

Des Moines Register

AGRICULTURE

Iowa farming gets greener as demand for organic crops, produce, milk, meat and eggs grows, USDA report shows

Donnelle Eller Des Moines Register

Published 7:01 a.m. CT Oct. 26, 2020

Iowa farmers are growing more organic corn, soybeans, hay and oats, driving a 30% spike in the state's organic acres over the past three years, a new U.S. Department of Agriculture report shows.

Iowa had 779 certified organic farms last year with 133,691 acres. Those figures include 47 more farms and 30,555 more acres than recorded in 2016, the year covered by the most recent previous survey.

Iowa now ranks sixth nationally for the number of organic farms, the report says. The state leads the nation in producing organic corn and soybeans, at 13% and 15% of the total, respectively, and provided 30% of the organic oats produced nationally, the report shows.

Iowans also grow organic vegetables, apples, berries and strawberries, the report says.

The state's growth in organic acres and farms is good for the environment and good for rural Iowa, says Paul Mugge, who grows organic corn and soybeans in northwest Iowa.

Mugge said growing organic grain, which often goes for higher prices than traditional corn and soybeans, makes it easier for farmers to be profitable while tending fewer acres.

"What could be better for our little communities, schools and churches, if there are 10 of me on 300 acres (as opposed to) one guy farming 3,000 acres?" said Mugge, who farms near Sutherland in O'Brien County.

Organic crops are grown without synthetic pesticides and fertilizers and genetically modified seeds, and prices for organic corn and soybeans are generally twice those for conventional crops, Mugge said.

A half-dozen years of falling commodity prices, with farmers struggling to post profits, have prompted some traditional farmers to shift to organic growing, said Gary Huber, president of the Iowa Organic Association.

Though prices for conventional corn have climbed in recent weeks, Mugge said that's partially due to the crops lost to the derecho that slammed through Iowa in August. The USDA estimates Iowa had 850,000 fewer corn acres to harvest because of the storm.

At the same time as farmers are considering a shift, Huber said, consumers have "a growing sensitivity" about who they're getting their food from and how it was produced.

It's "been going on for a while, but more recently, we're seeing a fundamental shift ... with skyrocketing interest in local foods," said Huber, an Ames resident who until recently sold vegetables at the Des Moines farmers market.

The trend intensified when the global pandemic hit the U.S. in March, with consumers becoming concerned about the availability of meat, eggs and other food products following disruptions in the food supply system, he said.

"I think we're poised to see these numbers expand a lot more," said Huber, who has worked at Practical Farmers of Iowa and the Iowa Food Cooperative.

U.S. sales for organic fruits, vegetables, meat and milk jumped 31% last year to \$9.93 billion, an increase of \$2.37 billion, the USDA says.

Iowa organic farmers' sales climbed 10% over the three years to \$144.6 million, with corn, eggs and milk leading purchases, the USDA report shows.

California leads the nation in organic sales and acres, with 3,012 organic farms encompassing nearly 1 million acres and generating about \$3.6 billion in sales in 2019.

Even though Iowa's organic acres are growing, they remain a small piece of the state's total 30.5 million farm acres. And higher grain prices alone aren't enough for Iowa farmers to make the switch, said Rosalyn Lehman, executive director of the Iowa Organic Association. Concern for the environment and climate change play a role as well, she said.

"Farmers don't just transition to organics just for the economics," Lehman said. "It's hard work and it's more work. ... You're learning a whole new production system from what you're used to. So you can't just get into it for the money."

Mugge said his concern about climate change plays a big part in why he grows organic crops. "Organic farmers use two-thirds of the fossil fuel that conventional farmers use," he said, noting that manufacturing anhydrous ammonia, a widely used synthetic fertilizer, is fuel-intensive.

Corn led Iowa's organic sales at \$38 million; followed by organic eggs at \$37 million; milk, \$19 million; soybeans, \$15.5 million; oats, \$4.4 million; and pork, \$3.4 million, the report shows.

Donnelle Eller covers agriculture, the environment and energy for the Register. Reach her at deller@registermedia.com or 515-284-8457.