



# Trends in Washington State Organic Agriculture

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION FACT SHEET • FS001E

This summary presents highlights from the 2008 “Profile of Organic Crops in Washington State” which provides an estimate of certified organic crop acreage. The full report, compiled by the Washington State University Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources (CSANR), is available at [http://csanr.wsu.edu/Organic/WA\\_CertAcres\\_08.pdf](http://csanr.wsu.edu/Organic/WA_CertAcres_08.pdf). The data reported are an *estimate* of organic land in the state because exempt producers<sup>1</sup> may choose not to be certified. Also, growers are not required to report transition acres<sup>2</sup>; additional acres under organic management likely exist. Data on processors and handlers are not included.

## Methods

CSANR compiles organic acreage and livestock estimates using data provided by multiple National Organic Program (NOP) accredited certifiers working in Washington (Washington State Department of Agriculture [WSDA], Oregon Tilth Certified Organic [OTCO], International Certification Services [ICS] and California Certified Organic Farmers [CCOF]). WSDA is the primary certifier in Washington, covering 95% of the certified organic acreage. Acreage data are segregated by specific crop (e.g., sweet corn) and organic status (certified vs. transition) on a calendar year basis (see full report). Farmgate sales are also compiled, based on data reported by WSDA and OTCO only. In addition, data from the USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture are compared to the 2007 certifier data.

## Trends

In 2008, 689 Washington farms were certified organic, with another 53 in transition. Challenging economic conditions slowed growth of organic sales nationally (down from 20% average annual growth in previous

years to 13% growth in 2008). Organic farming in Washington State showed a similar pattern, with certified area increasing 18% from 2007 to 2008, to 92,555 acres (Table 1) compared to 26% growth of acres from 2006 to 2007.

Organic farming occurs all across the state. In 2008, 63% of certified organic farms and 71% of organic acreage were located in counties east of the Cascade Crest (Figure 1). These farms accounted for 80% of state organic farmgate sales. Yakima County led in the number of certified farms (108), while Grant and Benton counties combined had 34% of all certified acres in the state. Despite no reported transition acres in 2007, King County certified acreage increased from 1,270 acres in 2007 to 3,040 acres in 2008 (139% growth), illustrating that growers often do not report transition acres. Transition acres reported in 2008 were still primarily for perennial crops (tree fruit, forages) in eastern Washington counties, suggesting continued but slower growth of these crops.

## 2008 Crop Summary

Based on 2008 certifier data, three types of crops dominated organic acreage in Washington: forage, vegetables, and tree fruit, representing 31%, 21%, and 18%, respectively, of the total certified acres in the state (Table 1).

**Forage.** Organic hay acreage grew 45% from 2007 to 2008, largely due to an increase of over 1,700 acres of organic alfalfa, mostly in Grant and Benton counties. The repeat strong annual growth (74% increase from 2006 to 2007) was in response to high prices and demand from organic dairies.

**Vegetables.** Organic vegetable acreage in Washington grew dramatically from 2004 to 2007, but showed no increase in 2008 (Figure 2). The main organic vegetables were sweet corn, green peas, potatoes, green beans, and onions. Sweet corn and green peas made up two-thirds of the state’s organic harvested vegetable acreage (including double crop). Much of this production went to processing, primarily for frozen products. Sweet corn acres showed a slight decline from 2007.

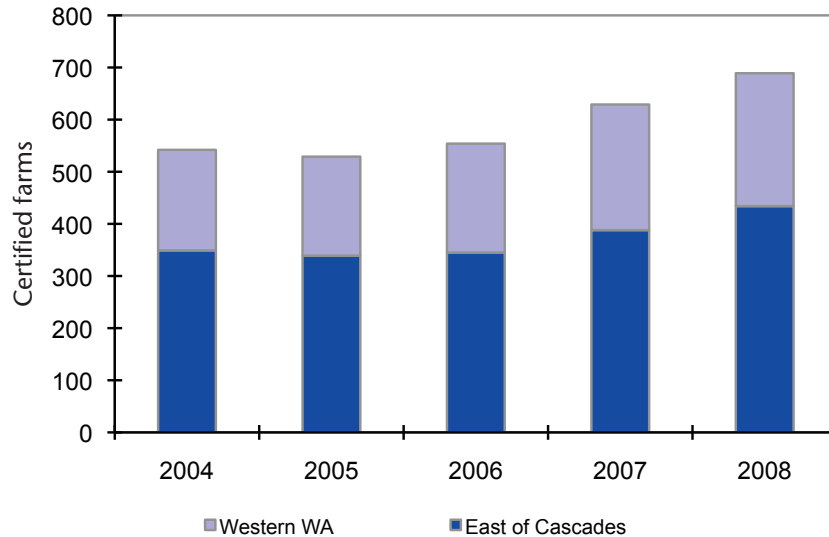
<sup>1</sup> Exempt producers (or farms) sell directly to consumers, have total annual sales less than \$5,000, and meet organic standards.

<sup>2</sup> Transition acres are under organic management but do not meet the 36-month interval from the last use of prohibited material to the first harvest of certified organic products. Registration of transition acres is not required by the National Organic Program; however, some growers voluntarily register transition acres.

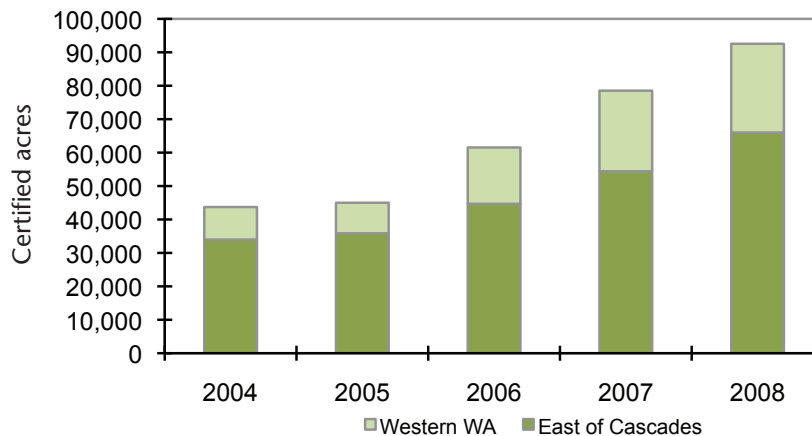
**Table 1. Washington State certified organic acreage summary.**

	Acres						% Growth (C only) 2007-08	% of Total (C only) 2008
	C 2004	C 2005	C 2006	C 2007	C 2008	T 2008		
Forage	8,400	7,907	17,321	26,091	30,031	1,552	15%	31%
Vegetables	9,971	10,985	15,466	20,042	19,836	27	0%	21%
Tree Fruit	9,468	8,955	10,110	10,959	16,983	6,721	55%	18%
Grains, Dry Beans, Oilseeds	5,435	6,347	5,240	5,276	8,508	31	61%	9%
Small Fruit and Nuts	2,528	2,535	2,847	3,014	3,205	534	6%	3%
Herbs	1,079	926	1,012	1,267	1,137	1	0%	1%
Other crops	372	665	821	730	787	1	8%	1%
Fallow	2,562	2,136	3,840	6,918	9,819	500	42%	10%
Other non-crop land	430	537	442	423	985	-	133%	1%
Other land, undefined	3,475	5,188	7,226	6,752	4,848	13	-	5%
Total acres (with double crop)	43,720	46,181	64,325	81,472	96,139	9,380	18%	-
Total area (no double crop)	-	45,009	61,540	78,529	92,555	9,380	18%	-

(C = certified, T = transition) Totals may not be exact due to decimal rounding. The vegetable category includes melons. The certified acreage total includes double-cropped acres (3,584 in 2008), primarily peas and sweet corn. The total 2008 certified area of 92,555 acres includes 4,848 acres of undefined WSDA-certified land either not cropped or multiple small sites with crops, not entered in the database. The data for 2004 are from WSDA, OTCO, and QAI; ICS data were added in 2005, and CCOF data were added in 2006. None of the data include non-certified exempt farms.



**Figure 1a. Chronological numbers of certified organic farms in Washington State.**



**Figure 1b. Chronological numbers of certified organic acres in Washington State.**

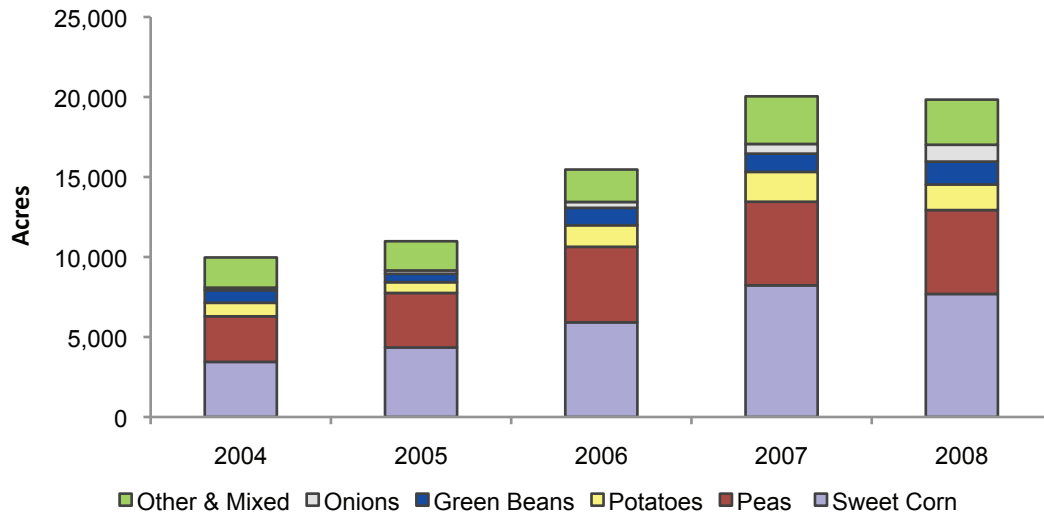


Figure 2. Chronological numbers of certified organic vegetable acres in Washington State.

**Tree fruit.** Washington State continued to lead the United States in both conventional and organic apple, pear, and sweet cherry acreage. From 2007 to 2008, certified acres of apples and cherries each expanded over 60% to 12,936 and 1,738 acres, respectively. Organic apples represented about 8% of all apple acres in the state. Organic pear acreage expanded moderately from 1,418 acres in 2007 to 1,713 acres in 2008 (21% increase). Organic pears and cherries made up nearly 7% and 5%, respectively, of the total acres of each of these crops in Washington. The organic tree fruit portfolio in the state will soon become more diverse with over 1,200 acres of peaches, apricots, nectarines, and plums currently in transition.

Organic apple prices declined for the 2008 crop; increased sales volume did not absorb all the additional certified fruit that became available, and fruit size was smaller than optimal. This was similar to the situation in 2001, with supply growth exceeding demand growth and downward pressure on organic prices. The market signal for more organic apples occurred in 2005, but the three-year transition required for organic producers makes it more difficult for them to respond in the appropriate time frame, adding a market risk to the production risks associated with organic farming.

**Small fruit and nuts.** Grapes (2,392 acres) comprised 75% of the land devoted to certified small fruit and nuts in Washington State. Nearly two-thirds of the grapes were juice varieties, with the remainder grown for wine. From 2005 to 2008, organic blueberry area doubled to 480 acres, while raspberry production declined from a peak of 250 acres in 2006 to 166 acres in 2008.

**Grains, beans, and oilseeds.** Although Washington State is a major wheat producer, organic production re-

mains relatively low, particularly in the dryland region of eastern Washington. Organic wheat acreage rose substantially in 2008 to 4,390 acres, but much of this growth was on irrigated farms as part of diversified crop rotations. Organic corn production (2,400 acres in 2008) for grain and silage has steadily increased since 2004, adding to in-state feed supplies for organic livestock. Less than 100 acres of organic oilseeds were grown in the state in 2008. Dry bean production totaled 664 acres.

**Livestock.** It is difficult to collect reliable data on organically-raised livestock, in part because the numbers can fluctuate rapidly over a season. In 2008, 46 certified organic dairy farms and one in transition were reported in the state. Herd size ranged from 15 to 2,500 milkers, with state totals at 9,022 milkers and dry cows and 7,022 replacement heifers and calves. Based on these estimates, organic cows represented about 4% of the state dairy herd. Three large organic egg operations were identified, totaling about 216,000 layers and pullets. Data on small layer flocks were not included in 2008.

### Farmgate Sales

Sales information from organic certifiers lags acreage data by one year. Total organic farmgate sales for 2007 exceeded \$213 million, an increase of over 40% from 2006 and more than double the 2005 value. The growth of farmgate sales has been driven by the entry and/or expansion of larger operations. In 2006, the smallest farms (< \$25,000 in annual sales) accounted for 51% of the number of certified farms in Washington but only 1.5% of the organic farmgate sales, while the largest farms (> \$1 million in annual sales) accounted for 5% of the number of certified farms and 51% of the organic sales.

## Comparison with Census Data

Data required by NOP certifiers provide a valid representation of land area and economic value of organic farming in Washington. However, since the NOP does not require exempt farms to be certified, the number of non-certified exempt farms has been a source of uncertainty in the data. The 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture collected data from organic farms in the state, certified or not. The Census reported 1,207 organic farms compared to the 629 identified by certifiers. Many of the Census farms had less than \$5,000 in sales, suggesting they were exempt. The Census farms accounted for 64,830 acres of organic land, less than the verifiable 78,106 acres from the certifier data. Census farms reported 21,629 acres in transition compared to 13,183 acres in transition from certifier data. Census farms also reported \$159.8 million in farmgate sales, considerably less than the \$213.2 million reported from the certifiers.

The differences in Census and certifier data may be attributed to different methodologies and time frames for the data requests. Comparing the two sets of information shows that a large number of exempt organic farms exist in the state that are not included in certifier data. The non-certified exempt farms appear to account for about 2% of Washington's organic land base (less than

2,000 acres) and a 0.5% share of total organic farmgate sales. Therefore, the omission of exempt farms from the certifier data does not substantially change the crop and sales findings.

## Conclusion

Organic agriculture in Washington State represented more than 3% of the state's 2007 farmgate sales, matching the 3–4% share of retail food sales that organic products had nationally. The 2007 Census ranked Washington 18th nationally for land in organic production, but second for organic product farmgate sales value (1,075 farms reported \$159.8 million) behind California which had \$656.8 million in sales. Oregon had the third highest farmgate sales value, attesting to the economic importance of the specialty crops grown on the West Coast. The upward trends in organic acreage and consumer demand are expected to continue, but more gradually than in recent years. Synchronizing supply increases to match demand will be a larger challenge if the growth of the organic market slows from its historic rate and becomes less predictable.

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