

Going organic - Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main principles behind organic systems?

"Organic farming can be defined as a system where maximum reliance is placed on locally or farm derived renewable resources and the management of self-regulating ecological and biological processes and interactions in order to provide acceptable levels of crop, livestock and human nutrition, protection from pests and diseases and an appropriate return to the human and other resources employed. Reliance on external inputs, whether chemical or organic, is reduced as far as possible".

(Organic Farming Management Handbook 2002/03 page2 Lampkin et al)

Questions associated with land conversion

Q1 If I decide to go organic what are my conversion options?

There are two routes to achieve organic status and you may wish to experiment before entering a commitment.

1. Simultaneous conversion (SimCon) - Choosing this option is the quickest route to having organic produce to sell because the land and the enterprises that it supports achieve organic status two years from the conversion start date. However there are associated cost implications to choosing this route because both land and livestock must be managed according to the Organic Standards from the first day of conversion. This means that vet and med treatments must be compliant as well as livestock feeding. As of 1 January 2008, ruminant diets must be 100% organic and any concentrate feed used must be fully organic. Organic compound feeds cost in the region of £350/tonne. This needs to be costed into the Conversion Plan.

2. Traditional conversion It is the land only that is managed according to the Standards under this option, which means that no prohibited substances can be applied to the land once conversion has begun. These would include artificial fertiliser, pesticides, herbicides, manure imported from an intensive poultry farm or zero grazed livestock enterprise for instance. Crops grown must be planted using seed mixtures that are compliant with the Standards. Grass seed mixtures must contain a minimum of 65% organic seed and farmers growing cereals must use seed that is 100% organic. Livestock on a farm that undergoes traditional conversion must begin conversion as soon as the land achieves organic status.

Q2 How do I maintain soil fertility?

Caring for the soil is one of the cornerstones of organic farming as all life ultimately is dependent upon it. A healthy soil will grow vigorous crops which will nourish both man and beast therefore the organic Standards do allow the application of some fertility building/maintaining products. Your Certification Body can supply you with a list of permitted products but you will have to demonstrate that application of P and/or K and Lime is necessary and a simple soil test can usually suffice as evidence. Generally speaking, if a soil analysis shows a pH of less than 5.8, and P and K indices below 1, application of lime and permitted sources of P and K can be used. Well rotted farmyard manure and slurry are the main source of fertility and they are to be seen as a valuable resource and stored and spread appropriately. Clovers are the chief source of nitrogen and a well managed grass sward which contains a high proportion of clover can contribute up to 200 kg per annum of nitrogen to the soil.

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Questions associated with LIVESTOCK conversion

Q3 When will I have organic livestock to sell?

If you choose to convert using the 'SimCon' method (and once the land has completed the conversion phase):

- Calves born three months after the start of conversion can be sold as organic, e.g. conversion date 1 March 2008; calves born 1 July 2008 onwards can be sold as organic after 1 March 2010.
- Ewes that are tugged during the autumn of the second year of conversion can be sold as organic. e.g. Conversion date 1 March 2008; lambs born during 2010 can be sold as organic after 1 March 2010.

Under the traditional conversion option (and once the land has completed the conversion phase)

- Calves born 3 months after the land becomes organic can be sold as organic,
- Organic lambs are produced after the ewes are tugged on organic ground. It is usually 3 years before there are organic lambs to sell.

Q4 How do I convert my livestock enterprise?

Every converting livestock producer must produce an Animal Health Plan (AHP) which is similar to what producers that are in Farm Assurance Schemes are already keeping. If you don't have an AHP, ask your vet to assist you prepare one. Many farmers praise this document because it draws attention to the persistent and occasional diseases and helps focus on ways to reduce or eliminate some of them.

Q5 How do I deal with internal parasites in sheep?

Although some treatment with anthelmintics (drenches) is permitted, steps must be taken to reduce the need for drenching and be written into the AHP. Methods such as: mixed grazing, reduced stocking rate, rotational grazing, culling persistent offenders and selecting resistant sheep are systems that minimise reliance on treatments.

Q6 How do I deal with external parasites in sheep?

Most treatments are permitted except for the use of OP's. Organic Standards do permit their use in extreme circumstances but dipped sheep cannot be sold as organic and breeding ewes will have to go through a conversion period again. Again good husbandry must form a large part of prevention wherever possible.

Q7 Can I continue to use vaccinations?

If there is a known problem e.g. pulpy kidney and the vet can verify this, a vaccine can be used but all treatments must be included in the AHP. Use a 6 in 1 as opposed to a 10 in 1 vaccine.

Q8 Are there issues associated with footrot that I should be aware of?

As with conventional farming, there are simple and effective ways to minimise footrot in a flock before resorting to antibiotics. These strategies should be included in the animal health plan. Antibiotics are permitted but the animal's identification number must be recorded, as well as the appropriate organic withdrawal period.

Q9 What is the "three strikes and out rule" ?

Three separate treatments in a 12 month period will result in an animal losing its organic status e.g.

- In sheep; antibiotic administered for lameness, retained afterbirth following a difficult lambing and an infection after flystrike.
- In cattle; lameness, retained afterbirth and mastitis. Dry cow tubes are not permitted except occasionally in high cell count cows. Discuss with Certification Body before use.

Q10 What are the withdrawal periods associated with drug use?

All treatments have longer withdrawal periods, usually at least twice what the manufacturers recommend. Routine use of drugs is not permitted; the aim of organic farming is to develop a farming system that promotes positive health where the focus is on disease prevention and not treatment.

Q11 What are the main preventative approaches to maintain animal health?

- The selection of appropriate breeds and strains of animal
- The application of animal husbandry practices appropriate to the requirements of each species encouraging strong resistance to disease and the prevention of infections.
- The use of high quality feed, together with regular exercise and access to pasturage having the effect of encouraging the natural immunological defence of the animal.
- Ensuring the appropriate density of livestock, thus avoiding overstocking and any resulting animal health problems (UK Organic Standards)

Questions associated with livestock nutrition

Q12 Do I need to alter my livestock housing arrangements?

Allowing sufficient space for livestock during housing periods is an essential part of managing their positive health. The organic Standards seek to provide the optimum density to ensure the animal's welfare by 'providing them with sufficient space to stand naturally, lie down easily, turn around, groom themselves and assume all natural movements'...(OF&G Control Manual 8.8.13). Slatted floors are permitted but must not cover more than 50% of the area and are not acceptable as lying areas. Animals must have bedding material and non-organic straw is permitted. Dairy cow housing space requirement: 10 sq m.per cow (includes feeding, lying and loafing area). Sheep housing space requirement: 4sq m.per ewe.

Q13 How will organic conversion affect my stocking rate?

The effect on stocking rate will depend on how intensive your system is now and to what extent clover contributes to your grassland. With moderate levels of feed and fertiliser expect a reduction of around 20%.

As a very general rule, with N fertiliser (150 kg N/ha or 3 cwt/acre) on good soils, expect a minimum reduction of 20%, on poorer land, the reduction will be greater. In areas where there are fertile soils, some organic dairy farmers are achieving stocking rates of up to 2.0 livestock units (LSU) (which is the maximum stocking rate permitted under the organic Standards so as to comply with the 170 kg N/ha rule) but a more typical stocking rate would be: lowland beef and sheep 1.5 LSU and upland beef and sheep 0.8 LSU Stocking is rate also affected by the amount of bought in feed; if you rely on high levels of purchased feed to achieve the current level of performance you will have to look closely at the economics of production.

Q14 How can the farm become more self sufficient?

A number of approaches can be taken:

- Aim to make best possible use of home grown forage; utilize your cheapest feed by conserving hay/silage when it is at its optimum growth stage and graze grass before it becomes stemmy and loses palatability.
- Select breeds that are good foragers and which are far less dependent upon concentrate feed.
- Consider marketing unfinished stock as stores
- Avoid keeping prolific breeds of sheep; ewes rearing a single lamb need no concentrate.
- Consider reducing stocking rates and use the extra land to grow cereals if the farm has sufficient land to grow crops in rotation.

Q15 What are the issues with diet and feedstuffs?

All ruminant diets must be 100% organic, this includes any concentrates fed. 100% organic concentrates are expensive and cost approx. £350/tonne. The ruminant's diet must consist of at least 60% forage. See Factsheet No. 6 for feed suppliers.

Pigs and poultry have at present a 10% non-organic allowance until December 2009 and 5% until 2011. These percentages are to be calculated on an annual dry matter basis. The maximum daily non-organic allowance is 25% of the dry matter intake.

Questions associated with certification

Q16 What is organic registration?

Factsheet 9 lists the Certification Bodies (CB) and it is advisable to contact more than one before making a decision. Your selected CB will send you an application pack for completion and the information that you provide demonstrates your understanding of organic principles and how you will manage your farm in accordance with the Standards. The application pack includes a copy of the Organic Standards and requires information on how your land is managed with regards to: manure storage and application, grazing rotations, silage/hay crops grown in each

field and crop rotations. An animal health plan is also necessary as is a biodiversity plan, farm buildings layout and proposed marketing of organic produce. Upon receipt of your application with payment, the CB will arrange to inspect your farm and when satisfied that you are compliant with the Standards will issue you with a Certificate.

Q17 What is a certification body?

CBs are privately run organisations licensed by DEFRA to inspect farms and processors to ensure their compliance with the organic standards. CBs must enforce the minimum organic standards which are decided upon by DEFRA and laid down in the Compendium of UK Organic Standards. The Standards are amended occasionally when the Advisory Committee on Organic Standards (ACOS) advise DEFRA on necessary changes. The most recent change to the Standards has been the inclusion of 100% organic feed for ruminants. Some CBs impose more severe standards than the minimum because they believe that the minimum standards don't adequately protect the needs of livestock. This is why it is important to discuss your enterprise with more than one CB before making your selection.

Q18 How long does the certification process take?

The certification procedure can take up to 2 months and can cost approx £450 + VAT. A typical 100 ha LFA farm would be charged an annual fee of £546. Organic status is achieved after 2 years but the period can be less than this for pig and poultry enterprises. After initial certification an annual inspection will involve looking at vet and med records, animal movements, land and manure use, purchased feeds and a farm walk to see the livestock, crops, buildings etc.

Q19 How big is the record keeping/paperwork burden?

The OF&G Manual states: 'The records must be sufficiently comprehensive to demonstrate that the Standards have been observed...' Record keeping is seen as a necessary evil in modern farming and organic farmers must keep adequate records as evidence that they have complied with the Standards. Records must be kept of the following: Livestock farmers – births and bought in stock, deaths and stock sold, vet products purchased and treatments given, livestock feeds, manure applications, fertilisers applied, crop yields (hay, silage, grain etc) seeds and derogation sought to use less than 100% organic seeds.

Questions associated with the Organic Farming Scheme

Q20 What is the current position?

It is still unclear how organic farming and conversion will be supported under Glastir, which will be available from 2011 onwards. For the latest information, please visit www.organic.aber.ac.uk/policy or contact the Organic Helpline on 01970 622100.

Questions associated with the marketing of organic produce

Q21 What are the main marketing outlets and what is the supply/demand situation?

The Organic Strategy Group advises that 'Producers should always consider the potential benefits offered by producer marketing groups, particularly when dealing with multiple retailers.

- Direct marketing is also possible via farmers markets and the Internet
- Livestock markets can only be used when there are specially designated organic sales. Usually, it is store and breeding stock that are sold through these outlets.
- Contact your present marketing outlet and discuss what market would they have for your finished organic stock.

Q22 How variable is the 'supply/demand' situation?

There are concerns among some market outlets that the supply of organic **lamb** is at saturation point; however, there are times of the year when the market is undersupplied. Converting producers need to be aware of the lamb supply profile and if possible avoid selling finished lambs during the peak months of September –December. Organic **beef** continues to be much sought after and the outlook is that demand for UK organic beef will continue to outstrip supplies and the market will remain buoyant for the foreseeable future.