

Organic Farming – is it for me?

Organic produce has undergone a massive surge in consumer demand across Europe, and most notably in the UK, in recent years. But in the current economic climate, is it still practical to farm and process organic food?

The main consideration when looking at organic production is to treat it as any other business venture. Now that the organic marketplace has grown to a substantial size consumers, and in turn retailers and wholesalers, expect a high quality product and a professional approach. If you are looking at primary production then the basics apply. If you run a dairy herd then it may be more viable to convert with support of a dairy or milk supply group. But if you are not geographically well placed for that then the option of going it alone will require considerations of whether, for example, it is possible to set up a dairy and if there is a market for a new local cheese. Similar considerations will apply across all agricultural production.



For food processors it is just as essential to know your market for an organic product as for any other. Consumers pay a premium for organic products and they expect high quality. This may be unfair, since much of the additional cost is in production, but it is best to recognise from the start that the modern consumer is unlikely to pay a premium price unless they recognise they are receiving a quality product. There is substantial information available from various studies that have been undertaken, and most organic operators are very happy to discuss such issues with potential business partners.



Why is organic farming supported by the EU and the UK?

The objectives of organic production are to:

(a) establish a sustainable management system for agriculture that:

(i) respects nature's systems and cycles and sustains and enhances the health of soil, water, plants and animals and the balance between them;
(ii) contributes to a high level of biological diversity;
(iii) makes responsible use of energy and the natural resources, such as water, soil, organic matter and air;

(iv) respects high animal welfare standards and in particular meets animals' species-specific behavioural needs;

(b) aim at producing products of high quality;

(c) aim at producing a wide variety of foods and other agricultural products that respond to consumers' demand for goods produced by the use of processes that do not harm the environment, human health, plant health or animal health and welfare.

These objectives are further supported by principles, some examples of these are:

- The restriction of the use of external inputs.
- The strict limitation of the use of chemically synthesised inputs to exceptional cases.

So support for organic production is based on the fact that an organic system is intended to provide high quality food whilst protecting the natural environment.

This is not to say that other individual farmers or farming systems may not have the same objectives, but organic production is the only system that has undertaken to be regulated and thus to provide a high level of guarantee to consumers that enables extra agri-environment support to be provided.

What are the rules covering organic production?

Organic farmers and also food and feed processors must comply with Regulations (EC) No 834/2007 and (EC) No 889/2008 and be controlled by an approved and accredited control body (in the UK such accreditation is undertaken by the UK Accreditation Service). In practice this means following the rules laid down in the standards of one of the approved private organic control bodies since the individual bodies may have rules in addition to those required by the regulation (but none may fall below what is required). A list of UK based control bodies approved by Defra and accredited to operate as organic control bodies can be found at www.defra.gov.uk/farm/organic. Links to the regulations and also to further information on importing organic products and ensuring they comply with equivalent standards to the European regulations can also be found at that site.



(This leaflet has been produced using images available for free from the European Commission Organic marketing website: http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/organic/home_en)

Schemes and information

England

The Organic Conversion Information Service; this provides information to English Farmers on conversion and includes a farm visit by a qualified advisor and follow up report. Web: www.ocis.org.uk Tel: 0800 980 0048.

The Organic Entry Level Scheme is the "organic" arm of the entry Level Scheme of agri-environment payments and provides additional payments to farmers in organic production. Web: www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/farming/funding/es/oels/default.aspx Tel: 0845 600 3078



Northern Ireland

Greenmount Campus, CAFRE offers courses in organic farming. Web: www.greenmount.ac.uk Tel: 028 944 2666

The Organic Farming Scheme is an Agri-environment package that encourages conversion to organic production by offering payments to

farmers in Northern Ireland who convert to organic farming. Web: http://www.ruralni.gov.uk/index/bussys/organic_production.htm Tel: 028 9442 6699

Scotland

An organic helpline is available through the Scottish Agricultural College. Web: <http://www.sac.ac.uk/knowledge/crops/examples/organicfarming/organichelpline>

Aid is available to organic farmers under the Scottish Rural Development Programme. Web: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Agriculture/Agricultural-Policy/15869/OAS/OrganicAS> Tel: 08457 741 741

Wales

The Organic Conversion Information Service provides information to Welsh Farmers on conversion and includes up to two on-farm visits by a qualified advisor. Web: <http://www.organic.aber.ac.uk/farmers/Conversion.shtml> Tel: 01970 622100.

The Organic Farming Scheme is a Welsh Assembly Government Agri-environment scheme that offers payments to farmers in Wales to help them convert to organic farming. Web: <http://www.organic.aber.ac.uk/policy/index.shtml> Tel: 01970 622248

Further information is available on Defra's organic farming web pages at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/growing/organic/>.