



United States
Department of
Agriculture

GROWING ORGANIC

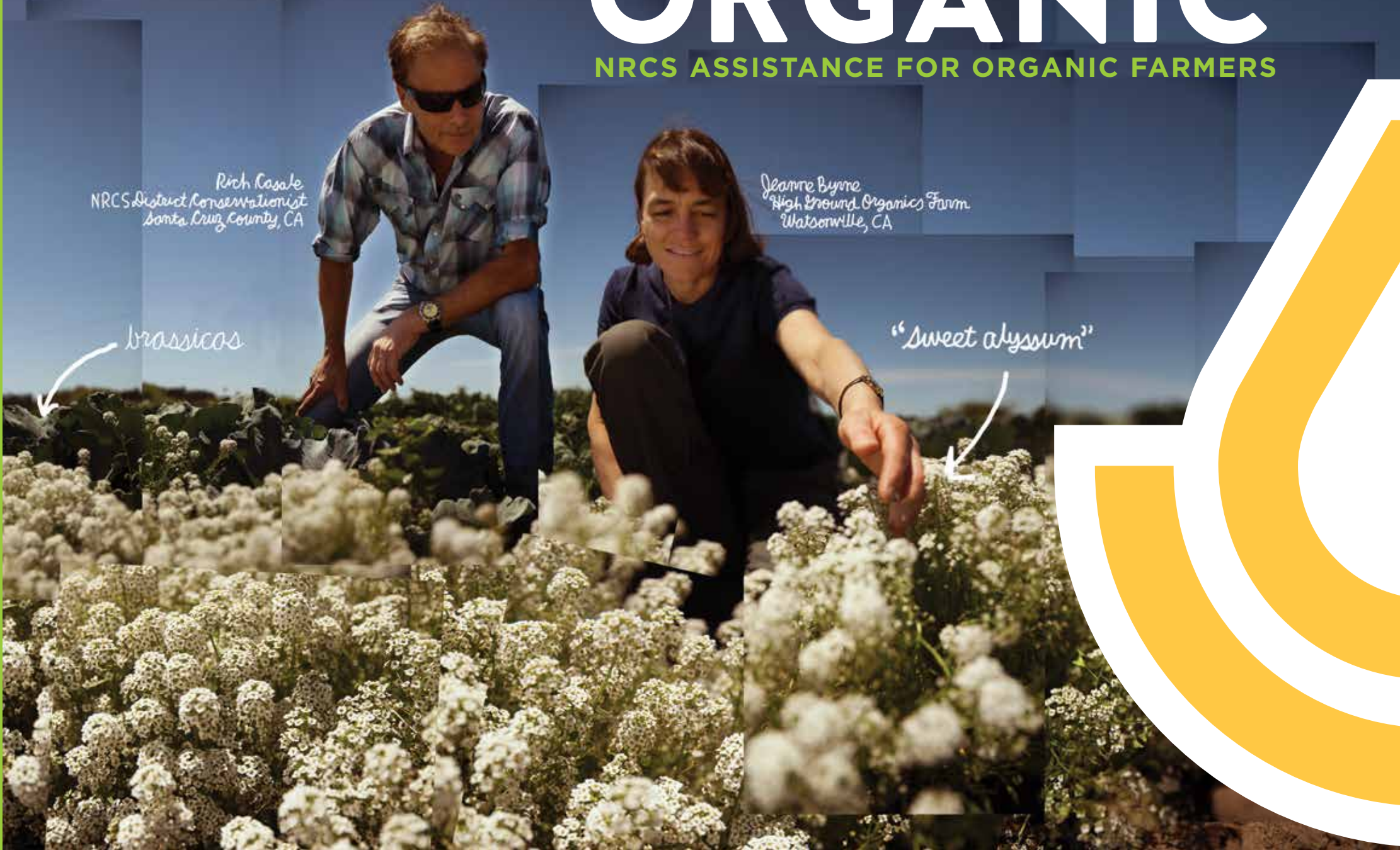
NRCS ASSISTANCE FOR ORGANIC FARMERS

*Rich Casale
NRCS District Conservationist
Santa Cruz County, CA*

*Jeanne Byrne
High Ground Organics Farm
Watsonville, CA*

brassicas

"sweet alyssum"



Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

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GROWING ORGANIC

NRCS ASSISTANCE FOR ORGANIC FARMERS

www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic

featuring information artworks by DOUGLAS GAYETON



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What is NRCS?

Since 1932, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has provided assistance to agricultural producers to conserve the soil, water, air, plants, and animals on their land.

Through offices in nearly every county across the U.S., NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help agricultural producers — including certified organic and transitioning producers — plan and implement voluntary, science-based conservation practices.

NRCS experts, such as district conservationists, soil conservationists, engineers, biologists, botanists, and others, work together to help producers find and apply conservation solutions while ensuring their working lands remain productive. Staff often live and work in the counties that they serve, and thereby understand local issues and challenges.

Organic agriculture and NRCS' goals are well aligned. Many of the USDA Organic regulations can be achieved using NRCS conservation practices, which reflect these shared goals.

“NRCS is a great resource for understanding some baseline things, like soil types and characteristics of a particular growing environment right up through supporting cover cropping, high tunnels and a whole range of technical assistance and financial support.”

— **Jack Hedin**, Certified Organic Farmer
Featherstone Farms, Rushford, MN

“I look at what an agricultural producer is passionate about. Since a conservation plan is voluntary, it's important to get their feedback and buy-in on a plan that can protect resources and help them with their agricultural production. It's rewarding when agricultural producers are happy with changes they've been able to make with our practices.”

— **Jennifer Walser**, NRCS District Conservationist
Sonoma County, CA



Do that we'd have enough water as many times a day as we need it, without wasting anything.

The water conservation plan helped us figure out exactly how much water we need on our crops.

NRCS "HELPS PEOPLE HELP THE LAND" BY SUPPORTING A VARIETY OF REGIONALLY-ADAPTED CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS.

As for the more holistic management, practicing hedgerow, and the single practices benefit for us has been the inclusion in production.



"To us, organic farming is the only option. I want to leave a legacy of supporting my family by feeding a healthy community."
- Elizabeth

Minto Island Growers
Salem, OR
27 July 2016

[this land will transition to organic]

[conventional wheat]

[cover crop]

TRANSITION

A three-year process is required to transition land that was previously farmed conventionally to USDA Organic standards. GMOs, synthetic fertilizers and pesticides are eliminated.

Farmers may choose to have both organic and nonorganic fields, but buffer zones between organic and nonorganic fields are required.

For organic certification, farmers and ranchers must present the following to an independent USDA-accredited certifying agent:

- detailed description of operation to be certified
- history of substances applied to land during the previous three years
- the organic products grown, raised, or processed
- written Organic System Plan describing the practices and substances to be used

CHRIS
ELIZABETH

ORGANIC

A labeling term for food or other agricultural products that have been produced using cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity in accordance with the USDA Organic regulations. This means that organic operations must maintain or enhance soil and water quality, while also conserving wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife. Synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation, and genetic engineering may not be used. Only products that have been certified as meeting the USDA's requirements for organic production and handling may carry the USDA Organic Seal.

(buffer zone between organic and nonorganic fields will go here)



What is Organic?

Organic farming is one of the fastest growing segments of agriculture.

To be "certified organic," producers must follow regulations outlined by the USDA National Organic Program (NOP). Managed by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, the NOP develops, implements and administers national organic production, handling, and labeling standards.

Organic agriculture is an ecologically based system that relies on preventative practices to deal with weeds, insects, and disease, using nontoxic methods for any problems that arise. Organic practices require the use of cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and preserve biodiversity. Organic producers avoid synthetic fertilizers and do not use sewage, sludge, irradiation, or genetic engineering on their operations.

Healthy soil is the foundation of organic farming. Early leaders of the organic farming movement emphasized that successful farming depends on the health of all natural resources on the farm and in its surroundings. Organic producers strive to develop farming systems that mimic nature and utilize natural processes.

More and more farmers and ranchers will be transitioning to organic to meet growing consumer demand, which currently outpaces U.S. growers' supply. NRCS looks forward to providing conservation assistance to today's and tomorrow's organic producers.

"We are very rooted in doing a type of farming that respects biodiversity and the health of the planet. The more we learn about natural systems and how we can work with them and enhance them in order to produce food, the more excited we are. You just feel really good to be part of a larger system."

- Harriet Behar, Certified Organic Farmer
Behar/Brin Farm, Gays Mills, WI

"I just have this love of nature, I guess, that really drives me. When I decided to get into agriculture myself, it wasn't like I switched from chemical production to organic; it was more an extension of the values I learned growing up."

- Jim Riddle, Certified Organic Farmer
Blue Fruit Farm, Winona, MN



▶ Watch "Growing Organic: NRCS Assistance for Organic Farmers" at www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic

A conservation activity plan can be used as part of the Organic Systems Plan required as part of the certification process.

NRCS & Transition

To be considered organic and to use the USDA Organic seal, all operations with more than \$5,000 in organic sales must be certified. Independent, third-party USDA-accredited organizations certify farms and ranches as organic. The application to become certified organic and use the USDA Organic seal includes:

1. Detailed description of the operation
2. History of substances applied over past three years
3. Organic products grown, raised or processed
4. Organic System Plan describing practices and substances used

It takes three years to transition land to an organic system that was previously farmed conventionally. Farmers may choose to have both organic and nonorganic fields, but must create buffer zones between them.

NRCS Technical Service Providers (TSP) can help producers develop a Conservation Activity Plan for Organic Transition (CAP 138). CAP 138 consists of three sections: Resource Inventory, Erosion Control Inventory, and Summary Record of Planned NRCS Conservation Practices. The Resource Inventory section may serve as a portion of the Organic System Plan, which is required for certification.

Farmers and ranchers should begin by working with NRCS to develop a conservation plan for their operation. Then, a TSP can develop a CAP 138 for transition and producers can apply for financial assistance to implement conservation practices or enhancements.

Additionally, farmers may apply for up to 75 percent — up to a maximum of \$750 per year — reimbursement of organic certification costs.

“I would say to farmers thinking about transitioning to organic that you really have to be open to experimentation. There’s no substitute for trying different methods on your farm under the exact conditions that exist where you’re farming and to experiment. Be willing to be flexible and to adopt new methods and try things differently every single season.”

— **Stephen Pedersen**, Certified Organic Farmer
High Ground Organics, Watsonville, CA

“The most important thing is to have conservation plans that help transition to organic. They can address concerns while also moving a farm toward the regulations and requirements of organic certification.”

— **Randall Wordlaw**, NRCS District Conservationist
Wedowee, AL

Operations that develop healthy soils using a variety of conservation practices that build soil organic matter.

Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has helped him transition his farm from conventional agricultural production using chemical-intensive practices to certified-organic operations that develop healthy soils using a variety of conservation practices that build soil organic matter.

HOW CERTIFIED ORGANIC FARMERS TRANSFORM THEIR SOIL

- I. Eliminate the use of all chemical-intensive practices, including non-approved pesticides and synthetic fertilizers
- II. Adopt biological practices to build soil health that include:
 - CROP ROTATIONS
 - III. Increase Biodiversity
 - MINIMUM OR NO TILLAGE (reduce soil disturbance)
 - COVER CROPS YEAR-ROUND (keep soil covered)
 - USE OF COMPOST, MANURE AND CROP RESIDUE (recycle nutrients and build soil fertility)
 - MINIMAL USE OF OFF-FARM INPUTS (building a regenerative system)

JAKE
NRCS
Soil Conservationist

MIKE
NRCS
District Conservationist

CLIF
Transitioning
Organic
Farmer

[this field will soon grow organic sweet potatoes]

“Am I glad I went organic? Yes, I am. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done... and now I get three, four and five times the price for my transplants and double the price for my organic sweet potatoes.”

Glade Farm
Surry, VA

TRANSITION

A three-year process farmers follow to transform their land from conventional to certified organic production, with all farm inputs and practices third-party verified for conformity to USDA National Organic Program (NOP) standards.

CLIF SAYS, “MY FRIENDS THINK I’M CRAZY AND THEY SAY, ‘YOU’VE JOINED THE LIKES OF THOSE TREE HUGGERS’ AND THINGS LIKE THAT, BUT I SEE WHAT ORGANIC FARMING CAN DO.”



Harmony Valley Farm
Wisconsin, WI

SAM SKEMP
NRC District
Conservationist

"The NRC is kind of a best kept secret. They have a really good cover program that encouraged us to diversify. We were planting two species and now we're planting five. There's just a lot to learn. Not just about seed, but how to do it organically."

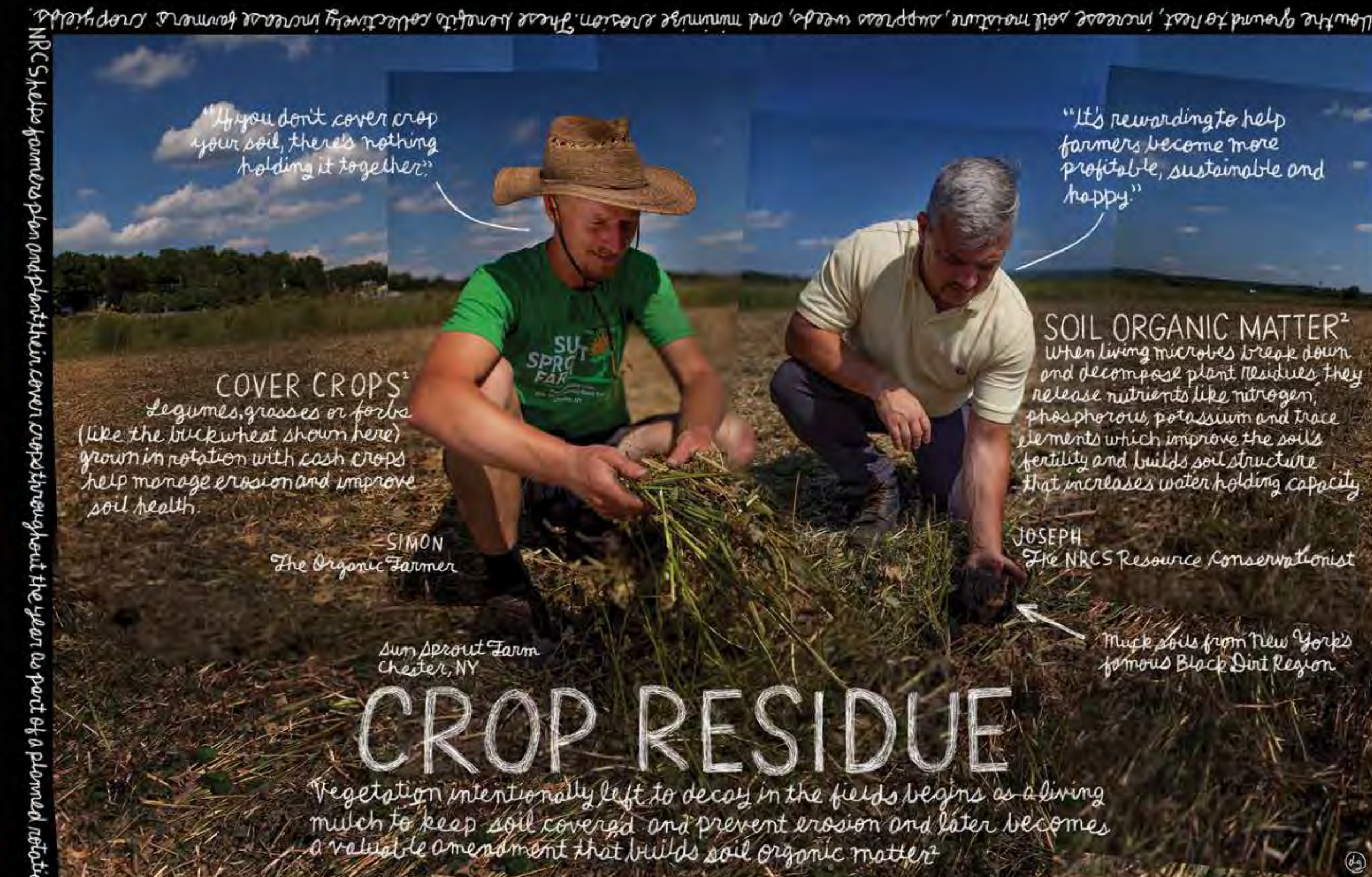
RICHARD DEWILDE
Organic Farmer

COVER CROP

An essential element of any organic farmer's crop rotation system, cover crops increase soil organic matter, keep the ground covered to slow erosion from water and wind, suppress soil diseases and pests, enhance water availability, smother weeds and provide significant contributions to a farm's biodiversity.

Cover crops (using a mix of grasses, legumes and forbs) can provide benefits for both organic and conventional managed systems. These include increased biological nitrogen fixation, minimization and reduction of soil compaction, decrease of particulates escaping into the atmosphere, and in some cases cover crops can even be used to provide livestock with a source of supplemental forage.

INSTEAD OF RELYING ON CHEMICALS, ORGANIC FARMERS CAN WORK WITH NRCs TO DEVELOP SYSTEMS THAT USE COVER CROPS TO BUILD HEALTHY SOILS.



"If you don't cover crop your soil, there's nothing holding it together."

COVER CROPS²
Legumes, grasses or forbs (like the buckwheat shown here) grown in rotation with cash crops help manage erosion and improve soil health.

SIMON
The Organic Farmer

Sun Sprout Farm
Chester, NY

CROP RESIDUE

Vegetation intentionally left to decay in the fields begins as a living mulch to keep soil covered and prevent erosion and later becomes a valuable amendment that builds soil organic matter.

"It's rewarding to help farmers become more profitable, sustainable and happy."

SOIL ORGANIC MATTER²
When living microbes break down and decompose plant residues, they release nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and trace elements which improve the soil's fertility and build soil structure that increases water holding capacity.

JOSEPH
The NRCs Resource Conservationist

Muck soils from New York's famous Black Dirt Region

NRCs help farmers plan and plant their cover crops throughout the year as part of a planned rotation. Cover crops increase soil fertility through the addition of organic matter, break pest and disease cycles, allow the ground to rest, increase soil moisture, suppress weeds, and minimize erosion. These benefits collectively increase farmer's crop yields.

HOW DO CERTIFIED ORGANIC FARMERS LIKE SIMON BUILD SOIL FERTILITY WITHOUT THE USE OF CHEMICAL FERTILIZERS? BY PLANTING COVER CROPS.

Weed & Pest Management

One of the greatest challenges organic farmers face is weed management. A single weed can produce more than 10 million seeds, and if they're not dealt with in time, they can present farmers with challenges for years to come. Instead of using chemical herbicides, organic farmers can work with NRCS to implement a variety of conservation practices that suppress weeds while building soil health.

Cover crops are one of the most effective tools for suppressing weeds, and they work in three ways.

1. When alive, they outcompete weeds for water, nutrients, and sunlight.
2. As mulch, they minimize weed growth by physically preventing the germination of weed seeds, cutting off access to light and warmer temperatures.
3. When certain legumes, cereals or brassica decompose, they produce natural herbicides that can suppress weed seed while sequestering carbon.

Rotating crops and timing planting dates to avoid weed germination windows are other effective weed suppression strategies.

NRCS can also help growers implement conservation tillage practices. Organic no-till uses tools like the roller crimper to kill cover crops while leaving their residue as a green mulch that feeds the soil and suppresses weeds. Farmers can use a variety of other mulches made from natural materials, paper or plastic. These are installed at the beginning of the growing season and trap soil moisture while preventing sunlight and weed growth.

Pest management on organic and transitioning farms requires a holistic approach. It relies primarily on preventing and avoiding pests with cultural and mechanical suppression. NRCS coordinates conservation plans with farmers' Integrated Pest Management plans to protect natural resources and benefit the ecosystem.

For example, organic farmers can plant insectaries to attract beneficial insects, like ladybugs, that biologically control pests. They can use companion planting to draw pests away from crops. Installing nesting sites such as bat and owl boxes can also help manage pests. Cover crops naturally break the cycle of soil-borne diseases, and some soil-dwelling insects, while increasing the soil's organic matter.

"We farm organically by dealing with erosion and insects and weed problems using non-synthetic measures. We also deal with intercropping and crop rotations. It's a big misconception that it's more difficult to farm organically than it is to farm using conventional methods."

— **Gene Thornton**, Farmer
Sneaky Crow Farm, Roanoke, AL

"At NRCS we always want to reduce tillage. Tillage destroys the structure of your soil. It burns up your organic matter. But if you're an organic producer, and you want to control weeds and don't spray, that's an issue."

How can we work on controlling weeds without tillage? Cover crops are perfect because now we're building soil health... and we're controlling weeds. We're addressing your problem and we're also meeting our goal!"

— **Cullen McGovern**, NRCS Soil Conservationist
Longmont, CO



▶ Watch "Weed Management: NRCS Assistance for Organic Farmers" at www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic

These pests most important native predators and parasites? 3) One critical resource (pollen, nectar, alternate hosts/prey) available to the beneficial insect

at the nighttime? 4) Which animals and perennials compensate for critical gaps in this landscape.

1000 acres diverse crops (from onions to spelt)

Bluebunch wheatgrass

"When I had to use pesticides there was always that worry... But with the way I am farming now, it just feels pure. It feels right."

BENEFICIAL INSECTS INCLUDE
lady beetles, ground beetles, syrphid flies, green lacewings, parasitic wasps and flies, praying mantis, predatory mites and parasitic nematodes

BRAD BAILIE
organic farmer

Lenora Farm, WA

INSECTARY

An intentionally-managed farmscape that attracts beneficial insects and organisms to biologically control crop pests while increasing pollen and nectar sources for pollinators

Factors to consider: 1) Where do crop pests come from and how are they attracted to a crop? 2) What are

THE NRCS CAN HELP ORGANIC FARMERS CREATE HABITATS FOR BENEFICIAL INSECTS AND ORGANISMS THAT INCREASE BIODIVERSITY WITHOUT USING PESTICIDES.



Red Wagon Organic Farm
Boulder, CO
26 June 2016

"Weeds are the most expensive thing on this farm. The fewer weeds we have, the more profitable we are."

Wyatt Picks some weeds by hand (and lets plastic take care of the rest)

MULCH

Any non-synthetic material, such as wood chips, leaves, or straw, or any allowed synthetic material such as newspaper or plastic, that serves to suppress weed growth, moderate soil temperature, or conserve soil moisture*. NRCs can help producers with a variety of mulches, including plastic mulch, green mulch and paper mulch.

* per the USDA's National Organic Program (NOP)

WYATT'S FOUR WEED BOUQUET
Lamb's Quarter
Redroot Pigweed
Bindweed
Buffalo Bur

WYATT BARNES
Organic Farmer

"If you need to grow a profitable crop and get rid of bindweed, the plastic is huge. And it saves us a bunch of water by trapping it so it doesn't evaporate through the surface"



Plants grow by using photosynthesis to convert sunlight into energy. This process requires specific light wavelengths, which differ from crop to crop. By reflecting light from the appropriately colored plastic mulch onto plant leaves, plant development can be greatly accelerated. Examples include red plastic mulch for tomatoes and metaldehyde for peppers and potatoes.

INSTEAD OF SYNTHETIC HERBICIDES, ORGANIC FARMERS RELY ON A VARIETY OF TOOLS TO SUPPRESS WEEDS, INCLUDING MULCH.



Crystal Organic Farm
Newborn, GA
11 August 2016

MARK
Organic Farmer

DENNIS
NRCs District
Conservationist



"What distinguishes an organic from a conventional farm is the things that you use and the things you're putting into the ground."

- Mark

COMPANION PLANTING

On agricultural practice that places different crops in close proximity, with the chemical defense systems of one plant used to assist another plant with pest control, provide habitat for beneficial creatures or help with pollination.



Companion plants can also provide protective shade for sun-sensitive shorter plants or serving as a windbreak. They can also create the opportunity to grow additional levels of crops in the same space, which may increase overall yields. The introduction of companion plants can disrupt the movement of pests from one plant to the next.

NRCs CAN PROVIDE ORGANIC FARMERS WITH A WEALTH OF TECHNICAL EXPERTISE, INCLUDING GUIDANCE ON HOW TO HELP TACKLE PESTS WITHOUT THE USE OF PESTICIDES.

to fish and wildlife habitat and other biological resources. The plan allows the farm to draw water during off-peak hours, then store it inside for later use. Butano Creek is far from residential, James says, "but they're making some progress on water conservation issues by working with willing partners."

FISH LIVE HERE
* steelhead and coho salmon

IRRIGATION WATER MANAGEMENT PLAN (IWMP)
Support from NRC S allows Fifth Crow Farm to establish a secure water supply for their USDA certified organic farm that also protects fish

1. SUCTION HOSES pull water from the creek with FISH-FRIENDLY SCREENS
2. buried PVC PIPE conveys water
3. water pumped from Butano Creek in off-peak hours is stored in six 5,000 gallon WATER TANKS to ensure water availability can be time-shifted for peak hour use
4. SMALL PUMP pulls water at a slower rate to fill the tanks overnight when energy costs are lower
5. LARGE PUMP conveys water from the tanks at a higher rate for irrigation use throughout the day
6. ELECTRIC PANEL programmed to regulate water use
7. VFDs (variable frequency drives) match different pump speeds depending on water requirements in the field, controlling pressure and flow greatly conserves energy and water use
8. RISERS put in the for for both drip and overhead irrigation

JAMES HOWARD
NRC S
District
Conservationist

JOHN VARS
Fifth Crow Farm
Pescadero, CA

FISH AND WILDLIFE HABITAT MANAGEMENT PLAN

An NRC S conservation plan can help farmers and ranchers manage their water use to protect anadromous fish populations as well as other downstream users. This is important to organic producers, because USDA Organic regulations require they maintain or improve natural resources and improve wildlife.

* (Natural Resources Conservation Service)

storage tanks (for farm)

"This stream is the lifeblood of our farm."
- John

HOW CAN FARMERS IN DROUGHT-STRICKEN AREAS MAINTAIN WATER SECURITY AND MEET THEIR IRRIGATION DEMANDS WHILE PROTECTING FISH AT THE SAME TIME?

Fifth Crow Farm works with NRC S specialists to craft a site-specific plan that pays careful consideration

able to make a living from being organic and farming in a way we think has a positive effect on the land. "Instead of planting fence post to fence post, NRC S helps farmers with conservation tools that build healthy soils while also providing critical environmental benefits. We're most proud of the progress we've made with this property in restoring the native habitat on the conservation

CONSERVATION CORRIDOR
Provides a safe habitat for wildlife to move through open agricultural land and acts as a buffer to slow and capture any sediment or nutrient-rich runoff

farm life

wildlife

STRAWBERRY FIELD (forever)

HARKINS SLOUGH
One of the few freshwater wetlands remaining in the area, sheltering nesting Osprey and bald eagles

High Ground Organics
Watsonville, California
9 June 2016

NATIVE PERENNIALS
Pacific dogwood, cottonwoods, willows, and box elders provide many ecological benefits to the farm.

NATIVE WILD RYE

STEPHEN PEDERSEN
organic farmer

JEANNE BYRNE
organic farmer

buffer strip*
Slows runoff, reduces erosion and captures sediment and/or nutrients ensuring that waterways (like Harkins Slough) remain unpolluted.

(NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE)

INSTEAD OF PLANTING FENCE POST TO FENCE POST, NRC S HELPS FARMERS WITH CONSERVATION TOOLS THAT BUILD HEALTHY SOILS WHILE ALSO PROVIDING CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS.

Irrigation

NRCS can help organic farmers with irrigation water management strategies tailored to their farm's specific needs. Conservation practices can also protect water quality in the surrounding ecosystem.

Water quantity. Irrigation management plans combine conservation principles with efficiency, balancing the farm's water needs with those of nature. Tools like drip irrigation, which provides water precisely where and when it's needed, can achieve greater precision with flow meters and soil moisture sensors.

Farmers can also conserve water by increasing their soil's water holding capacity and using conservation tillage to keep the ground covered, reducing water loss through transpiration and evaporation.

A one percent increase in soil organic matter can help the soil retain an additional 20,000 gallons of water per acre that can be banked and become available when plants need it most. NRCS agricultural engineers can use satellite-tracking tools to conduct precise topographic surveys, then design complete site-specific irrigation systems, from wells to pumps to pipes to hookups out in the field, saving water by improving irrigation efficiency. In combinations, these practices add up and make a huge difference.

Water quality. Well-managed organic systems rely on slow-release forms of nutrients, which reduce the risk of nutrient runoff and leaching. These practices help maintain water quality, while enhanced soil structure, water infiltration, and better nutrient retention also protect water quality. NRCS-developed nutrient management plans, cover crops, and buffers keep soil and nutrients in place and filter runoff water.

"One of the most profound things NRCS has been able to help us with is the establishing of the well in the upper fields. Up until that point, we had to chuck water into massive containers and then feed it to the lines for drip irrigation, which took a lot of time out of the day. Getting that well installed was a massive improvement."

— **Mark Lui**, Certified Organic Farmer
Crystal Organic Farms, Newborn, GA

"We've used the NRCS program for intermediate water management, so we're actually tracking the soil moisture that's available to plants multiple times per week. Now, we're only watering when it's necessary. It's important not only for soil quality, but to benefit water quality and water conservation through efficient irrigation, and these benefits also come across in the quality of the produce grown here."

— **Ryan Power**, Certified Organic Farmer
New Family Farm, Sebastopol, CA



▶ Watch "Irrigation and Water Management: NRCS Assistance for Organic Farmers" at www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic

I provide technical assistance on any natural resource concern that's out there," Wanda says. "I do design for stream bank stabilization and waste storage facilities, but the bulk of my work right now is providing irrigation technical assistance. At front field farm, I collect topography data on irrigation design that helps determine how much water the crops need and improve water use on their farm."

HOW DOES WANDA COMPLETE A TOPOGRAPHIC SURVEY?
"You have to set up a base station which reads the satellites. Then you set up the rover (which you walk around with to get survey points) so that it communicates with the base station. The rover has a data collector that allows the user to see in real-time her location and elevation. I use the data collector to shoot the points and store the survey data that will be used to develop a topographic map of the location just surveyed."

WHY IS THIS HELPFUL FOR JACQUI?
"Wanda first assessed our soil to help determine how much water they'll retain. Then she mapped out every inch of every field so she would know how many row feet we would have and how many drip tapes we would need. Then she figured out what size pipe we would need to run enough water to each of these fields to water whatever crop we were planting."

THE AGRICULTURAL ENGINEER
Responsible for providing technical guidance and the overall planning, design, installation and maintenance of the agricultural engineering phases of conservation activities.

NRCS CAN HELP FARMERS SECURE QUALITY WATER SOURCES AND OPTIMIZE THEIR USE TO GROW A BETTER CROP WHILE MAINTAINING GOOD CONSERVATION PRACTICES.



"This plan was the best fit for Minto's production. I'm proud of having helped them be more sustainable in growing the crops they want."

"The wheel line has totally changed my life. Before we had it, I was working long hours moving hundreds of irrigation pipes by myself."

JAROD
NRCs Soil
Conservationist

WHEEL LINE
A portable irrigation system that can be programmed to roll over and irrigate a large field quickly and efficiently.

CHRIS
Organic Farmer

Allis-Chalmers
Model "6" tractor ('57)

Minto Island Growers
Salem, OR

IRRIGATION WATER MANAGEMENT PLAN

NRCs Conservationists examine a farm's specific water needs, then define the optimal water volume, frequency and flow rate to achieve maximum irrigation efficiency. Other goals may include enhanced soil health, reduced energy consumption, minimized soil erosion, improved water quality and greater crop yields.

A comprehensive water strategy. "Minto agrees. "The single greatest [NRC S] benefit for us has been the irrigation." Different amounts of water at different times of the year. We've been able to help Minto financially and technically by making designs and helping implement different amounts of water at different times of the year. We've been able to help Minto financially and technically by making designs and helping implement



"This test takes the guesswork out by using science to measure the available water around a crop's root zone."

SENSOR
placed in pipe & then inserted in ground to measure soil moisture tension

METER
(displays test data)

"Rather than treating all crops with the same amount of water, the soil moisture test helps us to water only when necessary."

JASON
NRCs District
Conservationist

ELI
Organic Farmer

Front Field Farm
Winterville, GA

SOIL MOISTURE SENSOR

A device that measures soil moisture at various depths (depending on soil type and crop) to tell the farmer when and how much to irrigate

Control is critical for crops in high tunnels, which depend on precision irrigation instead of rainfall for proper growth. The data from soil moisture tests provide many benefits. It ensures that plants receive the correct amount of water, becoming less stressed during growth. Soil fertility also improves, pathogens are controlled, and nutrient-leaching is reduced. Overall plant yield often increase as well. But

High Tunnels

Across the U.S., farmers are discovering the benefits of high tunnels. NRCS can help producers integrate high tunnels into their operations.

While they may look like greenhouses, high tunnels are actually quite different. Greenhouses are usually constructed of glass and metal, with plants grown in pots above the ground. High tunnels are polyethylene, plastic or fabric covered hoop structures that can be assembled for a fraction of the cost, with plants grown in raised beds or grown directly in the ground.

Because the growing conditions are controlled, plant health is optimized. High tunnels protect plants from severe weather and allow farmers to extend their growing seasons — growing earlier into the spring, later into the fall, and sometimes, year-round. And because high tunnels prevent direct rainfall from reaching plants, farmers can use precise tools like drip irrigation to efficiently deliver water and nutrients to plants. High tunnels also offer farmers a greater ability to control pests and can even protect plants from pollen and pesticide drift.

A number of soil health practices can be used in high tunnels, including cover crops and crop rotations, which also prevent erosion, suppress weeds, increase soil water content, and break pest cycles.

Perhaps the best thing about high tunnels is that they help farmers provide their communities with healthy local food for much of the year – food that requires less energy and transportation inputs and provides communities with greater food security.

“We have really cold, wet springs with a lot of rain. High tunnels allow people to get into the ground and start producing crops earlier. They can also help people extend the growing season later as we go into the rains in the fall.”

— **Danny Perich**, Certified Organic Farmer
Full Plate Farm, Ridgefield, WA

“We got assistance from the NRCS to put in the high tunnel and it’s completely changed the way we farm tomatoes. We are able to get 103 tomato plants in there and before, we would do maybe 40 to 50 plants. So it’s double production for us. We’re also able to grow things during the winter, which we’ve never been able to do before.”

— **Stacey Givens**, Urban Farmer
Side Yard Farm, Portland, OR



▶ Watch “Growing All Seasons: NRCS Assistance with High Tunnels” at www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic



Livestock & Pasture Management

Organic livestock producers provide living areas that encourage the health and natural behavior of their animals. They use only certified organic feed, provide year-round access to the outdoors and access to pasture for ruminants and don't use antibiotics or growth hormones.

NRCS can help organic livestock producers with practices such as pasture and grazing management, diverse pasture plantings, fencing, and walkways, watering facilities, and shelters for animals.

Pastures, regardless of organic status, can become overgrazed, which can harm animal health and damage natural resources. USDA organic standards require producers to maintain pasture in a state of good health through management strategies that promote good forage quality and quantity, weed control, infiltration of precipitation, and erosion control.

One key practice is rotational grazing. This approach separates open fields into a series of closed paddocks that regularly directs animals to fresh pasture. The size of these paddocks is determined by the number of animals, time of year, grazing duration, and quality of available forage. Proper fencing and adequate water supplies are features of these intensively managed grazing systems.

Fences can control erosion or impede animal access to sensitive areas like ponds, streams, wellheads or protected habitat, while gated paddocks can be opened and closed to provide cattle access to fresh pasture. Diverse pasture plantings on provide livestock with well-balanced, nutritious forage that keeps them healthy. Using season-specific plantings is also good for the entire ecosystem.

“With a comprehensive nutrient management plan, livestock producers can use a system of practices to manage livestock waste on the farm. In particular, soil health practices in the plan include Rotational Grazing, testing soils and placing nutrients as fertilizer as to minimize effects to sensitive areas such as adjoining streams, habitats, and buffers.”

— **Joseph I. Heller**, NRCS District Conservationist
Rockland County, NY

“The reason we have cows is because of all the nutrients they create. In the right context they are such a great animal for rebuilding the soil. But we didn't want the manure just dumping into the water or all in one place, so our NRCS comprehensive nutrient management plan helped tell us where to store manure properly so it could become an asset rather than a pollutant.”

— **Marty Lain**, Certified Organic Farmer
KeziLain Bicentennial Farm, Westtown, NY



▶ Watch “Pasture Management: NRCS Assistance for Organic Farmers” at www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic

Vigor, resilience, and diversity, and enhance wildlife habitat. All are vital tools for conserving and restoring our natural resources.

They can provide guidance on range and pasture management methods that enhance sustainable livestock production while preventing erosion, increasing infiltration, facilitating soil building, grasses in rotation systems, and aquifer recharging carbon from the atmosphere. In addition they improve plant production.

Flavor Ridge Farm
Aitona, MN

“Organic farming means practicing what's necessary for the health of the land. It's something that can sustain us in the long term.”
— ROSS
[the organic farmer]

“I live in this community and drink the same water, so I want to see our resources protected.”
— SUE
[the NRCS District Conservationist]

THE DISTRICT CONSERVATIONIST

Works directly with farmers by providing technical and design expertise, financial support, and guidance on assistance programs that enhance on-farm conservation practices by benefiting wildlife, reducing energy costs, improving water and air quality, and helping build healthy soils

(dg)

THE USDA'S NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS) CAN HELP ORGANIC FARMERS BUILD HEALTHY SOILS TO SUPPORT HEALTHY COWS.

What our country needs right now. We don't need farms going away. We need more farm-to-table farms going organic. What's different than having a factory scale farm where you might have many employees taking care of your animals. It's going to take a lot of family farms but I think that's



AS MORE CONSUMERS "GO ORGANIC," CAN ORGANIC POULTRY PRODUCERS KEEP UP WITH DEMAND? JESSE SAYS, YES! THE SECRET? FAMILY SCALE FARMS.

Pete and Berry's Organic Eggs
Monroe, NH

Jesse
Co-Owner
and CEO

Kenm
Farm Relations
Manager

CERTIFIED ORGANIC

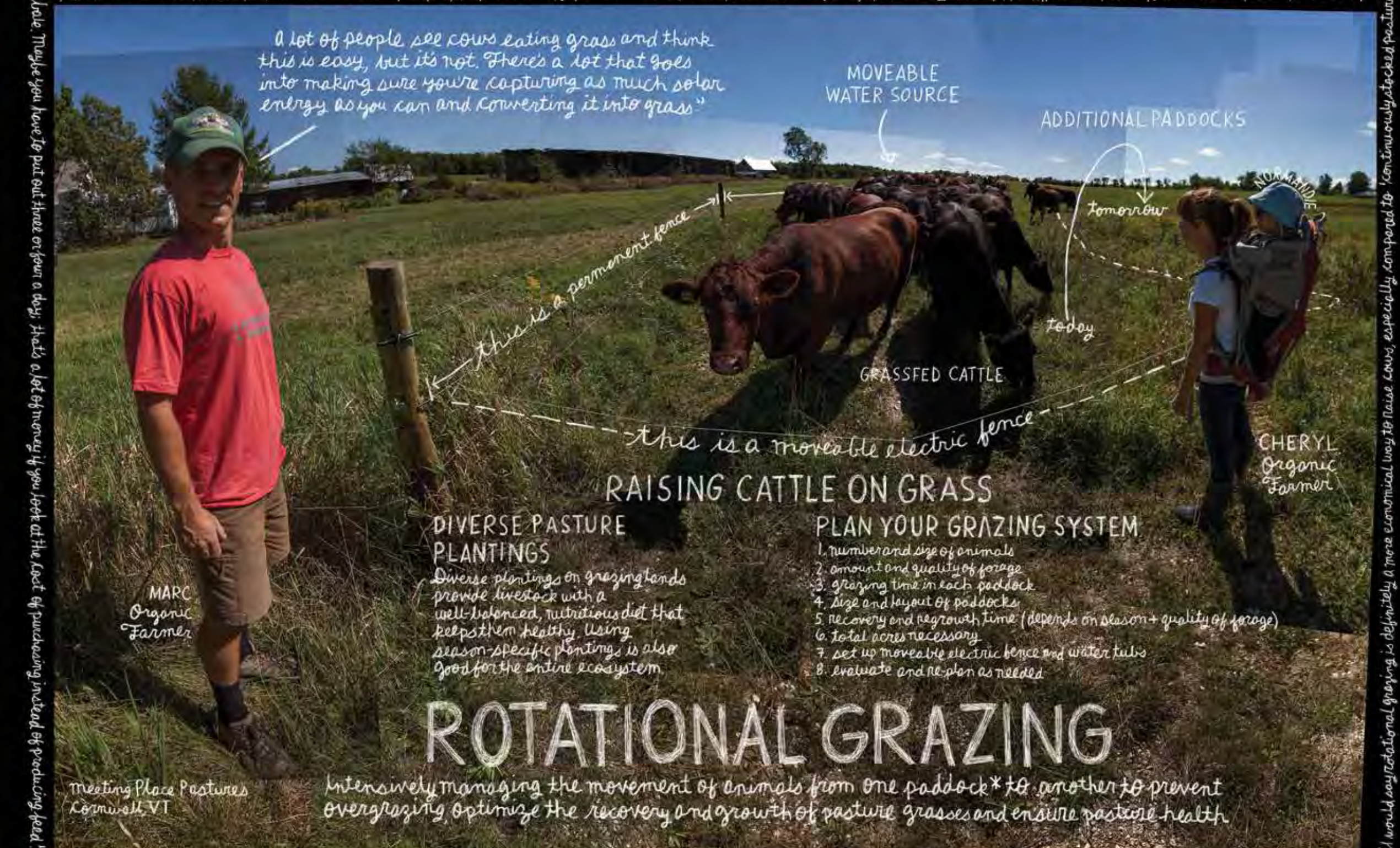
A labeling term for food or other agricultural products produced using cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity in accordance with the USDA organic regulations

The USDA organic standard requires producers to provide all poultry with year-round access to the outdoors, sunlight, shade, shelter, fresh air, exercise areas, clean water, and adequate nutrition. Temporary confinement is allowed under certain circumstances, such as severe weather.

NRCS can help producers implement livestock watering facilities and pipelines, windbreak planting, silvopasture, and livestock shelter structures, composting facilities and waste management plans to meet USDA organic requirements and protect soil and water quality from animal waste.

“A family scale farm - they know where their livelihood comes from,” Jesse says. “There’s a relationship there that’s different than having a factory scale farm where you might have many employees taking care of your animals. It’s going to take a lot of family farms but I think that’s what our country needs right now. We don’t need farms going away. We need more farm-to-table farms going organic.”

“I would say rotational grazing is definitely a more economical way to raise cows, especially compared to ‘continuously stocked pasture,’ where animals are always there.” Cheryl observes. “I would have a 40% increase in a six week period by moving cows around. Plus, if you start feeding hay to your animals in the middle of summer, that’s \$50 a bale. Maybe you have to put out those organic hay bales, that’s a lot of money if you look at the cost of purchasing instead of producing feed.”



MARC
Organic
Farmer

Meeting Place Pastures
Cornwall, VT

A lot of people see cows eating grass and think this is easy, but it's not. There's a lot that goes into making sure you're capturing as much solar energy as you can and converting it into grass.

DIVERSE PASTURE PLANTINGS

Diverse plantings on grazing lands provide livestock with a well-balanced, nutritious diet that keeps them healthy. Using season-specific plantings is also good for the entire ecosystem.

PLAN YOUR GRAZING SYSTEM

1. number and size of animals
2. amount and quality of forage
3. grazing time in each paddock
4. size and layout of paddocks
5. recovery and regrowth time (depends on season + quality of forage)
6. total acres necessary
7. set up moveable electric fence and water tubs
8. evaluate and re-plan as needed

ROTATIONAL GRAZING

Intensively managing the movement of animals from one paddock* to another to prevent overgrazing, optimize the recovery and growth of pasture grasses and ensure pasture health.

THE NRCS HELPS MARC AND CHERYL RAISE GRASSFED CATTLE USING CONSERVATION PRACTICES THAT REDUCE THEIR DEPENDENCE ON OFF-FARM INPUTS WHILE ENHANCING SOIL HEALTH.



Five Steps to NRCS Assistance

Here's what to expect:

1. PLANNING. NRCS technical assistance is free and voluntary. The first step is to visit your local field office and work with a conservationist on a conservation plan that meets the goals of your operation. Ask your conservationist if financial assistance is available to implement any the practices outlined in your conservation plan.

2. APPLICATION. NRCS can help you fill out the right forms for the application process. Applications for most programs are accepted on a continuous basis, but they're considered for funding in different ranking periods. Ask your local NRCS conservationist about the deadline for the ranking period to ensure you turn in your application in time. You can also apply for financial assistance and manage applications, contracts, and conservation plans online through the NRCS' Conservation Client Gateway.

3. ELIGIBILITY. To determine eligibility, you'll need an official tax ID (Social Security number or an employer ID). You'll also need a property deed or lease agreement to show you have control of the property. You'll also need a farm and tract number. If you don't have a farm and tract number, you can get one from USDA's Farm Service Agency (www.fsa.usda.gov). Typically, the local FSA office is located in the same building as the local NRCS office.

4. RANKING. The NRCS will take a look at the applications and rank them according to local resource concerns, the amount of conservation benefits the work will provide and the needs of applicants.

5. IMPLEMENTATION. If you're selected, your next step is to sign the contract. You'll then be provided standards and specifications for completing the practice or practices, and will have a specified amount of time to implement. Once the work is implemented and inspected, you'll be paid the rate of compensation for the work if it meets the NRCS standards and specifications.

For more information on how NRCS can help you, visit your local NRCS field office, or: www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic

For more information on the USDA National Organic Program, visit: www.usda.gov/organic





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