



## Drought Impacting Organic Farmers

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MADISON – Impact of the drought on organic farmers was one of several topics discussed at the Wisconsin Organic Advisory Council meeting on Monday, July 23 in Dodgeville. Wisconsin leads the country in numbers of organic dairy, beef and poultry, and this year brings significant challenges. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) continues to offer resources to farmers during this drought.

The drought has exacerbated existing feed shortages and high prices for organic grain and forage. In normal years, many organic farmers kept costs lower by producing their own feed. This year, yield reductions resulting from the drought will require these farmers to purchase feed.

“Price and availability will both be issues,” said Mike Schulist, Council member and marketing manager for the Wisconsin Organic Marketing Alliance. “I’ve heard of prices as high as \$17/bushel for organic corn and \$30/bushel for organic soybeans. One bright spot is that small grain yields have been relatively good this year.”

Another aspect of the drought is its effect on pasture production. Organic dairy farmers must provide pasture for their cattle, with 30 percent or more of their ration during the growing season required to come from pasture.

For farmers like Council member and Walworth County dairy grazer Altfred Krusenbaum, whose ration averages more than 50 percent pasture, meeting the pasture requirement will be less of a problem than sourcing hay for winter. Many organic dairy farmers are feeding hay that they would normally save for winter use.

Organic farmers can apply for a temporary variance if they cannot meet the 30 percent pasture requirement. To apply for a variance, organic farmers need to document they are affected by the drought with feed records, photos or newspaper articles. The variance is requested through their certifier. The USDA organic regulations do not allow variances to the requirement that 100 percent organic feed be provided to organic livestock.

The Council discussed the release of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres for grazing and haying. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency has released CRP acres for emergency forage in most of the southern half of Wisconsin. Many acres of CRP may be eligible for organic certification if they have been managed for three years or more with no synthetic herbicides, pesticides or fertilizers. Farmers must get approval from their county USDA Service Center before harvesting forage and there are restrictions and payment reductions involved.

“Organic farmers must also get approval from their certifier to bring additional acres into their organic system plan, whether they are on their own farm or on another property,” said Steve Walker, the Council’s certification representative from Midwest Organic Services Association (MOSA).

Even vegetable producers, many of whom have irrigation, have seen their yields decline due to the extreme heat that has accompanied the dry conditions. Livestock and dairy farmers have seen production decline in the heat and large scale producers of food grade grain and soy products will be impacted with lower yields.

For a list of drought resources, visit [http://datcp.wi.gov/Farms/Drought\\_2012](http://datcp.wi.gov/Farms/Drought_2012). A link is available to the Farmer-to-Farmer Network to connect buyers and sellers of livestock feed and pasture. The Wisconsin Farm Center is available to all farmers at 1-800-942-2474.

For more information about the Wisconsin Organic Advisory Council, contact Laura Paine, DATCP’s Organic and Grazing Specialist, at 608-224-5120 or [laura.paine@wi.gov](mailto:laura.paine@wi.gov). Connect with DATCP on Twitter at [twitter.com/widatcp](https://twitter.com/widatcp) or Facebook at [facebook.com/widatcp](https://facebook.com/widatcp). ###