically to the organic farming industry.

Some countries, including the European Union, have such policies to promote organic farming. They usually offer financial incentives to encourage a changeover to organic farming. Consequently, the amount of land area in Europe converted to organic farming has increased, as has the volume of certified organic products sent to foreign markets.

In its report entitled *Pesticides – Making the Right Choice For the Protection of Health and the Environment*, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development recommended in 2000 that

the government develop an organic agriculture policy for the transition from pesticide-dependent farming to organic farming. This policy should include tax incentives, an interim support program during the transition period, technical support for farmers, the development of post-secondary organic farming programs and enhanced funding for research and development (R&D) in organic agriculture.[\(7\)](#)

In its response, the government recognizes the importance of this sector and maintains that it supports its expansion through existing and future research and market development programs and services. Virtually all the programs directed to agriculture in general affect organic farming, because the government has adopted a “decoupling” approach between support programs and production-related decisions. In this way it does not favour certain agricultural practices over others, regardless of whether they are conventional, organic or other. It should be noted, however, that in the calculation of payments to farmers, traditional programs are based on prices lower than those applicable to organic production (crop insurance programs) or on incomes (NISA), which are often lower in organic production. In fact, organic farmers are at a disadvantage.

B. A National Standard

The adoption of a Canadian organic farming standard constitutes the first true federal government intervention directed specifically to this “sector”

of the farming industry. This standard, approved in June 1999 by the Standards Council of Canada, was developed jointly by the Canadian General Standards Board and the Canadian Organic Advisory Board (COAB), an organization that represents the interests of groups of organic farmers and certification bodies throughout Canada.

Although the organic farming industry is satisfied with the national standard, there is disagreement over the certification procedure to be adopted. The COAB was formed in 1992 as an advisory board with a mandate to represent the interests of organic producers throughout Canada; it made possible cooperation between the stakeholders of organic farming and those in the federal government involved in developing the standard. Some stakeholders would like the COAB to be recognized as the certification body for the national standard, with responsibility for the inspection and accreditation of businesses seeking certification.

Others believe that there is still a need for consultation on the choice of the certification body. In British Columbia and Quebec, two provinces that have long experience with provincial organic standards, many of those concerned think that it is not appropriate for an advisory board to become a national certification body. Moreover, these provinces already have provincial certification bodies that they would like to see accredited as certification bodies for the national standard.

A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE?

Because conventional agriculture has been marked by a number of crises or controversies, organic farming has often been advocated by some as a desirable model for sustainable agriculture. This section presents a few thoughts on the subject.

A. Sustainable Agriculture

It is now recognized that organic farming has a very positive impact on the environment world-wide. It differs from conventional farming in that it reduces the amount of pollutants released into the environment and improves the organic and physical fertility of the soil.⁽⁸⁾ Some studies also show that fields where organic farming is practised have greater biological diversity.⁽⁹⁾

However, the prohibition of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides results in decreased yields, with some farmers reporting yield reductions of between 30% and 50% during the initial stages of conversion from conventional to

organic farming.[\(10\)](#) However, the decline in yield is offset by the higher selling price of these products compared with that of conventionally produced products. Consumers are prepared to pay between 10% and 50% more for organic products.[\(11\)](#)

In terms of running the operation, organic farming is more labour intensive than conventional farming. By depriving themselves of the “safety net” provided by systematic treatment, organic farmers must be constantly vigilant, systematically seek alternative solutions, and try to streamline their operations. Thus, in the Netherlands, the most successful dairy farmers are those who convert to organic farming, because this represents a new challenge.[\(12\)](#)

B. Healthier Food?

Although beneficial to the environment, organic farming methods are not guaranteed to produce healthier foods than those produced by conventional farming methods. Organic farming standards do not include an obligation to produce results in terms of the quality of the product – which does not mean that organic farmers are not capable of achieving such quality. The label “organic” does not in any way provide a guarantee as to the quality and nutritional value of the product. Furthermore, as regards hygiene and health safety, organic farming is quite simply subject to the same rules as conventional farming.

It should be noted that the absence, by definition, of any synthetic chemical products and GMOs excludes the risk or uncertainty created by their presence – even if such risk or uncertainty is at times small in conventional farming. Nevertheless, although the transition period is used to rid the soil of its contaminants, and taking into account the fact that some traditional farm inputs can stay in the soil for decades, organic farming does not guarantee the complete absence of contaminants.

A report by the United Kingdom House of Commons Agriculture Committee, tabled in January 2001, noted that there is currently no proof that food produced through organic farming is healthier. In this regard, the report states that increased research must be done in this sector to produce scientific proof for the claims made.[\(13\)](#)

CONCLUSION

Organic farming is booming in Canada. A national standard that sets out organic production practices is good news for both producers and consumers, because it will help to shed some light on this market sector.

A system of operational certification is the next challenge to be faced by the Canadian organic food industry. Such a system will have to meet the expectations of the industry's numerous stakeholders, who have not waited for national standardization to organize themselves.

Many virtues are attributed to organic farming, including that of being the ideal form of sustainable agriculture, which protects the environment while yielding healthy and more nutritious foods – although the latter claim remains to be proved. Thus, certain countries are adopting policies to promote a substantial conversion from conventional to organic farming.

It is difficult to say that the abandoning of conventional farming and a wholesale conversion to organic farming could guarantee the same level of income for farmers and a stable and adequate source of food. To many, organic farming is a niche that must remain such if it is to retain its economic interest. Moreover, it is a more stringent form of agriculture as far as running a farm operation is concerned, one that tends to attract only the technically more proficient. Hence the idea, put forward by some, that it is the prototype for a more rational form of agriculture that can develop alternative solutions compatible with sustainable development.

(1) Heather Archibald, “Organic Farming: The Trend is Growing!” *Canadian Agriculture at a Glance*, Statistics Canada Catalogue No. 96-325-XPB, 1999.

(2) Alain Riquois, “L’agriculture biologique : un ‘prototype’ au service de l’agriculture conventionnelle pour un développement durable” [Organic farming: a ‘prototype’ for use in conventional agriculture for sustainable development], *Aménagement et nature*, No. 132, March 1999, pp. 49-61.

(3) Hélène Laberge, “Agriculture biologique et bio-dynamique” [Organic and biodynamic agriculture], *L’agora*, April 1996.

(4) Heather Archibald, 1999.

(5) Bill Parsons, “Organic Growing Practices Establish a Clear Market Position,” in *Vista on the Agri-Food Industry and the Farm Community*, Statistics Canada, Catalogue No. 96-325-XPB, 1999.

(6) *Ibid.*

(7) House of Commons, Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, First Report, *Pesticides – Making the Right Choice For the Protection of Health and the Environment*, 2nd Session, 36th Parliament, May 2000.

(8) Alain Riquois, 1999, pp. 49-61.

(9) Andy Coghlan, “Going Back to Nature Down on the Farm,” *New Scientist*, 3 June 2000.

(10) Heather Archibald, 1999.

(11) *Ibid.*

(12) Alain Riquois, 1999, pp. 49-61.

(13) United Kingdom, House of Commons, Agriculture Committee, Second Report, *Organic Farming*, January 2001.