

Foundation hails historic USDA plan to aid farmers, ranchers with organic transition

Written by Editor

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SANTA CRUZ – The US Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service has announced plans to provide \$50 million in 2009 to help farmers and ranchers throughout the country transition to organic production systems.

The funds will be distributed through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and will be available to farmers or ranchers working to transition new acreage or livestock to an organic system.

The Santa Cruz-based Organic Farming Research Foundation's policy team played a key role in the Farm Bill effort to win organic transition funding.

OFRF's Senior Policy Analyst Mark Lipson called the USDA's announcement 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," said Lipson. "Today we are reaping the fruits of our advocacy."

He added that the USDA funding is historic. "It signals federal recognition of the tremendous contributions organic agriculture makes to the health of our environment. Better water quality, enhanced bio-diversity, protection of bees and other pollinators, and increased carbon storage in our soil are all benefits of organic production."

Lipson said the EQIP transition contracts are geared for small- and medium-scale family farms and ranches and will speed the move toward more organic acreage. He said the challenge now is to let producers know they must act quickly to take advantage of the program.

The NRCS will be only be accepting applications for a three-week period, beginning May 11.

OFRF's Executive Director Bob Scowcroft characterized the \$50 million funding plan as one of the biggest policy successes of the organization's 19 years of advocacy.

"This move turns the corner for EQIP, setting it on a path toward producing organic solutions to the environmental challenges we face on our farms and ranches," said Scowcroft. "We have to thank our key Congressional allies: Senators Harkin, Leahy and Tester. Senator Gillibrand also played an important role in her previous position in the House, along with Rep. Cardoza."

He said their support was crucial in creating this conversion program and encouraging the actions the USDA announced.