

Prairie Organic Grain Initiative



Summer 2015 - Highlights and Update

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Welcome to the Prairie Organic Grain Initiative (POGI) Progress Update, aimed at keeping our partners, funders, advisory teams, and other interested supporters fully apprised of our developments and activities.

Watch for our new name!

While POGI is a descriptive name for our project, it doesn't quite sound right. We're coming up with a new name that will carry on beyond this initiative to represent Prairie Organics. Look for our new name in our next update!

Why the Prairie Organic Grain Initiative?

Prairie organic grain production has been in a state of severe supply shortage for the past several years, leading to instability and extreme price fluctuations. Processors have had to either cut back on their organic products, or look further overseas for organic ingredients. Some processors have even turned to other value-added ingredients like "natural" and "GMO-free", undermining the organic brand. Supply has been slow to meet demand partly because there have been no major campaigns to increase organic acreage or improve organic production. The Prairie Organic Grain Initiative, a partnership of the three Prairie Provinces, with funding from the industry-supported Prairie Organic Development Fund and matched federal funding, seeks to resolve this supply shortage using a three-pronged approach.

Who are the Prairie Organic Grain Initiative Stakeholders and Partners?

Organic Alberta is partnering with several industry stakeholders across the value chain, as well as the Prairie provincial organic agriculture associations (SaskOrganics, Manitoba Organic Alliance and Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia, COABC), The Canadian Organic Trade Association, The Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada, and The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security. Other Industry Stakeholders include Organic Processors, Brokers, Buyers and Certification Bodies.

Who is funding the Prairie Organic Grain Initiative?

Total project funding is \$2.2 Million: Western Economic Diversification \$1.2 Million; Industry \$890,000; Provincial \$30,000. Key industry funders include: The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security, Grain Millers, Nature's Path Foods, General Mills, Dave's Killer Bread, and Clif Bar & Company.



Prairie Organic Grain Initiative



To achieve resiliency and stability while growing the organic sector in the Prairies by focusing on both quantity and quality of organic grains and developing relationships across the value chain.

New Grower Stream

Objective:

Increased number of new organic producers

With high organic prices for organic grains, there is a strong incentive for growers to convert to organics. But the pathway to becoming organic often seems daunting, and the transition period is seen as a significant risk that will take considerable effort. Through targeted marketing, a suite of resources and supports for transitioning producers, and a series of training events, this stream will increase the number of organic growers.

Optimization Stream

Objective:

Improved management increases quantity and quality

Organic grain production remains underdeveloped. While there has been some research and investment in organic infrastructure in the Prairies, there are still significant gaps. Through compiling the latest research on organics, creating resources, training producers on how to implement these practices, mobilizing the industry and helping to build organic infrastructure, this stream will improve organic field crop quantity and quality.

Market Development Stream

Objective:

Increased markets for prairie organic grains

A major barrier to profitable organic production is whole-farm business planning and marketing of organic products. The Prairie organic brand needs to be promoted in new as well as existing markets. Information sharing across the whole value-chain is also crucial for market development. Through data integration, networking and buyer missions abroad, this stream will ensure profitability for producers and processors while providing improved market access.

Update on the New Grower Transition Stream

Marketing Campaign - Over the last several months, we have been working with an Edmonton-based marketing firm to develop a campaign aimed at conventional farmers. The campaign is designed to promote the transition to organic farming by addressing transition barriers and highlighting the benefits of organic production.

As part of their work, the marketing company has identified the target audience attributes as:

1. Farm is in good financial health.
2. Willing to adapt and learn.
3. Willing to network.
4. Good managerial skills.
5. Interested in a diversification strategy.
6. Able to put in time and effort to transition.

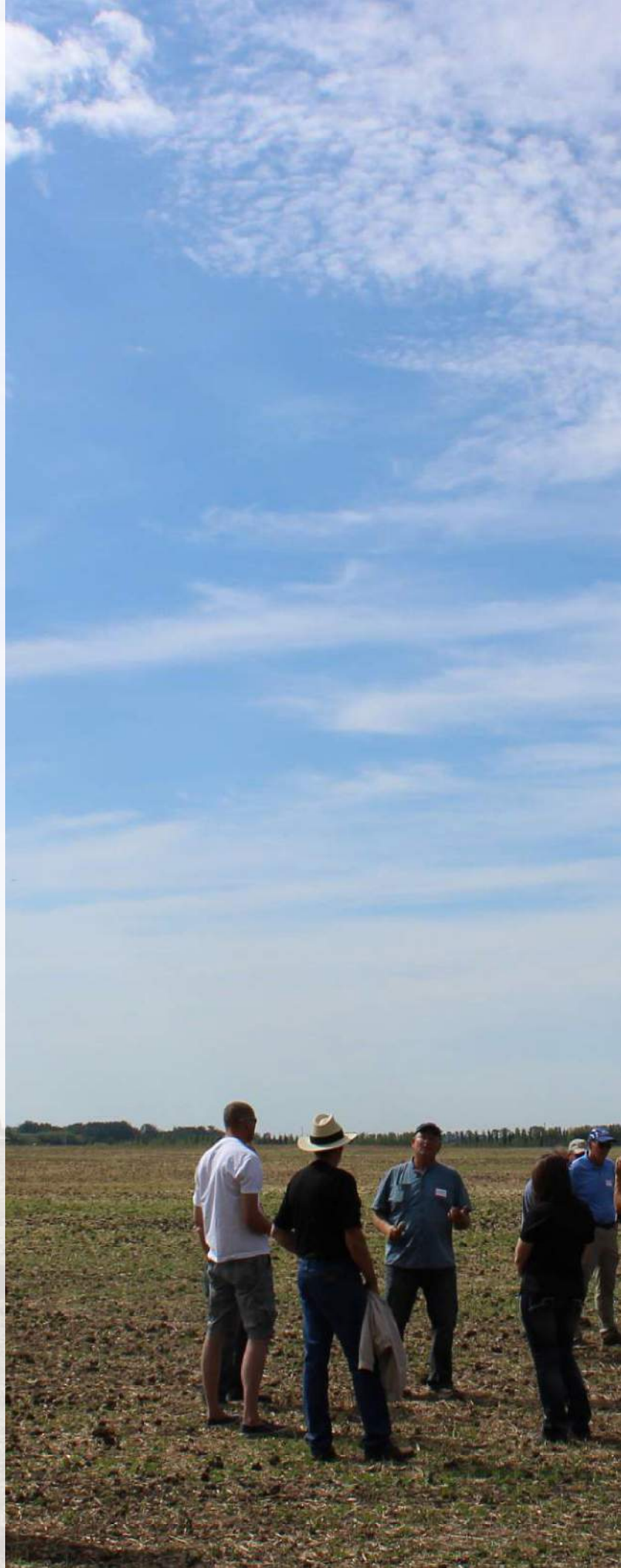
Farmers Most Likely to Transition to Organics are:

1. Young farmers: 20-35 years old, inherited the farm, Ag-College grads, use new technologies and social media, very receptive to news media.
2. Businessman farmers: 40-70 years old, economically very conscious, rely on traditional agriculture techniques, very sceptical of the organic business model.

They identified the transition barriers as follows (in order of importance):

1. The Transition Period: Perceived as unmanageable, labour and capital intensive, could lose money.
2. Uncertain Profits: Market premiums vs. market uncertainty, fewer buyers, lower yields.
3. Production: Management practice concerns (weeds, fertility, seeds, diseases).
4. Skepticism: Ideologically opposed, questioning the very idea of organics, food security, etc.
5. Different lifestyle: Negative perceptions of organics, peer influences.

The brand is also designed to change negative perceptions of organic production through education, engagement and by addressing the misconceptions. The campaign is scheduled to be completed and ready for use by September 2015.





Strategic Planning - In addition to providing input into the development of the marketing campaign, the Transition Stream Advisory Team is now meeting to determine the priority areas of focus for the stream. This guidance is critical for determining where resources and planning will be allocated. The process is forecast to be complete by September 2015.

Re-naming POGI - Another foundational step already underway is to determine whether or not the Prairie Organic Grain Initiative needs a new name that can be used in years to come to help brand prairie organic grain production. Ideas have been proposed and the Advisory Team continues to discuss the feasibility of different names. A decision on whether or not the Initiative will have a name change should be made by September 2015.

Inaugural Activities – While the strategic planning process unfolds, the New Grower Transition Stream has begun some projects with partners and stakeholders, in both supportive and coordinating roles:

- *Transition Workshops* – Two transition workshops were held in Alberta (Tofield and La Crete) with over 50 farmers in attendance. SaskOrganics held five transition workshops across Saskatchewan with over 50 interested producers. More transition workshops are being planned for Fall 2015.
- *Field Days* – We held a field day in June focusing on post-emergent tillage with tillage equipment displays and demonstrations. There were 50+ farmers in attendance.

Update on the Optimization Stream

The Optimization Advisory Team has been meeting regularly over the last several months and have determined eight priority areas to focus resources and activities. The team is now developing an implementation plan for each area.

1 **Improving Soil Fertility** **Understanding the role of Green Manures in Soil Fertility:**

Green Manures are crops grown primarily to add nutrients such as nitrogen to the soil for a subsequent crop. Understanding how to maximize soil fertility through green manures is crucial to improving crop quality and yields.

Application of Off-Farm Nutrients: Green manures may supply most but not all nutrients for organic crops, so producers often need to add nutrients from off-farm at some point. However, what to use, where to source it, how to apply it and what is most economical in terms of nutrient use is still poorly understood by many organic producers.

2 **Improving Weed Management** **Tillage Equipment and Practices:**

Tillage is typically the primary weed management technique used by organic producers, but there are many variations in terms of timing, depth, adjustments etc. that can greatly effect weed management and crop quality. There are also new technologies being developed to mitigate weed pressure without impacting the crop, however they have not been thoroughly tested under prairie organic conditions, and their cost-effectiveness needs to be explored.

Cultural Management Practices to Reduce Weed Pressure: Organic producers use multiple cultural techniques to reduce weed pressure, such as increasing seeding density, seeding in two directions, increasing or decreasing row spacing and intercropping. Producers often try different things each year without really knowing what will be effective. More examples of effective techniques in different crops are required.

3 **Improving Crop Quality** **Post-Harvest Sanitation and Economics:**


Organic harvests can contain more weed seeds and more immature grain than conventional, so cleaning and storage of organic grain is crucial for ensuring crop quality is maximized. Easy to use technologies like the Quick-Clean greatly improve sanitation and economics, but there is poor uptake among producers. Bin cleanliness is another factor that impacts crop quality.

Cultural Management Practices to Improve Crop Quality: Organic management relies heavily on cultural control practices for nutrient and weed management. However, these are often regionally-specific, and practices vary widely from producer to producer. Systematizing cultural management practices by crop and region could go a long way to improving organic crop quality.

4 **Improving Whole Farm Management** **Understanding Crop Rotation for Nutrient Budgeting and Weed Control:**

Crop rotations are integral to organic production, both for nutrient and weed management, however Prairie organic producers vary widely on how they use rotations. Through monitoring nutrient budgets in the rotation, adjustments can be made to maximize crop quantity and quality.

Cost of Production and Rotation Design: Before producers know what changes to make to their system, they have to understand how their bottom line will be impacted. This requires having a good understanding of their cost of production and how to calculate it. Many organic producers are not making management decisions from a cost of production perspective, which can negatively impact their profitability.



Inaugural Activities – We have implemented some projects with partners and stakeholders, in both supportive and coordinating roles:

- **Enviro-Scan:** This project was commissioned to gather together all the research on organic grains across the Prairies over the last 25 years. It also includes other research relevant to organic management. Over 600 documents on research and extension have been categorized, along with a report on past and future organic grain research and extension. This project is now complete and will be available in September 2015.
- **Producer Survey:** We are collecting production and yield data from all organic grain producers in the Prairies in order to have baseline data for the POGI project and to determine where we can have the greatest impact. This project is underway and due to be completed in September 2015.
- **Field Crop Handbook:** The Canadian Organic Growers are updating their classic book on organic grain production, with more current information and updated research. This project is scheduled to be completed in Spring 2016 and will be available through COG as well as the provincial associations.
- **Green Manure Manual:** The Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada is working with us to collect and disseminate the latest research and on-farm success stories on managing green manures, the backbone to soil fertility for organic grain producers.
- **Organic Production Conference:** An organic producer conference is planned for February 2016 in Winnipeg. For more information contact Laura Telford at 204-871-6600.

Update on the Marketing Stream

The Marketing stream Advisory Team was recently formed and had their first meeting in July 2015. The Advisory Team includes individuals from industry, research, organic farmers and provincial associations.

The Canadian Organic Trade Association is developing an international marketing strategy for Prairie Organic Grains with input from the Advisory Team.

- Key priority areas being developed include:
- Developing a Prairie organic grain brand.
- Networking with interested buyers.
- Marketing Prairie organic grain.

Inaugural activities of the Marketing Stream include participation in:

- BIOFACH, the world's largest organic trade show in February 2015.
- EXPO East, the largest natural foods expo in the US, in March 2015.
- Japan Organic Trade Show with interested Prairie companies, trade mission upcoming in October 2015.
- Korea – meetings with international buyers.

Project Preview: ENVIROSCAN

Time and again, we hear farmers mention some trial, done somewhere by some researcher about a topic. What was their name... and what were the results again? Was it red clover or peas that produced the most available nitrogen? Was it oat or wheat? Was it better on black soil or dark brown? Where can we go to find out?

Until now, you had to spend hours searching online to find the name, the location, the trial and hopefully the results. While the Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada website has done an admirable job over the years of linking farmers to organic knowledge and research results, you have to sort through a lot of information to find Prairie grain. Research trials and extension resources developed over the years tend to get lost and therefore confused. If only there was a list we could refer to...

Well, that list is now complete! We have over 600 entries in a categorized list on everything from soil quality to weed management to mycorrhizal fungi in organic systems. We can use this list to pull information to create new extension materials, and incorporate the latest research. We will also use this list to make an online, searchable database so producers, researchers, extension staff, or anyone interested, can go to find information about organic production.

Accompanying the list is a report outlining where research has been done and on what topics, what the main areas of research so far have been and what gaps exist. These documents will set the stage for future work on organic research and extension on Prairie organic grain.

This report will be available to the public in September, and the list will also be available to organic associations to help create new materials.