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## EQIP grants available for transition to organic

Cookson Beecher  
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The USDA announced plans Tuesday, May 5, to provide \$50 million in 2009 to help farmers and ranchers transition to organic production.

The funds will be distributed through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan said the grant program is part of the 2009 Organic Initiative, which is designed to encourage more organic agriculture production. Merrigan announced the grants while speaking at the USDA National Organic Standards Board.

"Assisting organic producers is a priority of the 2008 Farm Bill as well as for (Agriculture) Secretary (Tom) Vilsack and the Obama administration," Merrigan said in a USDA press release.

Under the Organic Initiative, required minimum core conservation practices will be determined based on specific resource concerns.

Those practices are conservation crop rotation; cover cropping; nutrient management; pest management; prescribed grazing; and forage harvest management.

States are required to consider using any appropriate practice that meets the resource concern on a particular operation.

In a press release from Santa Cruz-based Organic Farming Research Foundation, Mark Lipson, senior policy analyst, hailed USDA's announcement about the grant program as "a tremendous victory for the organic community and the environment."

"Throughout last year's farm bill fight, we worked hard to ensure organic farmers and ranchers a voice at the policy table in Washington," he said. "Today we are reaping the fruits of our advocacy."

The Natural Resources Conservation Service will only be accepting applications for a 3-week period, May 11 through May 29.

Producers interested in applying for the grants should contact their nearest USDA Service Center to determine eligibility.

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