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Finding: Farm Economy

October 24, 2013



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Who Is Adopting Organic Farming Practices?

by **Faqir Bagi**



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Consumers appear to be growing increasingly health conscious and environmentally aware. As evidence, U.S. organic food sales grew from \$3.6 billion in 1997 to an estimated \$28 billion in 2012 (see “Growth Patterns in the U.S. Organic Industry” in this issue of Amber Waves). Growth has been especially rapid since 2002, when USDA established national standards for organic agricultural production and processing. In response to the rise in demand for organic products, a growing number of farmers have had to adopt new (to them) organic production practices and establish new marketing channels. Farmers known



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for early adoption of innovative practices tend to operate larger farms and have higher levels of schooling and stronger links to outside sources of information than other farmers. How closely does this model of innovation adoption fit U.S. organic farming?

Despite strong growth in organic food sales, the adoption of organic farming is still relatively rare: only 1 percent of U.S. farms are organic. Data from USDA’s 2007 Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) reveal that small farms (annual sales under \$250,000) operated as a principal occupation were more apt to adopt organic farming than other small or large farms, so at least one characteristic associated with early adopters—large farm size—is not critical in organic farming. In the same period, however, farmers who had at least a bachelor’s degree were more likely to have adopted organic practices, so higher educational attainment may play a role in the decision to farm organically.

Nearly 70 percent of the Nation’s organic farms are in the Northeast or Pacific regions. Education appears to be particularly important as a predictor of organic farming in these areas. Among farmers in the Pacific region with at least a bachelor’s degree, 8.4 percent are organic farmers. Only 2.4 percent of farmers without a bachelor’s degree have adopted organic practices. The pattern in the Northeast is similar, although not as striking. When education and reliance on outside expertise are considered together, 10.2 and 14.5 percent of farmers, respectively, in the Northeast and Pacific regions who had at least a bachelor’s degree and also used both paid farm management advice and the Internet were organic producers, compared with 0.1 percent or fewer farmers with none of these three characteristics.

Econometric analysis shows that all three characteristics—education, access to management advice, and Internet use—are independently associated with the adoption of organic farming.

Farm operators more likely to adopt organic farming have at least a bachelor’s degree, use paid farm management advice and the Internet, and are located in the Northeast or the Pacific regions

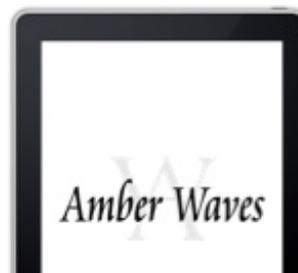
Farm or farm operator characteristic	Organic farms as a share of all farms in the area with each characteristic		
	U.S.	Northeast	Pacific
	<i>Percent</i>		
All farms/all farmer characteristics	1.0	4.7	4.7
Farms by principal occupation and sales*			

Small farms (nonfarming occupation)	0.6	3.0	2.4
Small farms (farming occupation)	2.0	8.8	8.6
Large farms	1.0	1.3	6.6
Farm operators with at least a bachelor's degree	1.8	5.8	8.4
Farm operators with less than a bachelor's degree	0.8	4.3	2.4
Farm operators with all of the following characteristics:	2.9	10.2	14.5
Have at least a bachelor's degree			
Use paid farm management advice			
Use Internet for business			
Farm operators with none of the above three characteristics	0.10	0.01	0.10
<p>*Small farms are those with annual sales under \$250,000. These are divided into farms operated as the principal occupation of the farmer and farms whose operators are either retired or who consider an off-farm activity as their principal occupation. Large farms are those with \$250,000 or more in annual sales. Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA's Agricultural Resource Management Survey, 2007, as reported in Bagi and Reeder (2012).</p>			

This article is drawn from...

Farm Activities Associated With Rural Development Initiatives, by Faqir Bagi and Richard Reeder, USDA, Economic Research Service, May 2012

Emerging Issues in the U.S. Organic Industry, by Catherine Greene, Carolyn Dimitri, Biing-Hwan Lin, William McBride, Lydia Oberholtzer, and Travis Smith, USDA, Economic Research Service, June 2009





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