

# Manual for conversion checks



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## Contents

Introduction.....	1
Getting started.....	1
The customer.....	1
Activities before each conversion check .....	1
Considerations and agreements before a conversion check.....	1
Interview with the farmer .....	2
Send written preparatory material to the farmer .....	2
Other preparations.....	3
Implementation of the conversion check.....	3
Suggestions for materials to supplement the conversation.....	4
Closing the meeting.....	4
After the conversion check.....	4
A visit report is sent to the farmer .....	4
Appendices .....	6
Material for written preparation .....	6
Organisation of the conversion check .....	6
Preparation pig farm conversion check.....	7
Preparation for crop farming conversion check .....	8
Preparation for cattle farming conversion check .....	9
Confirmation of agreement for conversion check to organic farming.....	10
Checklist for organising the conversion check' .....	12

## **Introduction to the English edition**

Conversion checks are a service for farmers interested in conversion that have been available in Denmark since 2011, as part of a governmental plan to mitigate agriculture's environmental pollution and protect nature. A conversion check is carried out by an advisor with expertise in organic farming, who will visit the farm. These checks are free to the farmer. This document sets out the protocol for preparation, the visit and the follow-up, carefully developed, based on many years of experience. The document is based on experience from 2011 to 2015 with more than 500 conversion checks performed by the local advice centres. Farmers who consider converting to organic can make a more balanced decision, avoiding undesired problems or drawbacks. The approach has proven to cause fewer re-conversions or interrupted processes.

The advisor and farmer go through the farm's production and sales potential to give the farmer an overview of what a conversion to organic production will mean in practice. The farmer can ask questions about organic and learn more about the farm's development opportunities.

## **Getting started**

Before you start conducting conversion-checks, it's a good idea to consider the following:

- What is the product, basis for the decision or a decision?
- What do you think is most important to the individual farmer?
- Is there anything you would like to be better at in terms of conversion consultancy?
- When is a conversion-check successful?

## **The customer**

Many conversion-checks today are carried out after the advisor has encouraged the farmer to do so, either directly or through adverts and events. This can mean that the farmer's commitment is not necessarily as high at the first meeting. You, therefore, carry the responsibility for a positive outcome. It's crucial for a successful conversion check that you as an advisor are clear and that the premise of the meeting is in place.

It can be an advantage to emphasise that the purpose of the conversion check is to create a solid basis for deciding whether to continue working with organic or not. Either decision will be an important outcome.

## **Activities before each conversion check**

### **Considerations and agreements before a conversion check**

What should the farmer know after a conversion check? What is the product?

What should the farmer prepare/have thought about before the meeting? So they get the most out of it.

Who participates internally and externally. Which people/competences/advisors does this particular farmer need?

How do you run the meeting? What does the agenda look like?

What is the role of each participant? If two advisors will have the preparatory conversation with the farmer, who will send him preparatory material and coordinate the meeting?

Who writes the minutes and sends them out?

### **Interview with the farmer**

Conduct an initial interview, preferably by phone.

Find out if there are any major barriers so that they don't show up during the meeting as stumbling blocks.

Explore for example:

- Is the number of livestock veterinary units (LVU) so large that there will be too little land and too much fertiliser when converting? If so, the farmer should consider the possibility of co-operation with other farmers in the area beforehand.
- If it's an arable farm, check the possibilities for organic fertiliser when converting and phasing out.
- If there is a barn, ask the farmer to have drawings or measurements of the indoor areas ready for the conversion check.
- If the partner or spouse of the farmer also has an interest in farming, it would be beneficial for them to attend the meeting.
- Arrange a time that suits all participants.
- Prepare the farmer for the material to be sent out so that they can get the most out of the conversion check.
- Tell them what they may have to pay for the conversion check if it goes beyond the financial framework that currently exists.

### **Send written preparatory material to the farmer**

Send a confirmation of the agreement; see the attachment 'Confirmation of agreement incl. agenda'. The appendix describes what the farmer can expect from the conversion check, while understanding what it does not include, such as conversion applications and reports. The attachment also includes the agenda and guidance for the farmer on preparation.

Send preparatory material (use the form in the appendix) for them to tick off before the meeting. It serves the following purposes:

- Tracks the farmer's thoughts on the benefits and challenges of organic farming
- Inspires reflections about what they want and what is possible
- Increases their benefit from the conversion check.

1-2 weeks prior to the meeting is a good time to send preparatory material.

Suggestions for preparatory material for the farmer: See appendix:

- 'Preparation for cattle farm conversion check'
- 'Preparation for pig farm conversion check'
- 'Preparation for crop growers conversion check'
- 'Principles of organic farming'
- The latest issue of 'Organic farming inspiration' can also be a good appetiser to whet the farmer's appetite and show them that there is a vibrant network and a stream of information they can benefit from when converting.
- If you have a folder for the conversion check, they will get something concrete.

### **Other preparations**

- Marketing is often the key obstacle to conversion. Have a good idea of the marketing options before the visit.
- Print out a map of the property and take it with you. It will help you get an overview.
- Bring a tape measure. Farmers rarely know the dimensions of their barn.
- Familiarise yourself with the property, talk to advisor colleagues who know about it.

It is not recommended to spend time to make a rough budget in advance. It's usually misleading because it doesn't take into account information that only becomes apparent during the conversion-check. If it is presented at the meeting anyway, the farmer can't help but look at the figures because they are so concrete. This leads to wrong conclusions being drawn. At the same time, some farmers are very disappointed to be presented with figures that have nothing to do with their property.

### **Implementation of the conversion check**

The meeting is all about seeing opportunities and localising barriers. Don't spend too much time or into too much detail on specific regulations. However, you should expect a lot of detailed questions that make demands on your ecological knowledge about the farm as a system and organic agriculture. Questions about inspection and bureaucracy will come up, so be prepared.

On larger properties or properties with multiple production branches, it can be an advantage to have two advisors present. It's obviously more expensive, but the product will be better. The professionalism is stronger and there is the opportunity to switch roles as reorganisation advisor and reporter.

It works well when the advisor has material to support their discussions. It's easier to absorb new knowledge if there is something to look at and listen to, and material supports the farmer in their further considerations. Don't include more than you can vouch for and explain yourself. A clear message is important. What am I trying to say with the document I've chosen to include?

### **Suggestions for materials to supplement the conversation**

- Only a few numbers and only a little information on each page, possibly as slides
- Use key figures that you are familiar with from the area you are an advisor
- Bring the leaflets that are relevant to this farmer
- A timeline for the conversion helps a lot to get an overview

### **Review barriers and opportunities**

See the appendix 'Common barriers and motivation when converting to organic in 2016' and bring it to the meeting to help you find solutions to work around potential barriers and better understand motivating factors.

Once you have clarified the consequences and barriers to converting the farm, calculations can be offered (conversion or extension of the barn, purchase of land, etc.).

Ask the farmer to consider whether there is a possibility of co-operation with other farmers who can receive/deliver manure or crops. It's good to be able to access special machines such as row cleaners etc. via neighbours or contractors. This is why your local knowledge is important.

Remember to mention the initiatives you can offer locally and in the Danish Agricultural Advisory Service (DLBR) system: expert groups, meeting days, courses and other events.

### **Closing the meeting**

- 'Are there any more questions?'
- 'What is your gut feeling after all the information you've been given?'
- 'Do you want a simple impact calculation comparing the current operation with organic, based on the information you've been given today?'
- 'Do you want a 5-year budget?'

Prepare the farmer that there will be a short summary/visit report from the meeting and that they will be contacted, e.g. within 3 months, to see if any further information is needed in the process.

Make sure the farmer has the contact details of the advisors who have visited. Questions may arise after you've left.

All advice on how to run the conversion check is summarised in the appendix 'Checklist for running a conversion check'. This checklist ensures that you cover all the most important topics during the visit.

### **After the conversion check**

#### **A visit report is sent to the farmer**

It can contain topics about:

- What is already agreed and in place

- Necessary changes: to the landscape, barn, grazing areas, machinery, other investments, etc.
- Advice for action

## **Appendices**

### **Material for written preparation**

1. 'Preparation pig farm conversion check'
2. 'Preparation for crop farming conversion check'
3. 'Preparation cattle farm conversion check'
4. 'Confirmation of agreement incl. agenda' (template)

### **Organisation of the conversion check**

5. 'Checklist for organising the conversion check'



## 1. Preparation pig farm conversion check

In preparation we would like to ask you to assess the following statements

Statement	Agreement					
	agree			do not agree		
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I'm fine with getting rid of my sprayer						
2. I believe I can run my farm without pesticides						
3. The farm must have a good image						
4. Economy plays the most important role in my conversion to organic farming						
5. I support the organic principles						
6. Free-range pigs are very important to me						
7. The opinion of those around me about organic farming is very important to me						
8. Animal welfare is very important to me						
9. I'm concerned about neighbours' complaints about smell and noise						
10. I think it is more ethical to run an organic farm						
11. I have an ongoing need for further training						
12. Organic farming is an exciting professional challenge						
13. It's ok that I need the vet to treat my animals with medicine						
14. I can do without fertiliser						
15. I want stable earnings without large fluctuations from year to year						
16. It is very important that the animals grow fast						
17. I would like to sell breeding animals from the herd						

## 2. Preparation for crop farming conversion check

In preparation we would like to ask you to assess the following statements

Statement	Agreement					
	agree			do not agree		
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I'm fine with getting rid of my sprayer						
2. I believe I can farm without pesticides						
3. The farm must have a good image						
4. Economy plays the most important role in my conversion to organic farming						
5. I support the organic principles						
6. I have access to fertilisers approved for organic farming						
7. The opinion of those around me about organic means a lot to me						
8. I can live with a few weeds in the fields						
9. I am concerned about neighbours' comments about weeds						
10. I think it is more ethical to farm organically						
11. I have an ongoing need for continuing education						
12. Organic farming is an exciting professional challenge						
13. It's time to stop polluting the groundwater with pesticides						
14. I can do without fertilisers						
15. I want stable earnings without large fluctuations from year to year						
16. I am ready to familiarise myself with the rules of organic farming						

### 3. Preparation for cattle farming conversion check

In preparation we would like to ask you to assess the following statements

Statement	Agreement					
	agree			do not agree		
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I'm fine with getting rid of my sprayer						
2. I believe I can run my farm without pesticides						
3. The farm must have a good image						
4. Economy plays the most important role in my conversion to organic farming						
5. I support the organic principles						
6. Cows on pasture is very important to me						
7. The farm must have a good image						
8. Animal welfare is very important to me						
9. I am good at managing grazing						
10. It takes longer to run an organic farm						
11. I have an ongoing need for further training						
12. Organic farming is an exciting professional challenge						
13. It's ok that I'm not allowed to prevent worm infestations with medicine						
14. I can do without commercial fertilisers						
15. I want stable earnings without large fluctuations from year to year						
16. A high milk yield is very important						
17. I would like to sell breeding animals from the herd						
18. I am ready to familiarise myself with the rules of organic farming						



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#### **4. Confirmation of agreement for conversion check to organic farming (template)**

Thank you for your interest in a conversion check for your farm.

We have arranged a meeting at your premises, x-road x-city, on x-date at x. The conversion check is calculated to take x hours. Participating advisors: xxx (specify advisor type) and xxx (specify advisor type)

The purpose of a conversion check is to discuss the possibilities and limitations of converting to organic farming on your property, so that you have a basis for deciding whether to convert your farm.

To get the most out of the consultancy visit, I would ask you to fill out the 2 attached forms. They are about 1) Production level and budget assumptions, 2) Personal attitude to organic farming. I also enclose an overview of the 'Rules for organic production' and the 'Principles of organic farming'.

See the agenda for the meeting page 2. Minutes will be sent to you after the meeting.

*Specific information for Denmark:* The 2016 conversion check is financed by the Fund for Organic Agriculture. The maximum amount for each conversion check is limited by the 'de minimis rules' It is important to clarify the financial terms with your conversion advisor prior to the meeting.

The reorganisation check includes:

- Preparatory (telephone) conversation.
- Review of your property as it might look as an organic farm based on the ideas that come up in the process.
- Questions and answers to what comes up.
- Minutes/visit report and a follow-up phone call.

A reorganisation check does NOT include the preparation of a detailed financial impact assessment, reorganisation application and grant application.

If you have any questions or suggestions for points you would like to discuss, you are welcome to contact me prior to the meeting and we will organise the meeting to suit your wishes and situation.

Yours sincerely

xxx Organic Advisor

Phone number:

E-mail:



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## **Confirmation agreement P 2**

### **Agenda for the conversion check**

- Short presentation of the farm and tour of the barn and field.
- Longer-term goals for the farm v/host
  - o What do you prioritise?
  - o What are you really good at as a farmer and where are you challenged?
  - o Where does the consideration of organic farming come into the picture?
  - o Where have you ticked your boxes in the form that was sent with the agenda?
- Field management
  - o Field plan, land division, crop selection and crop rotation.
  - o Review of rules and subsidies for organic crop production, harmony between stable and field, possible leases.
- Livestock production
  - o Grazing, stabling and housing conditions, feed.
- Review of rules in general.
- What changes are necessary in the field/crop rotation and livestock house?
- Timetable for converting the farm. Application and application deadlines.
- Conclusion: Opportunities and limitations. Consequences of conversion.
- Agreements and finalisation.

## 5. Checklist for organising the conversion check'

	<b>Short presentation of the farm and tour of the stable and field</b>
	<b>Longer-term goals for the farm by the host</b>
	What do you prioritize?
	Where does the consideration of organic farming come into the picture?
	Where have you ticked your boxes in the form that was sent with the agenda?
	<b>Field management</b>
	Field plan
	Crop choice and crop rotation
	Weeds on the property
	Harmony between barn and field
	Possibility of leases, if applicable
	There will be a lot of control
	A logbook must be kept, but not a spraying journal.
	General overview of rules and subsidies for organic crop farming
	See also <a href="http://www.landbrugsinfo.dk">www.landbrugsinfo.dk</a>
	<b>Milk production</b>
	Decent opportunities for driveways?
	Sufficient grazing area and landscaping?
	Sufficient stable area?
	Calving conditions?
	Calving conditions?
	Steers?
	Stalls for heifers?
	Space requirements (6 m <sup>2</sup> /cow, 3 m <sup>2</sup> fixed)
	Feeding
	See also <a href="http://www.landbrugsinfo.dk">www.landbrugsinfo.dk</a>
	<b>Pigs</b>
	Area requirements
	Stables, pens and pens
	Time outdoors
	Surgical interventions
	Feed and feed
	Investments
	New ways of working
	See also <a href="http://www.landbrugsinfo.dk">www.landbrugsinfo.dk</a>
	→
	→



**Checklist for conversion-check P 2**

	<b>What changes are needed in the field/crop rotation and barn</b>
	Timetable for conversion of the farm. Application and application deadlines
	Create a timeline for conversion and enter the relevant dates.
	<b>Conclusion: Opportunities and limitations. Consequences of conversion.</b>
	<b>Agreements and finalizing</b>
	Does the farmer have any questions?
	‘What is your gut feeling after all the information you've been given?’
	‘Do you need time to think about it?’
	‘Do you want a simple impact calculation comparing no-till with organic, based on the information you've been given today?’
	‘...Or do you want a 5-year budget?’
	‘xxx will send you a report in xxx days’
	Remember to mention the initiatives that DLBR can offer: Heritage groups, mini training, help finding an organic partner...
	Hand out business cards
	Offer to give the farmer a call.