

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Young Vegetable Grower Flourishing in Organic Hotbed

Twenty-three year-old Glen Elsbernd is utilizing the USDA's Organic Initiative and higher payment rates on conservation practices as a Beginning Farmer to help transition his 88-acre Winneshiek County farm to organic vegetables much sooner than he expected, and in doing so is protecting valuable natural resources on the farm.

For now he is growing dozens of certified organic vegetable varieties and organic soybeans on about one-third of his land, and working to transition the other portion with a crop rotation of cover crops and organic corn, along with about 20 acres of forage.

Elsbernd is in his third growing season operating the farm, following a one-year stint learning about growing organic vegetables at Harmony Valley Farm in Wisconsin. "My original goal was to have the entire farm in vegetables in 20 years," said Elsbernd. "I think I'll have it within 10 years now."

A goal of the 2008 Farm Bill is to make financial and technical assistance available to producers of all commodities. It specifically includes help to organic producers through the Organic Initiative, a part of the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The Organic Initiative is administered by the Natural Resources Conservation



Glen Elsbernd, sitting in between potato rows, began growing vegetables in high school while working at Ladybug Landscapes in Decorah. "I planted bedding plants and sold them to my teachers," he said.

Service (NRCS), and offers already-certified organic producers assistance for applying new conservation practices to treat natural resource concerns, and offers participants transitioning to organic agriculture assistance to protect natural resources while meeting their organic certification goals.

A native of Spillville, Elsbernd also received higher payment rates on conservation practices for participating in EQIP as a Beginning Farmer. The USDA defines a Beginning Farmer as one who has not operated a farm for more than 10 consecutive years.

"The Program has been a really big help for me to get my operation going," said Elsbernd. "It's been the shot in the arm that I needed."

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Marketing Produce

Elsbernd markets his produce under the name “G It’s Fresh.” He and his crew of at least six workers grow everything from romaine lettuce to carrots to parsnips. He says his biggest sellers are potatoes, lettuce and broccoli. During his first growing season, he sold produce through Grown Locally and the Winneshiek County Farmers Market. Grown Locally is a cooperative of more than 20 local farms and producers who work together to deliver a variety of locally produced food. He says Grown Locally markets the group’s food to many schools and restaurants.

His operation is expanding, so this year he is also marketing his produce to Organic Valley™, a farmer-owned Wisconsin-based company that sells organic products nationwide. “At first I had a problem with too much produce, and now I don’t have enough,” he said. “I guess it’s a good problem to have.”

Todd Duncan, district conservationist with NRCS in Winneshiek County, says there are many organic farmers in the county. In fact, Winneshiek County led the state in EQIP Organic Initiative funding in its first year. “Winneshiek County farmers are ahead of the curve

Veteran Winneshiek County District Conservationist Todd Duncan takes a look at hairy vetch, one of the cover crops that Elsbernd mixes with the dominant crop, triticale, along with alfalfa, oats, and a grass mix.



Long rows of green romaine lettuce in mid-June.

in a movement toward organic agriculture,” he said. “Our landscape fits these types of small farms. We have found ways for the Organic Initiative to help them protect their natural resources and complement their operations.”

Organic farming is big business across the river in Wisconsin, says Elsbernd, and that has influenced the growing number of organic farms in the area. “We have a lot of the same terrain here,” he said, “and our proximity to Wisconsin adds more marketing opportunities for organic products.”

Conservation Practices

Elsbernd’s small farm was prime farmland before he took it over. If he were not operating the farm Duncan says it would more than likely be row-cropped fence row to fence row. “Glen is making good use of the land,” he says. “Utilizing cover crops, crop rotations, mixed with vegetable production fits well here. The land’s resources are being protected by the way Glen is farming.”

More than 20 conservation practices are available to farmers through the EQIP Organic Initiative. Elsbernd is rotating crops and applying cover crops to help control erosion, return organic matter to the soil, and improve and maintain soil tilth. “Cover crops help build up organic matter in the soil,” he said. “And cover crops provide the nutrients I need since commercial fertilizer is prohibited.” Elsbernd also uses compost from his father’s dairy farm and fish emulsion for fertilizer.

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Elsbernd is interseeding alfalfa into a four-seed mix of triticale, hairy vetch, oats, and a grass mix. Triticale is a cereal rye/winter wheat cross that is easy to establish. He likes it because it effectively controls erosion and suppresses weeds. “When I plant triticale I also add hairy vetch to provide nitrogen,” he said. “I’ve seen some really good results with this cover crop.”

For early spring produce, the young farmer plants an Austrian winter pea and oat cover crop. “Austrian peas are winter hardy, but easy to kill off in the spring,” says Elsbernd. “I will go with triticale and rye for summer produce to build up nitrogen levels in the soil.”

Elsbernd has also uses winter tillage radishes, which are a deep-rooted cover crop that benefit the soil by reducing compaction, improving water infiltration, increasing organic matter and keeping the soil well-covered over the winter.

Elsbernd’s small organic operation created at least six new jobs. With plans for expansion, that number will surely grow.

With about 20 acres of grassland remaining on the farm, Elsbernd is implementing forage harvest management to help better manage his grass, control insects, weeds, and diseases. NRCS is also working with him to implement

pest and nutrient management plans on his entire farm.

High Tunnel

Later this fall, Elsbernd plans to install a seasonal high tunnel for crops through the EQIP Organic Initiative. High tunnels – or hoop houses – are polyethylene-covered structures that help extend the growing season with more favorable growing conditions for vegetable and other specialty crop growers. They benefit natural resources by improving plant, soil and water quality by reducing pesticide use and keeping vital nutrients in the soil.

High tunnels are used year-round in parts of the country, providing steady incomes to farmers – a significant advantage to small, limited-resource farmers and organic producers. These structures should not exceed a 30 foot width, and should be at least six feet tall to allow cultivation, harvesting, and other farming operations.

Elsbernd is planning a 30-foot by 72-foot seasonal high tunnel. “It will help me get an early start on the growing season and a higher quality crop,” he said. “The high tunnel will also give me a head start on the competition.”

The high tunnel will also allow Elsbernd to diversify his operation. “I have considered growing some type of berries or cherries,” he said. “The high tunnel will be great for keeping rain off the fruit when it ripens, allowing for a longer shelf life.”

Through the EQIP Organic Initiative, NRCS will fund up to one high tunnel per farm.

For more information about the EQIP Organic Initiative, contact your NRCS office located at your local county USDA Service Center or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/organic/index.html.

*Jason Johnson, Public Affairs Specialist
USDA-NRCS, Des Moines
July 2010*

