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## Agricultural Sustainability in North Dakota Communities: Assessing the Barriers to Transitioning to Organic Production



Curtis Stofferahn and Britt Jacobson

### University and Community Partners

Department of Sociology, University of North Dakota;  
The Foundation for Agricultural and Rural Resources  
Management and Sustainability (FAR<sup>RMS</sup>).

### Overview

This project, funded by a grant from the Public Scholarship Program of the University of North Dakota Center for Community Engagement, brought together a faculty member at the University of North Dakota and a project coordinator at the Foundation for Agricultural and Rural Resources Management and Sustainability. FAR<sup>RMS</sup> is a non-profit organization founded in Medina, North Dakota, in 2000, with the mission to explore and implement practices and methods to further the sustainability of farms and rural communities. This research was aimed at identifying the obstacles prohibiting conventional farmers from transitioning to organic production and the characteristics predisposing farmers to adopt organic farming techniques. Additionally, the research was used to determine the educational needs of organic and sustainable farmers in North Dakota. Upon completion of the project, the results were released to the public through the *North Dakota Rural Life Poll*, and were presented to the Board of Directors of FAR<sup>RMS</sup>.

### Project Description

This project is based on telephone surveys of conventional and organic farmers in North Dakota. Dr. Curtis Stofferahn, a UND rural sociologist, worked in conjunction with FAR<sup>RMS</sup> to develop the survey tool and to analyze the survey results. FAR<sup>RMS</sup> collected contact lists of farmers. Dr. Stofferahn then supervised the collection and analysis of data, and the development and dissemination of the final report.

The conventional farmers were selected from among the subscribers of *Farm and Ranch Guide*, who fit the characteristics of North Dakota farmers and ranchers as described in the Censuses of Agriculture. The organic farmers were chosen from the list of organic growers of the North Dakota Department of Agriculture together with lists of producer members provided by the Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society and the International Certification Services. Telephone surveys of 389 conventional and 102 organic producers were conducted by the University of North Dakota's Social Science Research Institute from February 20 through March 24, 2006. The overall response rate was 69%.

### Results

Eighty-two percent of the conventional farmers surveyed have never considered transitioning to organic production. The 68 farm producers who have considered transitioning to organic production were asked to identify the activities they have pursued in considering transitioning to organic production. Organic farmers were the most common source of information both in supplying information to farmers considering a transition to organic production and in discussing organic production with them. Farmers also attended seminars or workshops and searched the internet for information on organic production. Fewer farmers sought this information from government agencies.

Concerns about marketing, production yields, expenses, management difficulties, and compliance procedures were some of the barriers to transitioning to organic production mentioned by those surveyed. Weed control was also mentioned often.

The 81 farmers currently farming organically, the 21 in the process of transitioning to organic production, and the 68 conventional farmers considering a change to organic production were asked what circumstances serve as a constraint specific to the transition to organic production. Finding organic markets is the most serious problem, followed by transport of organic products, lack of organic marketing networks, and lack of consumer understanding about organic food.

Maintaining economic sustainability of the farm is felt to be the most important reason to farm organically, followed by concerns for the health of family and workers, and preoccupations with the environment.

### Lessons Learned

FAR<sup>RMS</sup> used the project results in a number of successful grant proposals. It was very helpful to have statewide data that confirmed the findings of similar national research of these farmer groups. The results also informed FAR<sup>RMS</sup>' development of educational programming. Today, the organization provides a variety of educational experiences, including: a 10-session Organic Farming 101 course, which provides more than 40 hours of training on organic farming techniques; tours of organic farms; and a variety of one-day workshops. FAR<sup>RMS</sup> also has created the Grants to Grow program, a combination grant-loan program to help farmers incorporate sustainable enterprises into their farming. To date, FAR<sup>RMS</sup> has served more than 200 individuals.