

U.S. sets survey of organic farming and marketing

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. government will make its first in-depth survey of organic farming this spring, an eight-page questionnaire on which crops and livestock are produced, how they are grown and where they are sold.

Questionnaires will be mailed in early May with responses due by mail or Internet by June 17, said the Agriculture Department. A report is expected in early 2010. The 2007 Census of Agriculture counted 20,437 farms with land in organic production and sales of \$1.7 billion.

Organic farming is a small part of American agriculture but commonly described as a rapidly growing segment. There are 2.2 million U.S. farms covering 920 million acres (372 million hectares). Organic farming accounted for 2.6 million acres in 2007.

Leaders in the organic movement have pressed for a USDA survey as the first step to more USDA research and aid to their sector.

"This is great news," said Bob Scowcroft of the Organic Farming Research Foundation in Santa Cruz, California. "We feel very strongly this will show a need for a fair share of research, which has been our mantra for years."

A 2001 survey by the foundation was the last nationwide gauge of organic farming. It focused on 6,487 operators who were certified organic producers. The USDA survey will include farms in transition to organic, noncertified farms and certified organic farms.

Producers will be asked which crops and livestock they grow, how many acres are devoted to each and sales figures for them. There also are questions on cost of fertilizer, fuel, seeds, labor, feed, property taxes and other production costs. value.

Also they will be asked about farming practices to control pests and weeds, if they limit tillage, and if they use animal or "green" manures before questions about marketing -- do they use roadside stand, sell on the Internet, contract with grocers or supply goods to a processor.

"This is an opportunity for organic producers to share their voices and help ensure the continued growth and sustainability of organic farming in the United States," said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack in a statement.

(Reporting by Charles Abbott; Editing by Marguerita Choy)

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