



## High crop prices may delay move to organic

By Sue Kirchhoff, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — High crop prices, if sustained, could have a number of spillover effects, on conservation programs to organic farming.

Anecdotal evidence suggests soaring prices for conventional crops could slow the movement toward organic farming.

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U.S. growers, who must meet stringent guidelines to be certified organic, have done so for both environmental reasons and the fact that organic crops sell at a premium. With conventional commodity prices so high, some growers may delay switching to organic production.

"The push to transition (to organic) is disrupted, if you will, by these tumultuous days in the conventional commodity market," says Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation. "However, organic demand continues to go through the roof, particularly for feed."

More than 4 million acres of farmland were dedicated to organic farming in 2005, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. While that's double the 2002 level, it's less than 1% of U.S. farm acreage.

The impact of higher prices isn't confined to this country.

Paul Rice is CEO of TransFair, which certifies that international suppliers meet stringent labor and environmental standards. He notes that high coffee prices mean some growers who had pledged to go organic are now waiting on the sidelines. But even as prices rise, many benefits are going to middlemen rather than growers in many developing countries.

Another open question is whether the supply situation will affect conservation programs, as farmers have an economic incentive to plant on more marginal land.

Acting Agriculture Secretary Chuck Conner announced last month that he would not let farmers opt out, penalty free, from the Conservation Reserve Program.

The CRP is the nation's largest private-lands conservation program, paying growers to take about 36 million acres of fragile areas out of production under 10- to 15-year contracts.

But Conner noted that about 2 million acres will come out of the CRP this year, as contracts expire and producers don't re-up. The USDA will not hold a general sign-up to put additional acres into the reserve this year, and Conner said he would continue to monitor the acreage and planting situation to make sure there was adequate supplies of wheat and other grains.

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