# Attitudes towards conversion to organic production of farmers in England

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## ABSTRACT

The poster presents results of a telephone survey commission by MAFF (now DEFRA) on attitudes of converting and conventional producers to organic production, investigating barriers and motives.

*Keywords: organic farming; attitudes; conversion*

## INTRODUCTION

Inquiries to the Organic Conversion Information Service (OCIS) have been made from approx. 11 % of producers (England and Wales), but there has been significantly less take-up of conversion. On behalf of DEFRA the study investigated farmer attitudes to conversion and to the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS). In previous studies perceptual barriers were identified as poor access to information and advice, technical issues such as weed and pest control, investments and increased labour requirements and lack of confidence in markets, premiums and the commitment of government (see Midmore *et al*., 2001; Padel, 2001 for literature review).

## APPROACH

The study involved a telephone survey of three groups of farmers in 2000: farmers converting within the existing Organic Farming Scheme (OFS); those who have contacted the Organic Conversion Information Service in England and had an initial visit, but had not progressed to conversion (OCIS non-converters); and a sample of farmers drawn at random from the MAFF holdings database (Census). Due to data restrictions, farmers had to agree to participate by returning their phone number before they were called.

## RESULTS

There were structural differences between the three groups of respondents: OFS farms had mainly livestock and cropping enterprises; the OCIS non-converters were on average smaller and had more horticulture. Responses of conventional farmers (OCIS non-converters and census) indicated that a higher proportion of farmers than have contacted OCIS are potentially interested in organic farming (see Table 1). Farmers were presented with a series of attitudinal statements and asked to indicate their level of agreement. All farmers agreed with a statement about environmental benefits of organic farming, but difference were more marked for other statements, for example regarding the ability to control weeds etc. without agrochemicals. More than 30% of all farmers answered 'don't know' regarding the statement about profit.

Table 1. Summary results of phone survey

| | OFS | OCIS non-converters | Census |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of useable responses (response rate) | 58 (16%) | 125 (35%) | 66 (15%) |
| Average farm size (ha) | 158.1 | 87.3 | 217.3 |
| Would consider conversion in future (% of respondents) | n/a | 60% | 35% |
| *Responses to a series of attitudinal statements (average scores, STD in brackets)* | | | |
| Organic farming is kinder to the environment | 1.4 (0.68) | 1.1(1.01) | 0.9(1.25) |
| You can't control weeds, pests and diseases without chemicals | 1.0 (0.68) | 0.6(1.01) | 0.421.07) |
| Organic farms are more profitable than conventional ones | 0.4 (0.82) | -0.1 (0.82) | -0.1 (0.98) |
| Premiums on organic products are a strong incentive to convert | 1.1 (0.67) | 0.4 (1.18) | 0.7 (0.93) |
| The organic standards are too restrictive to be practical | 0.2 (1.13) | -0.1 (1.23) | 0.2 (1.15) |
| Changing to an organic system is an exciting new challenge | 1.1 (0.64) | 0.5 (1.10) | 0.6(1.31) |

The situation and development of markets did not appear to constitute an obstacle to organic conversion, although the OFS sample was less optimistic about this. Information and advice about organic conversion were perceived as being easy to obtain by conventional but not by converting farmers, which illustrates that more advanced knowledge about organic farming is less widely available. The majority of converting farmers cited giving up agro-chemicals and concerns about the future profitability of conventional farming as main reasons. For those not converting their holdings financial viability, improvement of environmental quality and the Organic Faming Scheme were seen as important factors for any future decision to convert.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results suggest that farmers embarking on organic conversion have in some areas different attitudes from non-converters. It is likely that this depends on the adequate information and advisory support during the conversion period for example in the area of financial information.

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## REFERENCES

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