

Five myths dispelled about organic certification

By GAIL OBERST
For the Capital Press

Each year since the 1990s, consumer demand for organically-grown foods has grown by double digits. Certified organic products now account for 4 percent of all food sales, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

If you're a farmer or rancher, organic successes can't have escaped you: A "certified organic" label can double or even quadruple the prices paid for conventionally grown products. But many who look into organic certification come away shaking

their heads at what seems like endless application documents, reports, equipment, inspections and hours required to maintain organic certification. Why does it have to be so hard?

It doesn't, said Connie Karr of Oregon Tilth, one of 54 organizations in the U.S. accredited to certify organic producers. Karr was on a mission to debunk myths about the difficulties surrounding organic certification. Karr and two certified organic processors were part of a Feb. 2 discussion at the annual Local Food Connection gathering of producers, buyers and distributors in Eugene, Ore.

Misinformation often stops

producers from joining the ranks of organic farmers. "It's not a passing fad," she said of organic farming. "It's here to stay."

Myth 1: My whole farm has to be certified or none of it will qualify. "You can absolutely certify a part of your farm," said Karr. One 2,000-acre Oregon farm has a 5-acre patch certified for organic production.

Myth 2: There aren't enough acceptable products out there to conduct business according to organic rules. Producers worry that they won't be able to find cleaning agents, weed and pest control agents, fertilizers or feed to meet organ-

ic guidelines, but they shouldn't worry, Karr said. More than 3,000 acceptable products are listed on www.omri.org website, complete with purchase information. Oregon Tilth's website, www.tilth.org, lists 8,000 products.

Myth 3: Certification is too expensive. Not so for now, Karr said. Oregon Tilth sliding scale fees to certify begin at \$399, plus \$200 for inspection, but the Farm Bill's cost share program reimburses the grower or processor 75 percent of that at the end of the year. This reimbursement may, unfortunately, disappear in the near future, but for now, registration is a good deal, Karr said.

Myth 4: I don't have enough time for all that record-keeping. Organic facilities are required to track products from their origins to the point of sale, with proof at every turn that conditions were organic. While this requirement

may seem a waste of time, it is a valuable tool that can be used to improve yields and manage business, according to Richard Wilen, owner of Hayhurst Organic Farm and developer of COG Pro, software that simplifies reporting for organic and food safety purposes.

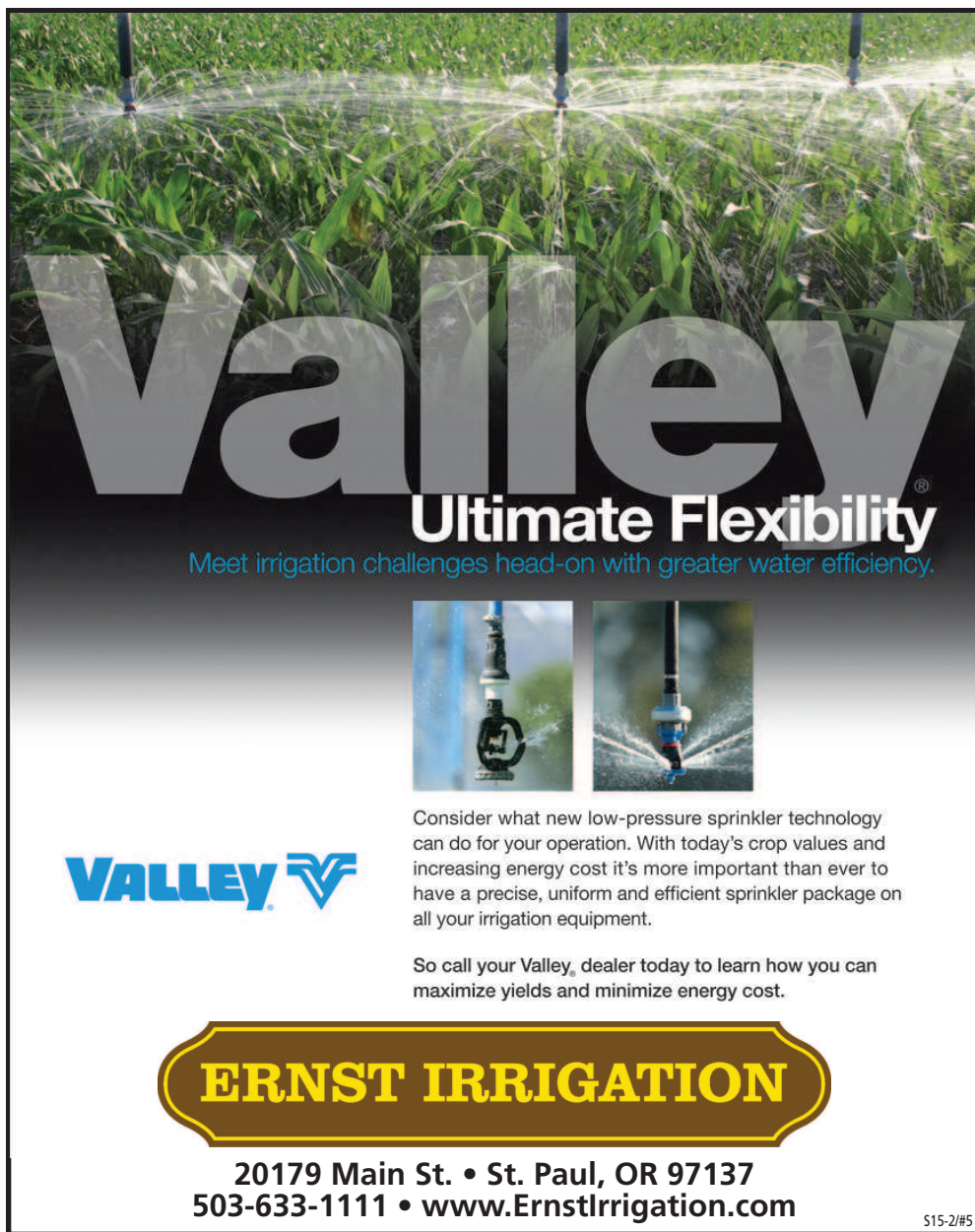
"I never met a farmer who got into organics to be an accountant and keeping records and filling out forms ranks right below shoveling manure for most farmers," Wilen said. The software is available for sale at www.cog-pro.com. Field data is stored online and is then available across devices on laptops, smart phones and tablets. Reports can be produced with the click of a button, Wilen said.

Myth 5: I'll have to fill out a 22-page document to apply for certification. Usually not, Karr said. Most applicants only have to fill out the few pages that apply to their operations. Oregon Tilth has recently hired

a transition services coordinator to help applicants through the process, Karr said.

"At first, the organic process seemed very difficult and pretty complicated," said Stephan Cameron, whose Blue Lotus Chai company must follow its products from India and then through shipping, processing and packaging in the U.S. to maintain organic certification. In the past few years, information has been easier to access from Oregon Tilth and from the Oregon Department of Agriculture, which is also accredited to certify organic operations. Most of his work has been to clearly label organic and non-organic materials and to be able to prove they have not been mixed. Good business practices come into play, Cameron said.

"Do your homework and think about your systems. There's no room for mistakes. Recalls are too expensive," he said.



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