

Attitudes and decision making amongst Scottish organic farmers

By CAROLINE BAYLISS¹ & TONY CLAY²

¹*Scottish Agricultural College, Craibstone Estate, Aberdeen AB21 9YA, Scotland*

²*Ravenslea, Midlem, Selkirk, TD7 4BQ, Scotland*

ABSTRACT

The number of organic farmers in Scotland increased dramatically in the period between 1997 and 2000, from 120 in 1997 to approximately 600 at the end of 2000; a five fold increase. Currently the outlook for organic farming in Scotland appears positive, despite recent publicity about farmers leaving the sector. Market prospects for all organic commodities are buoyant and there are increased Scottish Executive Organic Aid Scheme (OAS) maintenance payments in the offing. But what do Scotland's organic producers really think about the system, which has them, tied in for at least five years?

In June 2004, a representative group of Scottish organic farmers in the South of Scotland was surveyed to determine how many intended to continue farming organically once they had completed the OAS and to consider the factors affecting their decisions regarding organic conversion and cessation. Results indicated that 55% of respondents intended to continue farming organically in the short term whilst 37% intended to continue for the long term (the next decade).

Although half of the respondents indicated that they were greatly influenced to convert to organic farming for wider environmental benefits and 45% for perceived job satisfaction, by far the biggest influence cited was financial benefit. Sixty nine per cent of respondents cited OAS subsidies and 55% cited the perceived price premium on produce. These findings were confirmed in a second survey of organic farmers in Central Scotland between November 2004 and January 2005. In this second survey almost half (49%) of respondents cited increased long term financial returns and 44% cited the short-term cash injection from OAS payments as being of great importance in the decision to convert.

The Central Scotland survey also indicated that stress and pressure on farmers following conversion was remarkably high, perhaps as a result of farmers having to adopt new practices and procedures; 97% of respondents reported increased paperwork and 79% stated that they required increased management skills. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that farmers' attitude to organic farming changes over time from initial apprehension to more confidence in production methods and the system in general.

Factors impeding farmers' efforts to farm organically were primarily issues relating to cash flow, certification bodies, standards and marketing. Marketing issues were perceived or found to be the main problem after full organic status was achieved in the SW Scotland survey. The Central Scotland survey indicates insufficient price premiums and lack of local outlets as the main factors for cessation of organic farming. Both surveys also concur on the fact that hill farmers are more likely to leave organic farming in the short term than their upland and lowland counterparts. However, respondents from both surveys who did not intend to continue farming organically stated they planned to continue farming extensively using organic farming methods and systems.