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Central Oregon Farmers and Organic Certification: Perspectives, Challenges, and Opportunities

Prepared by High Desert Food & Farm
Alliance through the Transitioning to
Organic Partnership Program





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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Overview

This report presents the findings of a study conducted by the High Desert Food and Farm Alliance to explore Central Oregon farmers' perspectives on organic certification. The study utilized an online survey and focus groups to gather insights into farmers' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences related to transitioning to and maintaining organic certification. Participants provided input and perspectives on their current production systems, including the use of regenerative soil health management practices, as well as their most pressing production and non-production challenges, technical assistance needs, and concerns related to organic and conventional agriculture. This study aimed to understand the factors that motivate or deter farmers from pursuing organic practices and certification and to identify potential support mechanisms to address their needs. The study was funded through the Transitioning to Organic Partnership Program with support from Oregon Tilth.

1.2 Key findings

Key findings highlight a mix of enthusiasm and apprehension among farmers regarding organic certification. While many respondents recognized the potential market opportunities, environmental benefits, and consumer demand associated with organic farming, significant barriers were also identified. These included concerns about the costs and complexity of the certification process, ongoing compliance requirements, and uncertainty about market premiums and long-term profitability.

The report also sheds light on the practical challenges Central Oregon farmers face, and how the backdrop of growing in the arid, climate change-impacted high desert impacts the ways they think about engaging with organic production methods and accessing resources and technical assistance. Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of community perception and peer influence in shaping attitudes toward organic farming.

While the survey was conducted mid-summer through late-fall, potentially resulting in less engagement and contributing to "survey fatigue" that many farmers face, the focus groups were held during the off-season when many producers are less busy with markets, growing season staff management, and daily farm tasks. Holding these events in November and March underscored the importance of in-person networking, idea sharing, and conversation. Many of the sentiments expressed in the surveys were given more depth and context at these discussions, with opportunities for further conversation around both growing techniques and larger topics around being a producer. Deeper discussions were held around market access, cost vs. benefit in small farms, and values driving production practices.

1.3 Recommendations

Based on the insights found in surveys and focus groups, the report offers the following recommendations for continued work:

- 1. Expand mentorship and farmer networking opportunities*

Attendees of the focus groups expressed that one of the main benefits they gleaned was the opportunity these events provided to meet with other farmers. Having in-person learning and farmer-driven education was expressed to be most impactful. Additionally, peer mentorship was specifically called out as one pathway for learning in both surveys and focus group conversations. By offering more opportunities for connection and farmer-to-farmer mentorship, the farming community will build relationships, skills, and resilience.

- 2. Intentional communication and information sharing about programming and opportunities*

Many survey respondents and some event attendees expressed confusion over requirements, expectations, and mechanics around becoming certified. Farmers interested in learning more about the requirements for organic certification may not be clear on the best sources for information about organic production and certification. Having clear, accessible, and easily found information and resources available through certification agencies, and intentional sharing of these resources through other organizations and channels, may help.

- 3. Increase agency-led technical support offerings in Central Oregon*

Both survey respondents and event attendees expressed a lack of resources and capacity from service providers with knowledge about organic production and certification in Central Oregon. In order to increase the number of transitioning and certified organic producers in this region, technical service providers and resources should be tailored to addressing Central Oregon needs, and staff capacity to work with these producers should be addressed.

- 4. Promote and expand cost subsidy programs for wider reach and impact*

One of the biggest concerns that arose in the survey was the cost, both for the certification itself and for infrastructure and supplies to transition to organic. One organic farmer shared that they participate in a cost share subsidy program, but there are many farmers with incomplete or inaccurate information about the real cost. It may be beneficial to share more widely and intentionally about these kinds of programs and the true cost of organic certification and advocate for additional funding toward covering these costs.

- 5. Expand consumer education and knowledge about local food, organic certification, and organic practices*

In the focus groups, participants spent time talking about market access and consumer knowledge of food grown locally. HDFFA already has local food-driven consumer



campaigns, but more intentional, targeted education will help share the value of local food even more.

2. Introduction

2.1 Background and Context

2.1.1 About HDFFA

HDFFA was founded in 2012 with the mission of supporting a healthy and thriving food and farm network in Central Oregon through education, collaboration, and inclusion. In 2018, HDFFA formalized Agricultural Support as one of four main programs and now has a full-time Agricultural Support Manager and Small Farms Coordinator dedicated to improving the viability of farms and ranches through relationship building, marketing, and technical and capacity support. HDFFA works closely with approximately 60 farm businesses annually, known as “Partner” farms. While HDFFA works within the entire food system and aims to support all small- to mid-sized farm businesses, partner farms are typically direct-to-consumer and between 1-20 acres.

2.1.2 About the Transitioning to Organic Partnership Program/Oregon Tilth

The Northwest Transition to Organic Partnership Program is supported through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP). TOPP is a program of the USDA Organic Transition Initiative and is administered by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) National Organic Program (NOP). Central Oregon’s lead organization is Oregon Tilth. Their programming offers technical assistance, mentorship, community building, and workforce development opportunities. When initially approached by Oregon Tilth, HDFFA, one of the main agricultural nonprofits in Central Oregon, had never previously created programming centered around organic farming and knew little about the region’s farmers’ sentiments. Before initiating other programming through TOPP, HDFFA considered it important to conduct this assessment.

2.1.3 About Central Oregon

Central Oregon is home to 264,000 people and is nearly the geographic size of New Hampshire. It is located on a high desert plateau with irrigated water for agriculture available from April to October, and there is the threat of frost any day of the year. The tri-county region - Crook, Deschutes, and Jefferson Counties, and the ceded lands of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs - is located in the rainshadow east of the Cascade Mountains with a high desert climate, distinct from the valley population centers of the state. Central Oregon’s main agricultural economy is commercial farming with a growing number of small- to mid-sized producers serving the local food system.

In 2021, 34% of the total land area in Central Oregon was designated agricultural (1.7M acres), and 8.7% is irrigated (148,083 acres). The region has a large amount of rangelands, known for providing high-quality proteins for consumption within the state and for international export. According to the 2022 Farm Census, there were a total of 2,529 farmers (an increase of 28 from the 2017 data), 72% operating on 1-49 acres; of those 45% are on < 10 acres (an increase of 10%) and 85% make < \$25,000 in farm sales (an increase of 4%). In 2021, Oregon grew, raised, and harvested 220 products, while regionally we estimate 44 crops and 8 types of livestock, with the main products identified as: tomatoes, carrots, beets, peppers, cattle, and swine.

2.2 Setting the stage: Current challenges, needs, and topics of concern for Central Oregon farmers

Central Oregon farmers face a complex array of challenges that significantly impact their agricultural operations and livelihoods. The region's unique high desert climate, characterized by extreme temperature fluctuations, a short growing season, and limited water resources, presents formidable obstacles to successful farming. These natural constraints are further compounded by ongoing drought conditions, changing environmental regulations, and economic pressures.

Our study participants expressed a keen awareness of the difficulty of farming in the high desert and specifically identified the numerous current production and non-production challenges facing their businesses, not limited to organic production. Main themes emerged around climate and growing season, irrigation/water resources, pest and weed management, costs, labor, and meeting certification requirements. Find more detail in section 3.1.3.

We know as the agricultural landscape evolves, Central Oregon farmers are actively seeking solutions to enhance their resilience and sustainability. They are considering organic transitioning against the backdrop of these other production and non-production challenges.

2.3 Objectives of this study

Because there are very few certified organic farmers in Crook, Deschutes, and Jefferson counties and in the lands of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (approximately four producing food at the time this study was conducted), HDFFA was interested in learning more about the barriers, challenges, and needs of the farming community in this rural, high-desert climate before approaching them with organic technical assistance. Farming practices in Central Oregon differ greatly from other parts of the state, and so the practical assistance for transitioning must be tailored to this context. To understand more deeply how programming through TOPP could serve farmers and ranchers, HDFFA conducted an online survey and two focus groups to glean more information and have conversations with producers both interested and not interested in transitioning and becoming certified organic.

Oregon Tilth initiated a conversation with HDFFA in 2023. Because the vast majority of organic programming, especially through TOPP at the time, was focused in the more highly populated I-5 corridor and Willamette Valley, HDFFA proposed conducting this assessment to learn more about rural, high-desert farmers and their specific challenges and needs. This report will help not only HDFFA, but also Oregon Tilth and other service providers in Central Oregon, learn more about the kinds of programming the region will benefit most from.

2.4 Scope and Methodology

This study was designed to examine Central Oregon farmers' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to organic farming, with a specific focus on exploring the factors influencing their decisions to pursue or avoid organic certification. The scope of the study encompasses a broad range of topics, including awareness of organic practices, perceived benefits and challenges of certification, current farming and marketing practices, economic considerations, and access to resources and support systems.

The study targeted farmers across Central Oregon, representing diverse farm sizes, crop types, and production methods. The data collection involved:

- **Surveys:** A structured questionnaire was distributed to a wide range of farmers to capture quantitative and qualitative data about their perceptions of organic farming. Questions addressed knowledge of organic practices, interest in certification, and barriers or incentives that influence decision-making. 21 farmers completed the survey.

Survey questions and processes were based on the Organic Farming Research Foundation's (OFRF) 2022 National Organic Research Agenda (NORA) report to identify main themes and question topics. Relevant questions to the population and goals of this assessment were pulled and adapted from the OFRF report. The survey followed logic pathways based on respondents' answers, guiding them to the most appropriate set of questions. Survey respondents could indicate if they were organic, transitioning, interested in becoming certified organic, or not interested in becoming certified organic. When relevant, responses to these questions are separated in this report based on these self-selecting categories. Most questions were asked of all respondents, although some were not relevant to all categories and were not included. The link to the survey questions can be found in the appendix.

The survey was distributed through HDFFA's farmer/rancher newsletter, social media, other regional targeted newsletters, at farmers markets, and through targeted



outreach to known market farms HDFFA has relationships with. The survey was open from April–November 2024.

- **Focus Groups/Field Days:** Small-group discussions were conducted to gain deeper insights into the complexities of farmer experiences and attitudes. They included a tour of the host farm, with opportunities for farmers to ask questions about production and business practices, and a more focused discussion led by HDFFA staff to deepen understanding of survey responses. These discussions provided an opportunity for participants to share perspectives, clarify concerns, and discuss potential solutions in a collaborative setting. The focus groups were advertised on HDFFA's farmer/rancher newsletter and social media outlets, a Central Oregon farmer/rancher Facebook group, and through the TOPP events page.

In the first focus group, held in November at Rainshadow Organics in Sisters, OR, nine participants engaged in discussion. Eight farmers attended the second focus group held in March at Sungrounded Farm, in Terrebonne, OR. Three participants at the March field day had attended the previous event, and one was the co-owner of a farm with representation at the previous event.

Both surveys and focus group participants were provided a stipend. Participants could opt out of receiving the stipend.

2.5 Respondent Demographics

2.5.1 Survey Respondent Demographics

This section provides an overview of the characteristics of the participants, including farm size, type of production, years of farming experience, and geographical distribution within Central Oregon. These demographic details are crucial for interpreting the data, as factors such as farm scale, crop or livestock focus, and the level of experience often influence perspectives on organic certification and practices.

Participant demographic profiles

Age: Of the 17 respondents who provided their age, 22% are between the ages of 30-39, 28% between 40-49, 17% between 50-59; and 28% above the age of 60.

Gender: Of the 18 respondents who indicated their gender, 8 identify as male, nine as female, and one indicated “other.”



Race: Nearly all respondents wrote that they were “white” or “American,” with one indicating that they were “white mixed race” and another indicating they were “English/Danish.”

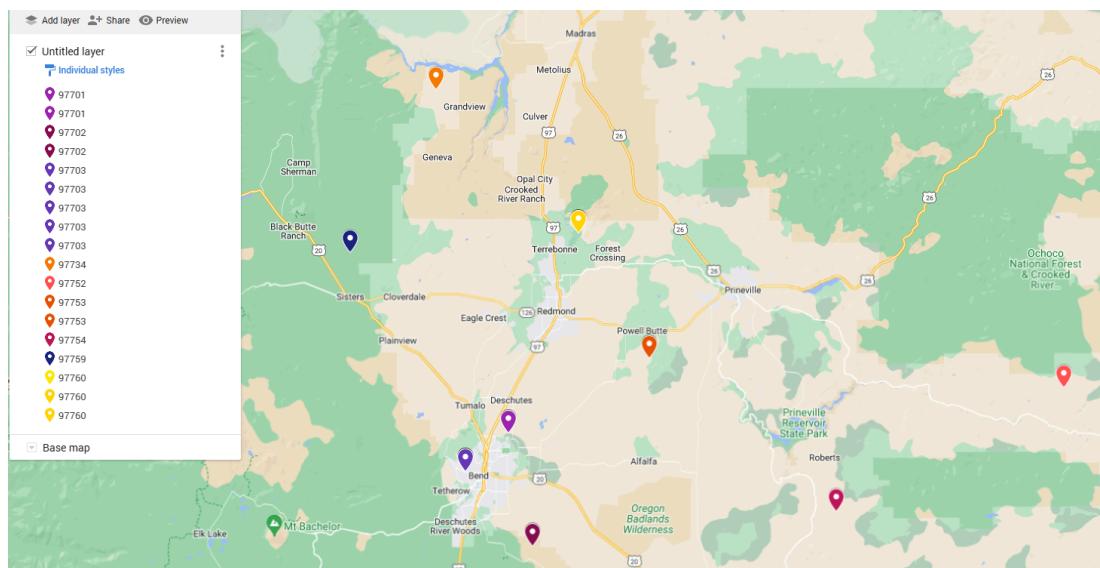
Years of farming experience: Farmers with varying levels of experience participated in the survey.:

- Less than 5 years: 22%
- 5 to 10 years: 22%
- More than 10 years: 61%

Experienced farmers often provided nuanced perspectives based on their long-term observations and operations, while newer farmers shared insights into how organic certification aligns with their aspirations and challenges as they establish their practices.

Farm location and size

Geographic distribution: 67% of survey respondents have farms located in Deschutes County, 22% in Crook County, and 11% in Jefferson County. The geographic layout by zip code is indicated in the map below.



Farm size: Survey respondents managed farms of varying sizes, reflecting the diversity of agricultural operations in the region.

- Farming 5 acres or less: 39%
- Farming between 6–25 acres: 28%
- Farming between 26–200 acres: 20%
- Farming more than 200 acres: 10%

These figures indicate strong participation from smaller and mid-sized farms which may have distinct challenges and opportunities related to organic certification.

Primary production type

As seen in the graph below, the vast majority of survey participants indicated they are using “organic practices,” but are not certified. This reflects many of the comments made in both the survey and in focus group discussions, and is indicative of how farmers communicate about their practices. Only a small number of certified, and even smaller number of transitioning producers, completed the survey. Meat, poultry, dairy, and eggs, as well as some vegetable and nursery crop growers, were more likely to be grown conventionally.



2.5.2 Field Day Participant Demographics

This information was not specifically gathered during event registration and was therefore provided either with a short evaluation survey or in conversation with attendees.

Primary production type:

- ~56% known to be primarily or solely diversified vegetable operations
- ~22% known to be primarily or solely meat/poultry
- ~22% known to grow/raise both

Location: all Deschutes County (Bend, Redmond)

Markets: Eight responded to evaluation surveys between the two field days. While some responded that they utilize a distributor or food hub (3 via non-organic distributor, 4 through a regional aggregator or food hub) and some sell wholesale directly (5 direct to

retail, 3 direct to restaurant), the majority sell directly to their consumers (1 farm-to-school, 2 via farmers markets, 5 have CSA shares, 6 through farmstands).

Experience: One participant was within their first year of owning a business, having previously worked for another farmer. Another participant has been farming for decades. Most of the other attendees would be classified as “beginning farmers or ranchers,” with under 10 years of experience. Two attendees who came together are thinking of scaling up their business raising cattle and increasing their children’s skills in regenerative pasture management.

2.5.3 Current growing practices & future intentions:

- Two survey respondents were certified organic. They were both certified by Oregon Tilth and both indicated that they intend to maintain current levels of organic certification. One indicated that they are also “Real Organic Certified”.
- Two survey respondents indicated that they are currently transitioning their land to become Certified Organic. Neither had been organic previously, and neither indicated they were working with an agency at this time.
- Out of those not certified or transitioning, 1 survey respondent indicated that they are considering certification “Yes - actively considering”; 11 said “maybe - would consider transitioning to certified”; and 5 said “no - they are not interested in ever transitioning to certified.”

The majority of non-certified growers indicated that they utilize organic practices throughout the survey (noting that “organic practices” is not a defined term and is not encouraged among certifiers) with many comments such as, “I haven’t used chemicals on my land since 1994 when purchased” and “We already grow everything organically, just not certified.” This is somewhat reflected in the data for inputs and practices, as well as how growers communicate with consumers (see section 3.3). Fourteen of the sixteen non-certified responses indicated that they either often or very often use manure and other animal byproducts; nine indicated often or very often utilizing organic or natural mineral fertilizers/amendments; eleven using compost, and ten implementing reduced irrigation or water use. Unless otherwise noted, we did not ask if these inputs were organic.

While specific practices of each focus group participant were not explored, generally participants of the focus groups were interested in learning about organic practices from a certified organic farmer.

During the field day/focus group events that HDFFA held, farmers shared lots of information on best practices; information like how to use less plastic, tomato trellising

techniques, and efficient irrigation systems were some of the topics discussed. Additional areas of conversation included seeding practices, including seed sourcing; pest control for both insects and rodents; and timing plantings for highest yield. Themes emerged based on the timing of the event: the first field day held in November saw the close of the growing season, bringing conversation more toward best practices and experiences learned from and reflections on the previous growing season; the field day in March showed some of the earliest crops emerging for the season, driving conversation toward propagation, pests, and the excitement over the upcoming season.

3. Findings

3.1 Farmer attitudes toward organic farming

3.1.1 Initial reactions to thinking about organic certification

In an effort to explore farmers' feelings and emotions regarding the topic of organic farming and certification we began our survey by asking respondents to choose an emoji that best represents their emotional state when contemplating the shift to organic farming practices. This approach allowed respondents to communicate complex, nuanced feelings through a universally understood visual language.

Initial responses revealed a full-spectrum of emotional responses ranging from happy/positive (👍😊😊) to disdain/frustration/confusion (🙄🤓🤯), to confusion and a belief they would have to study up to understand certification (🤔🤓🐜), to a fear that certification would be expensive (💰).

Respondents were also given the opportunity to share three words that best express how they feel about organic certification and to explain why those words best capture their feelings. As with our emoji responses, there was a wide range of expressions shared, but most farmers chose words that expressed worries about the cost, challenges, and perceived red tape of becoming certified organic.

governmental-hoops
 paperwork markets
 unnecessary
 gimmick costly
 overwhelming interested
 complicated onerous
 security trust
expensive oversight
 pertinent control
 pricey challenging hard
 difficult red-tape
 marketing-tool rigid why unattainable
 misleading tedious
 time-consuming

When asked to explain why they chose these words, or if they wanted to tell us anything else about their gut reactions when thinking about organic certification, this is what farmers told us:

- “The only reason we would certify is to be able to charge more for our products. We already do what is right with our land without the certification.”
- “I think that growing without toxic or synthetic chemicals by improving the health of soil, and doing so in a responsible and sustainable way is super important. I think our current organic program provides some security to customers. I think it is challenging to design guidelines that meet everyone's needs and to provide the appropriate amount of oversight to make sure those rules are followed.”
- “Tedious, unnecessary (for our scale). Understandable (for larger scale).”
- “I feel to be certified organic would be costly and involves lots of governmental hoops but I need to learn more. We use lawn grass as mulch but otherwise use only organic practices and the bugs, especially cutworms, are taking out entire rows. I have too much to do already just to keep my little farm going.”
- “Expensive to get certified. Cost for all crops in the future % to certifier \$\$\$\$\$\$”
- “It seems out of reach, too complicated, expensive, time consuming ...and I'm not sure my customers would care differently if we were certified.”
- “It's a marketing tool only. I have a neighbor with nearly a thousand acres of hay that he is converting to organic hay....the weeds are not under control and the feed quality is less than desirable. Really unfortunate.”

- “Unattainable, red-tape. We are in the middle of conventional farmland. We are at the end of our irrigation line, which means we get the runoff from all farms above ours. We also get overspray from crop dusters. So while we use organic and sustainable practices on our farm, we would not qualify to be certified. There are also many loopholes certified organic places can use that we choose not to.”
- “Pricey Control Gimmick. I feel that most farmers practice organic farming for the most part. The cost is too high to get certified and I feel that the government just wants their handout.”
- “I was flower farming in Texas back in the 90s when the organic certification was really starting to take off. I originally thought I would do it, but after a great deal of research and talking with others who had done it, I decided against it. The regulations and requirements are so rigid and way too onerous for a small farmer. And it seems so backwards that someone who ISN'T using chemicals should bear the burden of proving that they aren't. When the chemicals can just flow freely with no strict reporting requirements. It seems like a really lousy system and not really worth it in my opinion.”

3.1.2 Perceived benefits of organic certification and/or utilizing organic practices

Our research reveals that farmers recognize multiple benefits to organic certification and/or utilizing organic practices spanning environmental, economic, and health domains. These perceived advantages can be broadly categorized into four main areas: environmental stewardship, sustainability/resiliency, protecting human health, and market demand/potential for increased profits.

Our survey results specifically showed:

- The main drivers for those ***potentially interested in transitioning to organic*** were health and environmental factors, with all 11 respondents indicating concerns for human health, biodiversity, climate change resilience, and family values; and ten indicating influence for farm worker well-being, farm environmental sustainability, and the expanding markets. Nine of the eleven indicated the potential for increase in profit as a driver.
- For those that indicated they ***weren't interested in certification*** at all, we adapted the question to “Which of the following may be motivating factors to potentially transitioning to organic OR to adapting production practices?” While this alters the meaning, it is interesting to see that human health, concerns about farm worker well-being, personal and family values, concerns about the environment, and resilience were still highly rated as influential factors.

- Only two ***transitioning producers*** filled out the survey; one respondent indicated the only motivating factors for transitioning were the potential increase in profit and specific market opportunity or contract from a buyer. Both indicated “Yes” for the market opportunity increase, which may show that the local distributor, Agricultural Connections, may have had some influence.
- Two ***organic growers*** filled out the survey. Interestingly, both said that access to the expanding market for organic goods and potential enhancement of farm environmental sustainability were NOT factors; however, they both responded Yes to “response to community need for organic,” “concerns for farm worker well-being,” and “concerns for the environment.”

Similar motivations for considering and/or engaging with organic certification practices emerged during focus group discussions. Field day participants consistently identified four key benefits to being certified organic:

- **Motivation #1 - Being part of a movement.** One of the organic host farms shared that the biggest motivation for maintaining organic certification is to be a part of a national movement. They shared that there is power in officially certified organic farmers being a group that can lobby and have more power unified than if they were acting individually. This concept seemed to resonate with participants with one saying, “I like how [they] talked about being part of a movement. How together we can move the needle, push for the government to support organic.” Another said, “I get that it feels good to be part of a movement, but this takes a lot of time.”
- **Motivation #2 - Consumer demand.** While consumer demand did come up, certified organic farmers also acknowledged a general inability to charge higher costs for organic products in order to compete in the market. There is a high demand for all locally-grown food in Central Oregon, and these farmers shared that higher costs for certified organic goods would not be attractive to their consumers who already perceive prices to be higher for locally grown food at farmers markets or wholesale settings. There was a general sentiment amongst field day participants that most Central Oregonians are satisfied with having a farmer explain their practices, and they don’t demand certification. There was therefore a lot of discussion around creating relationships with the customer and helping them understand the value of organic certification: “[Consumer demand] might be the only motivating factor. You’re doing it to give the end consumer knowledge. The government doesn’t need to know how I grow, but the consumer might. This would be the biggest motivator.” Another said, “Certification can be good for some people, especially people with certain medical conditions. There are people who rely on that information for understanding what they are consuming.”

Motivation #3 - A belief this is just the “right” way to farm, and has been historically. As one farmer put it, “Many organic practices are old practices. It’s in our best interest as farmers to use these practices. You can’t keep mono-cropping. You can’t keep asking your land to give like that year after year.” Another said, “Organic farming is at the heart of global sustainability. Small farms are what feeds the world.” And a third told us, “Organic farming just works better!”

This type of reasoning seemed to be a main driver for both certified organic farms and those that are not, but that still utilized organic growing methods. Some also appreciated that the organic certification process ensures forced reflection on “why?” at all steps, including “those we wouldn’t normally think about.” In other words, organic certification offers a framework that validates the procedures that matter to growers.

- **Motivation #4: Accountability and knowledge of what inputs/practices are beneficial.** One of the host farms shared that they value that certification allows them the opportunity “to keep yourself to a certain standard.” While a farmer may know what they would like to keep track of, the certification process might open their eyes to additional measures of health and sustainability. A certified organic farmer is agreeing to an annual audit that has standards they may not otherwise know of or set for their health, consumer health, and land health.

Understanding these perceived benefits is crucial for developing effective strategies to support farmers in their transition to organic practices and for the continued growth of the organic agricultural sector.

3.1.3 Perceived barriers and challenges of organic certification and/or utilizing organic practices

Even though the vast majority of participants recognized the benefits summarized above of engaging in organic growing practices, most still say they find the transition process daunting. The following are split into production challenges and non-production challenges participants identified. For many, the perceived barriers to organic transition outweigh the anticipated benefits at this time.

Perceived production challenges:

- **Drought management:** Central Oregon faces especially challenging drought conditions and a limited irrigation season. Drought management will always be top of mind when water may not always be available. One respondent said, “Although [an HDFFA] grant helped me buy a very efficient water drip tape system, I don’t feel

I have enough water. Also, the system breaks a lot and clogs from canal water particulates.” Areas of need for additional support specifically called out by the certified Organic grower were concerns about soil fertility, and management of crop nutrients, and water management.

- **Controlling insect pests.** Since organic production limits the application of pesticides, farmers may feel burdened with additional labor and costs associated with other methods. Unfortunately, not many responses addressed this challenge with further information.
- **Managing production costs.** In addition to the cost of obtaining a certification, survey respondents stressed the challenge they perceive around organic production costs. This could mean labor, seeds and inputs, machinery, etc. “Production costs are always a factor in farming, especially mixed vegetable production with its high demand of labor. Trying to keep produce affordable while increasing wages all while working within the Organic program is a very real challenge.”

Non-production challenges:

- **Cost of organic certification:** One of the biggest concerns expressed in both the survey and focus groups was the financial burden of both certification and maintaining an organic system. One survey respondent said, “The reason I am not organically certified is that I am barely staying alive financially. If I was making more profit I could invest it into an employee that could help me with my record keeping. I have very little office time as I am putting all my energy into making it happen outside.” Another expressed concern over how funding is distributed, saying, “Financial grants aren't geared for the seeded farmers, only the young or DEI population.” This suggests the need for more outreach on all available funding opportunities that support organic transition costs.
- **Meeting both recordkeeping requirements and production requirements of organic certification.** This was a common theme of concern for both survey respondents and focus group attendees. Specifically, managing paperwork, understanding what to expect when visited by a certifier, and understanding all of the regulations and compliance requirements. One farmer said, “The regulations and requirements are so rigid and way too onerous for a small farmer.” Another said, “It seems out of reach, too complicated, expensive, time consuming...and I'm not sure my customers would care differently if we were certified.”
- **Developing infrastructure.** The organic respondent stressed this challenge in practice, saying “Scaling infrastructure together on the farm during our growth cycle

has been a challenge. Adding more crops often has the unintended consequence of requiring more of all other infrastructure too.”

- **Additional areas of concern:** These themes emerged in the additional comments made about both production and non-production challenges:

- **Climate change:** In addition to drought, Central Oregon growers suffer from severe climate conditions like heat, wildfire risk, and unexpected frost. Many farmers noted the short growing season and climate-driven extremes. Field days reflected problem-solving for this issue, as participants discussed row cover, heated greenhouses and other temperature controls, and strategizing greenhouse use.
- **Organic fraud and integrity of the organic label.** In the surveys, some identified concerns about organic fraud and maintaining the integrity of the USDA label. This was fleshed out more in the first focus group, where farmers suggested they did not feel the need to be certified when they could talk with customers about their practices. One survey respondent said: “Organic can be misleading for consumers.” Another said in frustration, “It seems so backwards that someone who ISN’T using chemicals should bear the burden of proving that they aren’t. When the chemicals can just flow freely with no strict reporting requirements.”

At one of the focus groups, we asked specifically about organic fraud, as one attendee expressed concern over the certification’s influence. The organic grower shared that while they don’t have deep concern for fraud of the certification at their size - noting it can be a problem at a larger, industrial scale - they are concerned about the usage of non-certified organic growers saying they use “organic practices.” This was the same farmer who expressed appreciation for how the certification and audit processes ensure a high standard of farming and recordkeeping, and so their concern indicates that even if these farmers claiming to use organic practices are well-meaning, there is risk of them not meeting necessarily high standards for organic practice.

- **Managing weeds and pests.** Many growers noted challenges with weeds, with one farmer noting especially invasive species like cheatgrass and foxtails. “We are always trying to use less inputs. Especially fertilizers and agricultural practices and water. This means we often lose crops as we are too inexperienced to know what is ‘just enough’ in a given circumstance.”

Another noted, “Weed control is through the roof and organic practices [are] not practical, more information on that.”

At one field day specifically, attendees asked questions about pest control and utilizing organic methods to address rodents and insect pests. Non-chemical methods like the “stairway to heaven” (a non-chemical rat trap) and bringing in beneficial insects were discussed.

- **Access to agricultural service providers.** This was called out by one survey respondent specifically who noted their challenge in finding service providers that are knowledgeable about organic operations and the support needed. They expressed difficulty connecting with support. Another noted that they experienced challenges with “timely visits [and email communication] by OSU Extension faculty.”
- **Access to organic products.** Interestingly, a number of ranchers indicated that one of their biggest concerns was finding organic feed and not being aware of some of the regulations around organic meat, viewing them as more burdensome than regulations around produce. At the first field day, held at Rainshadow Organics, a diversified vegetable and meat operation, the owner shared that her produce production is all organic, but they do not pursue organic certification for their meat and poultry products for similar reasons.
- **Labor costs and experience.** With one transitioning farmer noting, “labor costs are terrible,” and another farmer saying they struggle finding “knowledgeable staffing,” for those that experience this challenge, it is burdensome. One farmer said “As a human powered farm, we struggle with our hourly wage, in a challenging climate and limited experience. It isn’t much \$\$\$. Our ethics push us to offer affordable food for middle class families such as ours used to be.” A number of farmers also noted their slowing ability to maintain their farms with aging bodies and increasing mobility issues.
- **Neighbor relationships.** For farmers growing amid vast areas of conventional agriculture, this is becoming an increasingly difficult challenge, especially regarding weed control. This also comes up with farmers at the end of irrigation lines receiving their water allotment last. One noted, “We are in the middle of conventional farmland. We are at the end of our irrigation line, which means we get the runoff from all farms above ours. We also get overspray from crop dusters. So while we use organic and sustainable practices on our farm, we would not qualify to be certified.”

- **Marketing and Product Value:** Many farmers identified marketing as a major challenge, especially when it comes to promoting specialty crops. One survey respondent specifically criticized the marketing of organic products, calling it “a marketing gimmick that is not based on empirical evidence.” However, another added, “The only reason we would certify is to be able to charge more for our products.” This contradicts some of what the certified organic producers noted in field days around their inability to do so. Others emphasized the difficulty of conveying the true value of their products. One respondent emphasized in this section the challenges of “marketing, recognizing products' value for pricing...”
- **Overwhelm and time.** Many participants said they feel they are already being pulled in many directions. As one put it, “Farmers do so much in so many different aspects, labor, planning, office, accounting, advertising, family, etc.” A number of survey respondents shared this sentiment, saying they’re already stretched too thin to add an organic certification process to their plates.

3.2 Farmer views on the information landscape

3.2.1 Farmer perception of currently available information on organic transition

The transition to organic farming represents a significant shift in agricultural practices, requiring farmers to navigate complex regulatory frameworks, adopt new techniques, and often make substantial investments in their operations. This section of our report delves into the perceptions and experiences of participants regarding the current landscape of information available to support organic transitioning.

The survey and focus groups revealed mixed sentiments among farmers currently transitioning or considering transitioning to organic methods. While many participants acknowledge the growing abundance of resources, there is a palpable sense of overwhelm and, at times, frustration with the quality, accessibility, and practical applicability of available information.

Key themes that emerged include:

- **Challenges in finding reliable, up-to-date information on organic certification processes and costs, particularly regionally specific information.** Some farmers feel overwhelmed by the amount of information available about organic transitions, while others feel like they can't find the information they are looking for. A few specifically said they don't know where to go to find reliable, relevant information for organic farming in the high

desert in particular. These farmers feel information from other areas might not be relevant to the unique growing conditions in Central Oregon.

- “How to make money with small to medium scale mix vegetable farms. I have not found a source [for this information].”
- “I could always use more detailed information about specifics.”
- “I think the resources are there, I just don’t have time or interest in navigating them, because we will care for our land regardless of certification.”
- “I feel like I need a mentor or multiple mentors. Mentors from outside my area that are not selling to the same customers.”
- “Not really sure where to go for unbiased information that is realistic for our growing climate and soil.”
- “Central Oregon is not well served by OSU research for small organic farms. Climate is too different from the valley.”
- “I have requested information/help from researchers/extension but have not had any support.”
- **Not understanding “the rules.”** Several participants indicated they feel overwhelmed by the thought of trying to figure out “the rules” inherent in organic certification. Most feel time-pressured already and worry that the time it would take to learn about and abide by organic certification rules “won’t be worth it.”
 - “I do not know the rules for organic cattle ranching.”
 - “We use good systems and organic components when possible, but I don’t know the details of certifying as organic and I feel like they are too burdensome for our small operation.”
 - “I look at the list of allowed and forbidden substances a lot to make sure we are compliant with the rules. I have spent some time on the website to try to understand how the system works and I know there is some government assistance to become certified. I just don’t see it being a reasonable option for our tiny market garden and pastured egg business.”
 - “I don’t know what it takes to be certified or if it’s worth it. My clients know I use organic methods and efficient water use.”

3.2.2 Preferred Modes of Communication

We asked farmers to share their preferred modes of communication about topics related to their business. They told us, in order of preference:

- On-farm demonstrations and field days (13.5%)
- Emails newsletters, groups, and listservs (10.8%)
- Printed materials (10.8%)

- Conferences and workshops (9.5%)
- Films or documentaries (9.5%)

We also asked organic and transitioning farmers about preferred ways of getting information about resources. These are their answers, in this order of preference:

- Online resources
- Certified organic farmers
- Crop consultants
- Suppliers

One respondent also noted that non-certified organic farmers were considered “very useful” sources of information.

3.2.2 Previous training

In order to understand where farmers have successfully sought out or received training and resources for navigating organic farming and certification, we asked farmers to name specific resources and training topics previously utilized.

Farmers indicated that they had received some training or resources in the following areas:

Costs and capital:

- Navigating the federal cost share program
- Grant writing training
- Internet research/articles on financial assistance or cost share

Production and soil health:

- Writing an organic system plan with a consultant
- On-farm organic production advice from other farmers and extension agencies
- NRCS support with soil restoration/ecosystem health

3.2.3 Further information farmers are seeking

We asked farmers, “What resources and information do you wish you had to help you?” While the question was targeted toward organic systems and pursuing certification, some responses seem more generally toward farming and business operations. They told us they are seeking:

Finance and budgeting support:

- “Budgeting strategies/sheets”
- “Financial assistance, benefits”
- “Financial assistance is always useful”

Resource navigation, technical assistance, and clarity:

- “Centralized source for more reliable information specific to organic farming in CO”

- “Access to land grant library resources”
- “Technical support is always something everyone can use. Farming has been in my family for many generations, so with that said a person can always learn.”
- “A genuine honest conversation about my cropping system.”
- “It seems like the standards are very broad, to be interpreted by a certifier for a specific context Or maybe they are hidden behind a paywall or something. It would be nice to be able to just look it up. Like hmm, I want to grow organic carrots, let me look at this list of what is allowed, and a few examples of management systems for my region.”
- “I wish I had understood better what to ask for- what qualifies in the grant. I would have asked for more help and could certainly use lots of information about organic farm in central Oregon and how to navigate financial assistance”

One specifically called out farmer-farmer support: “I wish I had a mentor outside my market that I could call and talk to and go visit to see how they do the recordkeeping. It would also be nice to visit with someone about strategies to obtain organic crop nutrients in less expensive ways. I would also like to be able to work with a local broker/distributor to market my crops too.”

3.3 Communication About Farming Practices

We asked how farmers communicate with customers when asked about their farming practices and if they are certified Organic.

The certified organic farmer who completed the survey told us, “I respond by asserting that we are certified Organic and Real Organic certified.”

Our non-organic certified participants told us they use the following range of messages when communicating with customers:

- “We use regenerative practices, which transcend and include organic practices.”
- “We grow everything using organic practices, but we are not certified organic.”
- “We say that we use organic practices as often as possible, but that we are not certified organic.”
- “Yes we use organic practices.”
- “We are not certified. We do not apply anything to the garden or pasture, which we understand to be disallowed and even try to strictly limit organic pesticides, herbicides and fungicides. They are a last resort. Our laying hens eat organic certified feed. Our occasional meat animal eats conventional feed due to availability issues and the cost prohibitive price point to get it delivered.”
- “We discuss our certified Naturally grown certification”

- “I use best practices as I eat my own food. I do my best to resource organic products for my animals. However, I have to stay within a budget. I stay away from GMO corn and soy products. I offer to let them observe my operation.”
- “I say I’m not certified but I use only organic fertilizers and no pesticides.”
- “We do our best.”
- “Formerly certified and using organic methods.”
- “We tell them they are either not organic or non-certified organically grown.”

4. Recommendations, Takeaways, and Priorities

We have identified a population of Central Oregon farmers and growers who are interested in, or already using self-determined organic practices. However, there is hesitation about the need for officially transitioning and certification. Knowing this, there are a few main recommendations HDFFA has for moving forward with organic technical assistance in Central Oregon.

Recommendation #1: Mentorship and Farmer Networking

A specific need, or desire for, one-on-one support for farmers transitioning or interested in transitioning paired with organic growers was expressed, specifically at the focus groups. One individual expressed that she did not think she would transition or explore certification without an experienced farmer guiding her; other respondents explicitly called this out in the survey for “record-keeping” and “organic crop nutrient [management strategies]”, with one response saying, “I feel like I need a mentor or multiple mentors.”

Additionally, as demonstrated at the field days, participating attendees remained engaged and curious. Questions ranged from production practices to reporting and recordkeeping. Additionally, these events provided opportunities for farmers to network, share contact information, and build relationships. It is important to provide opportunities like this and facilitate both structured and unstructured programming.

Organizational lead: Oregon Tilth, with HDFFA support

Recommendation #2: Intentional Communication and Information Sharing

Survey respondents expressed confusion about how to access information and navigate existing resources on organic practices and certification. HDFFA suggests more widespread information sharing through existing and trusted channels (HDFFA newsletter, social media, one-on-one conversations) and providing resources through a centralized database. These efforts are already underway, as the partnership between HDFFA and Oregon Tilth has expanded through this contract, and should be explored further. In addition, some participants expressed confusion and concern over the requirements for paperwork, recordkeeping, and developing an organic systems plan. It may be beneficial to provide readily available resources on what to expect before farmers contact certifying agencies so they know beforehand what they will need at each step.

Organizational lead: Oregon Tilth, with HDFFA support

Recommendation #3: Agency-led Technical Support for Central Oregon

Central Oregon has a very different growing climate and population of growers compared to much of the rest of the state of Oregon. Some perceptions of growers about agencies is that they do not service this region as well as other, more populated areas. This is reflected in some of the survey respondents who shared that they were challenged accessing technical support. Service providers should develop a better understanding of what these trainings and resources should look like in production practices, recordkeeping, and business skills.

OSU Extension, NRCS, and other service providers should have access to reports, training, and other resources in organic principles and practices; while OSU has an increasing capacity to work in organic services, specialized skill building in Central and Eastern Oregon should address region-specific needs to build agency capacity to serve the region's organic sector.

Organizational lead: Oregon Tilth, NRCS, OSU Extension, and HDFFA

Recommendation #4: Promotion and Expansion of Cost Subsidy Programs

Cost of certification and any equipment/supplies purchases to transition seemed to be one of the biggest concerns for survey respondents and event participants. While there are cost subsidy programs currently available, many farmers expressed concern over the ongoing cost of certification, organic practices, and finding markets. One organic grower shared that they utilize the organic certification cost-share program, but their administrative costs still seemed high. By sharing about these opportunities, the costs may seem less prohibitive; any additional funding to offset these costs may encourage more participation as well. Additionally, some responses to the survey and conversations with farmers indicated that there is some confusion or misunderstanding on how much it actually costs for certification, and it may be beneficial to create resources and transparency around this process.

HDFFA and other organizations can also support any efforts advocating to increase funding for these programs.

Organizational lead: Oregon Tilth, OSU Extension, NRCS, with HDFFA support

Recommendation #5: Consumer Education

Throughout all of our Agricultural Support programming, HDFFA has heard from farmers that the marketing of products and reaching markets (both wholesale and direct-to-consumer) is an ongoing challenge. An important aspect of the food system, in addition to the actual growing of the food, is reaching customers. A number of survey respondents shared that marketing their product and its



true value, whether organic or not, is a challenge. HDFFA and other organizations can offer consumer education on topics such as:

- Organic certification, labeling, and the required practices
- The certification process and why one may or may not pursue it, as well as the “why” for growing and growing organically
- Organic farms in our area
- General awareness of the local food system.

HDFFA and other participating organizations can reach new markets, educate buyers on how and why their food is grown and labeled a certain way, and provide marketing assets for relevant farms.

Organizational lead: HDFFA

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Appendices

- Survey questionnaire:
https://hdfffa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/surveymonkey_413099272.pdf
 - This survey has “logic” applied; based on a respondent’s answers to the initial questions, they were directed to the appropriate questions (eg/ “Are you certified organic?” lead to the appropriate relevant questions.
- Focus group guide
 - <https://hdfffa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/topp-focus-group-discussion-guide.pdf>
- Organic Farming Research Foundation’s (OFRF) 2022 National Organic Research Agenda (NORA) report
 - https://oarf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OFRF_National-Organic-Research-Agenda-NORA_2022-report-FINAL.pdf
- USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service 2022 Census of Agriculture - Data for Crook, Deschutes, and Jefferson Counties
 - <https://hdfffa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/tri-county-farm-census-data-2022.pdf>