



10/19/2007

Dickinson Research Extension Center Certified For Organic Farming Research

A 10-acre tract of land at the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center has been certified by two major organic farming certifiers, according to Pat Carr, DREC sustainable agriculture adjunct professor and agronomist.

The certification means the DREC will be able to conduct research on organic farming methods at the center. The land has been certified by the Organic Crop Improvement Association International in Omaha, Neb., and International Certification Services Inc. of Medina, N.D. The majority of organic farmland in the state has received certification through these two organizations.

"Receiving organic certification for this land heralds a new era in agricultural research at NDSU," Carr said. "For the first time, experiments can occur on land within the NDSU system that has been certified organic. It will allow NDSU scientists to initiate a sustained and thorough program of investigating organic farming methods to serve the needs of farmers throughout the state and region."

The DREC began the certification process in 2004 when the 10-acre tract of land was dedicated to the operational principles of the organic agriculture community.

"It was a three-year process to become certified, which has been a very good learning experience for us at the center," Carr said. "We wanted to do that so we would have legitimacy among the vast majority of the organic growers in the state and it really forced us to become familiar with the certification requirements."

One of the major differences between conventional and organic production is inputs. Organic producers, for the most part, are prohibited from applying any synthetic products, such as fertilizer and pesticides. The DREC research will focus on alternative management methods. Crop rotation research will be extensive.

"It often takes a complex rotation where you are putting in place many different crops to allow producers to control pests, such as weeds, and make available plant nutrients," Carr said. "We have one study that's planned where we will have in place an eight-year rotation, which means that a group of crops will need eight years to run through a full, complete cycle."

Another major focus of the organic research will be on the energy necessary to grow crops in North Dakota.

"There are a lot of spinoffs that have as much application as for conventional producers," Carr said. "Conventional farmers can and do apply fertilizers. Those fertilizers cost money. As we've watched gas prices go up the last few years, we've also watched fertilizer prices increase. A lot of conventional producers are looking for alternative or supplemental sources of nitrogen fertilizer.

"Organic producers must apply alternative sources to synthetic fertilizer because they typically can't apply synthetic fertilizer to maintain certification," he adds. "We are going to look at methods that best utilize natural sources of nitrogen to meet crop needs. We hope to fine-tune that to North Dakota conditions. What we discover also will have direct and immediate application to conventional farmers."

One such opportunity Carr and his research associates will investigate is the use of legume crops.

"I hope we will gain new insight into the amount of nitrogen legumes provide to subsequent crops," Carr said. "What we will learn will be accessible and useful to conventional and organic producers."

North Dakota is a major producer of organic crops, ranking second behind California in certified organic acreage. North Dakota leads the U.S. in the production of organic flax, oats, sunflowers and buckwheat. It also is a top 10 producer of wheat, barley, spelt and rye.

The USDA Economic Research Service reports organic crop acreage has almost tripled since 1995. Retail sales of organic foods have grown since 1990 by 20 percent or more annually and there is little evidence of a slowdown anytime soon.

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