

DROPPING ORGANIC CERTIFICATION -EFFECTS ON ORGANIC FARMING IN NORWAY

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Introduction

We present the number of farmers entering and opting out of organic farming in recent years; the farmers' reasons for opting out; and some of the farm characteristics. The work is a part of the research project "Reasons for opting out of certified organic production in Norway" (2007-08), funded by the Research Council of Norway and the Agricultural Agreement Fund.



The Norwegian Ø-label for organic certified products. The letter "Ø" symbolises the Norwegian word "økologisk" (ecological).

Materials and Methods

The work is based on:

- results from previous Norwegian studies
- agricultural statistics
- preliminary results from a research project with a combined quantitative and qualitative approach

Statistics:

Farm data from the Norwegian Agricultural Authority (SLF) on all farmers opting out between 2002 and 2006.

Interviews:

Four farmers that had opted out of organic grain, vegetable, sheep and dairy production were interviewed along with two advisers. Our aim was to better understand the complex process of converting to and opting out of organic agriculture.



The extension service gives advice on weed control and plant nutrient supply in organic farming. Picture: M. Koesling.

Results

From 2002 to 2006, 7.3 % of the certified organic holdings resigned from certified production. Nevertheless, the total number of organic farms increased slightly in this period, from 2303 to 2500 holdings. The area of organically certified farmland and land in conversion increased noticeably, from 32,546 to 44,563 ha.

The average organic area per certified farm increased from 11.0 to 15.5 ha from 2002 to 2006, while the average total agricultural area on these farms increased by 25 % from 19.7 to 24.7 ha. This shows that smaller farms tended to resign from organic farming, whereas converting farmers had more farmland.

Table: Key characteristics of farms in Norway, opting out, organic and general

Year	Farms opting out					Organic farms	All farms
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006 ²⁾	2006	2006
Farms	199	210	182	153	160	2500	51200
Agricultural area; ha/farm	17.4	15.9	15.6	24.9	24.7	24.7	20.2
Organic and in-conversion area; % of agricultural area ¹⁾	29 %	47 %	49 %	39 %	65 %	72 %	4 %
Dairy cows/dairy farm	14.3	12.6	17.1	15.5	22.1	19.1	17.6
Sheep over 1 year/sheep farm	36.5	43.9	41.8	47.0	56.9	59.9	62.9

1) In Norway, parallel organic and conventional production is permitted

2) Characteristics are based on 69 farmers opting out in the first half of 2006.

Farmers and advisers mentioned various reasons for opting out:

- Organic standards changed frequently and unexpectedly, and were perceived to become stricter with time
- New organic standards for animal housing often require high long-term investments
- Problems with weed control and plant nutrient supply for crop farmers
- Difficult to obtain 100 % organic feed, especially to be self-sufficient with concentrates in many regions
- Hard to find local buyers and to achieve a premium price for vegetables
- High employment rate and high salaries make off-farm employment attractive

Conclusions

Important reasons for farmers to opt out of certified organic production were organic standards, other external conditions, agronomy, economy, and farm exit. There was no indication that more organic farmers quit farming than farmers in general.

The prevailing regulations and policies promote farms with more farmland and/or more animals than the average.

The structural development (increasing agricultural area and herd size per farm with time) proceeds faster in organic agriculture than in conventional agriculture.

Predictable and stable standards, policy instruments and economical conditions would make more farmers motivated to continue organic production.

