

Organic Farming-Tarlok Sahota's Questions; Hugh Martin's Answers

Dr. Tarlok Singh Sahota, TBARS Thunder Bay

A couple of months ago I had some questions on organic farming. And I thought that Hugh Martin, OMAFRA's Organic Crop Production Program Lead, would be the best person to answer those questions. I am reproducing below a dialogue between Hugh and me for information of our growers.

Q1. How much acreage have we got in Ontario/and Canada under organic farming and what is the trend in the recent past? Is the acreage increasing or decreasing? At what rate?

A1. We have about 500-600 certified organic farms in Ontario. In 2005 the acreage was about 85,000 acres. Both the number of farms and number of acres is growing but at a slower rate than the increase in retail sales. The numbers can be found at the following links:

- <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/organic/orglinks.htm#stats>
- http://www.agr.gc.ca/misb/hort/org-bio/pdf/certifiedorganicproduction05_e.pdf
- <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/95-629-XIE/2007000/landuse.htm#certorg>
- http://www.organiccentre.ca/MarketInfo/mkt_welcome.asp
- http://www.organiccentre.ca/Docs/RetailSalesOrganic_Canada2006.pdf

Q2. How much organic food do we import into Ontario/and Canada? What is the dollar value?

A2. We sell about \$1Billion per year of organic food in Canada (retail value). The percentage imported varies in each study but 50-90% of processed food and fresh fruit and vegetables are imported. Eighty percent is a commonly used number but a recent A.C. Nielsen study suggested it may be somewhat lower.

Q3. What are the main constraints in Organic Farming? Weeds? Fertility? Any other?

A3. This depends on the product.

- In fruits – insect pests/diseases, and tree management including the orchard floor
- In vegetables – weeds, insect pests/diseases, marketing, and labour
- Grains – weeds and nitrogen – both are manageable but takes extra time for mechanical weed control, which is a constraint on some farms
- Livestock – feed costs, some health issues but it is manageable, and marketing challenges with some products

Q4. Are the economic returns attractive enough from organic farming?

A4. It depends on the commodity and on how good the management is. In general returns are better than for conventional, but challenges are greater. There is no recipe. A

higher level of knowledge and management is required. Information is sometimes harder to get and research information is not always available.

The issue of how much difference there is between conventional and organic yield is always controversial. There is some good work in Iowa/Minnesota that suggests corn and soybean yields can be fairly similar and Rodale also has similar work. The rotations are such that you do not produce corn and soybean each year. The real answer is that it is variable and it depends on many factors.

Q5. What could be the best strategy to improve production and increase returns from organic farming?

A5. I think we need more research but sometimes you have to be innovative in finding the funding. All research that is appropriate for organic agriculture has some application in conventional farming. Organic research also gives a new perspective for doing conventional research. There are fewer sources of partnership funding in organic farming. The needs depend on the commodity. Here is the link for national research priorities:

http://www.organiccentre.ca/ResearchDatabase/res_priorities07.asp

Readers may note that the global market for organic products rose from 23 Billion USD in 2002 to 40 Billion USD in 2006. Ontario/and Canada are the net importers of organic food. Organic crop production has not been keeping pace with the demand for organic food. With some enlightened Thunder Bay groups, such as Food Security Research Network and Food Action Network, promoting locally produced food and consumers' likely willingness to pay more for the locally produced food, especially for the organically produced food, Thunder Bay growers have an opportunity to strengthen their organic food production operations/or venture into such operations. Another favourable factor for organic food production, in our area, is that we do not have any serious challenge of insect pests or diseases in any of the crops. I am sure Hugh Martin will be willing to provide technical information to the interested growers. Hugh can be contacted at 519-826-4587 or at hugh.martin@ontario.ca.

Published in Northwest Link, October 2007, Pages 5-6.