

Utah Agricultural Producer Barriers to Adopting Organic Production Methods

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Introduction

Highlights

- USU researchers conducted a statewide needs assessment in 2024 to better understand the barriers to adopting organic production methods among Utah's agricultural operations.
- Financial and operational demands of organic production outweighed concerns related to land, water, or product quality.
- Producers are more concerned with market uncertainty and price risk than with logistical or product quality issues when considering organic production.
- Improving producer confidence in organic market opportunities may be as important as addressing production-related challenges.
- Efforts to increase organic adoption in Utah should focus on reducing administrative burdens, improving access to financial assistance, and providing practical guidance on certification requirements.

To better understand the barriers to adopting organic production methods among Utah's agricultural operations, Utah State University (USU) conducted a statewide needs assessment in 2024. Researchers collected data through an online Qualtrics survey and received 131 completed producer responses. The survey examined farm characteristics, production methods, motivations for adopting organic practices, attitudes toward organic

agriculture, and concerns related to organic production, markets, and certification. Respondents also evaluated the importance and usefulness of information, tools, services, and educational programs that could support organic production decisions.

According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture (NASS, 2024), Utah has approximately 41,000 acres of certified organic farmland, representing about 0.5% of the state's 10.5 million acres of agricultural land. Certified and exempt organic farms generated nearly \$28.9 million in sales, accounting for approximately 1.3% of Utah's total agricultural cash receipts. Although certified organic forage and grain crops comprise most of Utah's organic acreage, fresh produce generates a disproportionately large share of organic farm revenue (approximately 60%) because of its substantially higher value per acre.

The Utah Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP), funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), was established to increase the number of successful organic producers, strengthen organic supply chains, and support the growth and resilience of organic agriculture in the United States (AMS, 2022). Through partnerships with universities and other organizations, the program expands access to education, technical assistance, and mentorship opportunities for certified organic and transitioning producers.

This fact sheet discusses the study results, which identified the primary barriers Utah producers perceive in adopting organic production methods. Study findings will help guide the development of educational programs, technical assistance, and outreach efforts of the Utah TOPP program, Extension, and partner organizations to address producer needs and support the successful adoption of organic production systems in Utah.

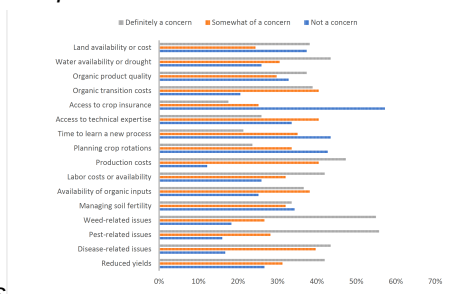
Results Overview

Organic Production Concerns

Survey respondents were asked to rate 16 organic production concerns on a scale of 1 to 3, from *not a concern* to *definitely a concern*. Figure 1 shows that respondents expressed moderate to high levels of concern regarding many aspects of organic production, with production costs, labor costs or availability, weed-related issues, and organic transition costs emerging as the greatest concerns. Disease, pest management, soil fertility, and reduced yields were also frequently identified as concerns, indicating that producers perceive

both economic and production management challenges as significant barriers to adopting organic practices. In contrast, concerns related to land availability or cost, water availability or drought, access to crop insurance, and organic product quality were generally rated as less important, with a larger share of respondents indicating these issues were not concerns. Overall, the results suggest that the financial and operational demands of organic production outweigh concerns related to land, water, or product quality.

Figure 1. Respondent Production

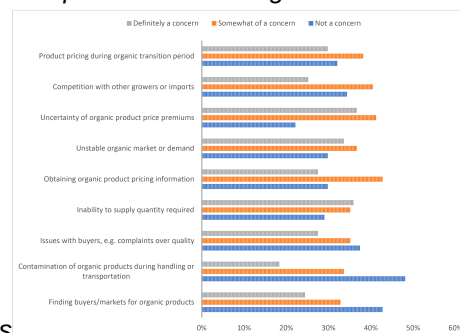


Concerns

Organic Marketing Concerns

Survey respondents rated nine organic market or marketing concerns on a scale of 1 to 3, from *not a concern* to *definitely a concern*. Figure 2 indicates that marketing concerns were generally moderate, with uncertainty about organic price premiums, unstable organic markets or demand, product pricing during the transition period, and competition with other growers or imports receiving the highest levels of concern. Respondents also expressed concern about obtaining reliable organic pricing information and finding buyers or markets for organic products, highlighting uncertainty surrounding market access and profitability. In contrast, issues related to contamination during handling or transportation, buyer complaints about quality, and the inability to supply required quantities were less frequently identified as major concerns. These findings suggest that producers are more concerned with market uncertainty and price risk than with logistical or product quality issues when considering organic production.

Figure 2. Respondent Marketing



Concerns

Organic Certification and Regulatory Concerns

Survey respondents rated nine certification or regulatory concerns on a scale of 1 to 3, from *not a concern* to *definitely a concern*. As shown in Table 1, respondents expressed moderate to high concern about organic certification and regulatory requirements. Paperwork and recordkeeping requirements were identified as the greatest concern (mean = 2.48), with 61.1% of respondents rating them as definitely a concern. The cost of certification ranked second, with 59.5% indicating it was definitely a concern. Loss of freedom in farm management, financial support for organic certification (mean = 2.28), confusion about the certification process (mean = 2.21), and the three-year transition period (mean = 2.17) were also commonly identified as concerns, with approximately 41.0%–48.0% of respondents rating these issues as definitely concerning.

In contrast, interactions with certifiers were viewed as the least concerning certification-related issue (mean = 1.90), with only 27.5% indicating it was definitely a concern and over one-third (37.4%) reporting it was not a concern. Interpreting or understanding organic standards and meeting organic requirements were rated as moderate concerns, suggesting that while producers recognize the challenges associated with certification, administrative requirements and certification costs present greater barriers than technical compliance or relationships with certifying agencies.

Table 1. Respondent Certification/Regulatory Concerns

Concern	Rating	Sample (%)	Mean (Scale of 1–3)
Financial support	Not a concern	16.7%	2.28

Concern	Rating	Sample (%)	Mean (Scale of 1–3)
for organic certification			
Somewhat of a concern	38.1%		
Definitely a concern	45.0%		
Three-year transition period	Not a concern	25.1%	2.17
Somewhat of a concern	32.8%		
Definitely a concern	41.9%		
Cost of certification	Not a concern	15.2%	2.44
Somewhat of a concern	25.1%		
Definitely a concern	59.5%		
Paperwork and recordkeeping requirements	Not a concern	12.9%	2.48
Somewhat of a concern	25.9%		
Definitely a concern	61.0%		
Confusion about the certification process	Not a concern	20.6%	2.21
Somewhat of a concern	38.1%		
Definitely a concern	41.2%		
Interactions with certifiers	Not a concern	37.4%	1.90

Concern	Rating	Sample (%)	Mean (Scale of 1–3)
Somewhat of a concern	35.1%		
Definitely a concern	27.4%		
Loss of freedom in farm management	Not a concern	24.4%	2.24
Somewhat of a concern	27.4%		
Definitely a concern	48.0%		
Interpreting or understanding organic standards	Not a concern	25.9%	2.08
Somewhat of a concern	40.4%		
Definitely a concern	33.5%		
Meeting organic requirements	Not a concern	25.1%	2.08
Somewhat of a concern	41.2%		
Definitely a concern	33.5%		

Conclusions



Conclusions The study results indicate that Utah producers perceive a range of economic, production, market, and regulatory barriers to adopting organic production practices. Among production-related concerns, the costs associated with organic production, labor availability, weed management, and transition expenses were identified as the most significant obstacles. Producers also expressed concern about maintaining yields, managing pests and diseases, and meeting soil fertility needs under organic systems. These findings suggest that the financial risks and management challenges associated with transitioning to organic production remain substantial deterrents for many Utah agricultural operations.

Market-related concerns further highlight uncertainty surrounding the profitability of organic production. Producers were particularly concerned about obtaining sufficient price premiums, market stability, pricing products during the transition period, and competition from other producers and imports. In addition, many respondents expressed uncertainty about accessing reliable pricing information and identifying profitable marketing channels. Together, these concerns suggest that improving producer confidence in organic market opportunities may be as important as addressing production-related challenges.

Certification and regulatory requirements also represent important barriers to adoption. Paperwork and recordkeeping requirements, certification costs, and the length of the three-year transition period were among the highest-rated concerns, while respondents viewed interactions with certifiers as comparatively less problematic. These findings suggest that efforts to increase organic adoption in Utah should focus on reducing administrative burdens, improving access to financial assistance, and providing practical guidance on certification requirements.

Acknowledgments

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Authors

Salma Shrity, Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics; **Kynda Curtis**, Professor and USU Extension Specialist, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics; **Michele Schahczenski**, Organic Outreach Coordinator, Transition to Organic Partnership Program