

USDA's Organic Initiative supports real change

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Taxpayers care how federal money is spent on agriculture. We want the government to spend more to help farmers conserve natural resources, produce safe food and develop their communities — and less on direct commodity payments and price supports. This according to a [study](#) out of Oklahoma State University just released by the [National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#) (NSAC).

The Farm Bill largely determines how tax dollars are spent in agriculture, and the most recent version upped support for programs like the [Organic Initiative](#) that help farmers conserve natural resources. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will spend \$50 million through this program to help organic and transitioning farmers adopt new conservation practices like cover cropping, integrated pest management, crop rotation and stream buffers.

Transitioning farmers and ranchers who participate are reimbursed for 75% of the cost of the conservation measures they put in place. Those considered "historically underserved" by USDA (beginning, new, limited resource, and socially disadvantaged producers) are paid up to 90% of their costs. The program offers a maximum of \$20,000 per year, and up to \$80,000 over six years. First implemented in 2009, many farmers and ranchers (including some who had been farming conventionally for decades) have successfully kicked the chemical habit with help from the Organic Initiative. This year's deadline to apply for the program is [March 4, 2011](#).

As the reauthorization battle over the federal Farm Bill begins, PAN is working with partners such as NSAC and [Healthy Food Action](#) to protect conservation programs that are sure to be threatened with budget cuts. Key to the success of these policy efforts will be on-the-ground evidence that conservation programs like the Organic Initiative really work, effectively protecting the natural resources upon which consumers, farmers, farmworkers and rural communities depend.

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