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Organic sells

New Mexico farmer says organic produce continues to boom

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By Brook Stockberger *Las Cruces Sun-News*

On the Net

Organic Farming Research Foundation: www.offf.org

USDA Organic Certification: www.ams.usda.gov/nop

Organic Consumers Association: www.purefood.org

LAS CRUCES, N.M. (AP) - O.D. Maes knows that not everyone is open to his message, but the Las Cruces businessman still works to get the word out.

"I like the sound of natural; I like the sound of health," said Maes, who sells organic farm products. "Let's do things nature's way."

Maes grows lettuce and other crops on his land using organic-farming methods. In the barn he has a variety of organic products that he sells.

He works for BioFlora out of Goodyear, Ariz. With clients in Arizona, Colorado, Texas and Mexico, as well as New Mexico, Maes said he has seen the idea of organic farming expand.

According to the Organic Farming Research Foundation, about 2 percent of the U.S. food supply is grown organically, with the sale of organic products showing an annual increase of at least 20 percent, the fastest-growing sector of agriculture, the organization reports.

Organic farming is done without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers.

To have their products certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as "organic," growers must keep records of their products demonstrating that they are produced by organic methods and are not contaminated by conventional fields.

Grains, meat, dairy products and eggs, as well as flowers and fibers such as cotton, can be organically produced.

Farmer Dosi Alvarez said he has bought products from Maes for four years.

"I've been organic for about 13 years now," he said. "My son was born, and I had been exposed to chemicals all my life, and I just decided I didn't want my son exposed to them."

Alvarez grows cotton as well as chile, lettuce and alfalfa. Some of the cotton he grows is brown and green colored.

"I started out small, with 25 acres, and found out it could be done," Alvarez said. "I've never regretted it."

He said he sells what he grows both domestically and abroad.

Maes said that organic cotton, especially colored cotton, has a big market in California and Japan, as well as Europe.

Maes said there are many organic products available to growers.

"There are organic certified insecticides," he said. "There is one that we use that is potassium mixed with neem oil. It comes from the seed of the neem tree in India. You mix it with water and you spray it out there. Bugs can't get accustomed to that.

"I got some material called DE - diatomaceous earth," Maes said. "It's a good insecticide because, if you're to look at it under a microscope, it looks like a shattered piece of glass. It serrates (the insect's) skin when they walk over it."

In addition, there are organic fertilizers as well as organic animal feed.

Nitrogen is one of the most important components of farming, but is also the most volatile. There are organic methods to help growers obtain more use from their nitrogen, Maes said.

A liquid carbon material can be mixed with nitrogen in a 50-50 ratio before being applied in the fields.

"Now the nitrogen becomes available in that amount that you bought," Maes said, "instead of losing X percentage to volatilization or wash."

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