BARRIERS TO ORGANIC IN ARIZONA

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the barriers that Arizona food producers and handlers face in transitioning to organic, and obtaining and maintaining USDA organic certification. Drawing on 13 interviews with producers and handlers representing a range of production types, scales, and certification statuses, the research identifies key challenges including complex paperwork, high certification costs, limited market access, and inadequate infrastructure. While many of these obstacles mirror national trends, others are uniquely acute in Arizona, particularly for ranchers and small-scale handlers.

Interviewees emphasized the value of community support and peer networks, with the USDA's Transition to Organic Partnership Program offering meaningful but time-limited assistance. Findings point to the need for simplified certification processes, expanded financial and technical support, increased in-state certifying capacity, targeted market development, and stronger livestock processing and feed supply chains. Recommendations include establishing a statewide resource-sharing network, hosting an Arizona Organic Conference, and advocating for policies such as a state-based cost-share program and a USDA Organic Transition Label. By investing in these strategies, Arizona can strengthen its organic sector, create new market opportunities, and support local food systems.

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INTRODUCTION

Organic agriculture in the United States has evolved significantly since the passage of the Organic Foods Production Act in 1990, which laid the groundwork for national standards on what it means to produce, handle, and sell food organically (USDA, 2025). A decade later, the final rule was issued and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) established the National Organic Program to enforce regulations for organic certification, labeling, and compliance across the country.

Although consumer demand and organic acreage have grown considerably in the U.S., producers and handlers still face numerous challenges in their pursuit of organic certification. While many studies have documented these barriers and highlighted strategies to reduce them, there is a noticeable gap in literature and resources focused specifically on Arizona.

Arizona is a unique agricultural state. Between November and April, 90% of all leafy greens consumed in the U.S. and Canada come from the city of Yuma, located near the state's southern border (Yuma Fresh Vegetable Association, n.d.). Additionally of note, Arizona has the largest percentage of female farm producers and Native American producers in the country (Rice, 2024). Research shows that female producers are, on average, more involved with organic farming and show greater interest in environmentally-friendly practices (Unay-Gailhard & Bojnec, 2021). Given Arizona's agricultural significance and the distinctive demographic of its farming community, the state would seem poised to be a leader in organic production. Yet, that potential remains largely untapped.

This study examines the barriers that Arizona food producers and handlers face in transitioning to organic and securing USDA organic certification. Through analysis of interviews

with local producers and handlers, this paper highlights opportunities for improvement and offers recommendations to strengthen long-term support for Arizona's organic sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the federal government established national organic standards and created the USDA organic seal, consumer demand for organic food and certified organic farmland across the U.S. have risen significantly. Between 2001 and 2020, inflation-adjusted retail sales of certified organic food grew by nearly 450%, while certified organic acreage expanded by almost 350% from 2000 to 2019 (Carlson et al., 2023, p. 1). This growth reflects consumer perceptions that organic food, which is free of synthetic pesticides, antibiotics, and genetically modified organisms, supports environmental and personal health (Carlson et al., 2023, p. 62).

However, despite this upward trend over the first two decades of the USDA National Organic Program, recent years have seen a decline in organic agriculture nationally. According to the USDA's 2022 Census of Agriculture, the number of certified organic farms nationwide fell by 3.9% between 2017 and 2022 (USDA, 2024). Additionally, in the most recent Organic Survey conducted by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, data showed that certified organic acreage dropped by 10.9% between 2019 and 2021 (USDA, 2025).

In response to this fluctuation and to ease barriers to organic farming, the USDA launched the Organic Transition Initiative (OTI) in 2022, allocating $300 million to expand organic farming and strengthen organic markets (USDA, 2025). This led to the creation of programs such as the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) and the Organic Market Development Grant Program. The following section examines common challenges farmers face in pursuing organic practices and achieving certification, shedding light on potential factors contributing to the recent decline in organic agriculture.

Common Challenges of Organic Agriculture in the U.S.

Weed and Pest Management

As USDA organic regulations prohibit the use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides, organic farmers must find alternative ways to manage pests and weeds in their fields. Many studies have found that farmers across the U.S. experience weed management as a major obstacle in farming organically (Lloyd & Stephenson, 2020; Snyder et al., 2022; Stephenson et al., 2021). In a national survey conducted by the Organic Farming Research Foundation, organic farmers expressed that increasingly unpredictable weather has exacerbated weed pressure and that there is a need for more research on organic weed management (Snyder et al., 2022). Additionally, controlling insect pests on organic farms is a common challenge, particularly for beginning organic farmers, and some farmers have struggled with higher frequency and/or intensity of pest outbreaks over time (Lloyd & Stephenson, 2020; Snyder et al., 2022; Stephenson et al., 2021).

Transition Period and Recordkeeping

Farmers who convert from conventional to organic agriculture are required to undergo a 3-year transition period before qualifying for USDA organic certification. During this time, farmers must comply with all USDA organic regulations and not use any prohibited inputs. This transition period is known to be financially challenging for farmers as they often experience volatility in their yields and are not able to sell their product at the organic premium yet (Constance & Choi, 2010; Makinde, 2024).

Furthermore, at the start of a farmer's transition to organic, they must begin keeping detailed records of all substances used during the production of the crops and/or livestock, a history of the fields, and more. These records are essential for an operation's Organic System

Plan (OSP), which is a requirement of organic certification to demonstrate that the farm is compliant with USDA organic standards. This recordkeeping requirement is widely reported as a substantial challenge to achieve organic certification, even being coined as the "hassle factor" (Delbridge et al., 2017; Lloyd & Stephenson, 2020; Snyder et al., 2022; Stephenson et al., 2021).

Cost of Organic Certification

Organic certification costs can range from hundreds to thousands of dollars depending on many factors such as the certifying agency, size and income of the farm, and complexity of the operation. Despite the variance in costs, there is a broad consensus among farmers that certification fees are a major obstacle to obtain and maintain USDA organic certification (Lloyd & Stephenson, 2020; Snyder et al., 2022; Stephenson et al., 2021). While payment systems differ by certifying agency, fees typically include a one-time application fee, along with annual certification and inspection fees.

The USDA's Farm Service Agency has provided financial assistance for organic certification since 2010 through their Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP). Farmers and handlers must apply to OCCSP, and if they are eligible, this program provides reimbursements of 75% of their certification costs in a given year, or up to a maximum of $750 per certification scope (crops, livestock, wild crops, and handling) (USDA, 2024). These funds are limited and provided on a first-come, first-serve basis. Studies underscore the importance of maintaining this program, which is widely regarded as helpful for organic farmers, especially on small farms, to access and afford organic certification (Lloyd & Stephenson, 2020; Snyder et al., 2022; Stephenson et al., 2021). In addition, there are policy recommendations published by organic researchers that suggest the cost share percentage should be increased for BIPOC and underserved producers (Snyder et al, 2022).

Other Challenges

Aside from these prominent challenges that show up consistently across the literature, there are many other obstacles that farmers may face during the transition to organic farming and the process of organic certification. Examples related to organic production include navigating production costs, managing soil fertility and crop nutrition, accessing organic crop varieties and seed, affording and accessing organic inputs, controlling disease pressure, adapting to climate change, and more (Constance & Choi, 2010; Delbridge et al., 2017; Snyder et al, 2022; Stephenson et al., 2021). Challenges outside of production include accessing labor, finding new markets, developing or accessing infrastructure, accessing capital, managing business activities, and more (Constance & Choi, 2010; Delbridge et al., 2017; Lloyd & Stephenson, 2020; Snyder et al., 2022; Stephenson et al., 2021). Social norms and ideological beliefs can also be a significant barrier that farmers face when considering organic farming and certification (Delbridge et al., 2017).

Organic Agriculture in Arizona

Data from the USDA's most recent Census of Agriculture indicates that Arizona is a notable and diverse agricultural state (USDA, 2024b). In 2022, agricultural sales in the state exceeded $5 billion, with the top categories including vegetables, melons, potatoes, sweet potatoes, milk from cows, and cattle and calves. However, the leading crops by acreage were forage, vegetables, cotton, wheat, and lettuce. Arizona had 16,710 farms, 76% of which were 49 acres or less, and a total of 29,100 producers. Despite its vigorous agricultural activity, only 1% of farms in Arizona were certified organic in 2022.

The USDA's 2021 Organic Survey gives a closer look at the 1% of organic farms in Arizona (USDA, 2022). Of the 62 organic farms accounted for in the survey, 61 had certified

organic crops and one had certified organic livestock and poultry. Sixteen participated in OCCSP and 11 had crops covered by crop insurance. In total, organic farmers in Arizona spent $473,000 on organic certification costs in 2021. Thirteen organic farms sold direct-to-consumer, while 25 farms sold to retail markets, institutions, or food hubs. When it comes to experience, 34% of these farms had been involved in certified organic agriculture for less than five years, 18% for five to nine years, and 48% for ten or more years. Looking ahead, 32% of organic farms planned to increase their organic production, 58% intended to maintain current levels, and 6% expected to decrease. In 2021, ten farms were in transition to certified organic farming, covering a total of 269 acres of cropland. The 62 certified organic farms in the survey operated on a total of 22,644 acres. Production challenges were categorized as follows:

- 53% experienced regulatory problems
- 29% experienced price issues
- 38% experienced production problems
- 13% experienced market access challenges
- 29% experienced management issues
- 13% experienced other challenges

Although another Organic Survey has not been conducted since 2021, the USDA maintains an online resource called the Organic INTEGRITY Database, which provides the most up-to-date information on organic operations across the country, including those that are certified or have surrendered, suspended, or had their certification revoked. As of August 2, 2025, the OID reports 68 certified organic farms in Arizona, totaling 33,434.5 acres. Although the number of organic farms only rose by six since 2021, the acreage of organic agricultural production

increased by nearly 50%.

Of note, since the launch of TOPP in 2022, there has been a concerted effort to increase support for organic producers in Arizona. This work, led by the Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems at Arizona State University (ASU), includes farmer-to-farmer mentorship, technical assistance, workforce development, and community building.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to better understand the barriers that Arizona food producers and handlers face in transitioning to organic practices, as well as obtaining and maintaining USDA organic certification. To achieve this, outreach was conducted to 18 individuals, including producers and handlers, with an invitation to participate in a virtual interview. These individuals were identified through the existing network of the ASU Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems. The selection was intentional, with the aim of including a diverse mix of participants: some who are currently certified organic, some who are in the process of transitioning and obtaining certification, and some who are not certified but have expressed interest in organic certification. This purposive sampling approach ensured that participants had firsthand knowledge of organic practices and/or organic certification in Arizona, and included varied experiences and insights relevant to the goals of the study.

Of the 18 individuals invited, 13 responded, consented to participate, and completed an interview. Among them were 10 producers (working in either crops, livestock, or both), two handlers, and one individual who operates as both a producer and handler. Four participants were USDA certified organic, five were in transition (including one whose certification was previously suspended), and four were not certified (including one who previously held certification but later surrendered it). All participants were either involved in the TOPP program

as mentors or mentees, or had previously explored joining the program but ultimately chose not to. Participants represented operations across Arizona, with six based in Maricopa County, three in Cochise County, and one each in Yavapai, Pima, and Gila Counties. One participant operates in both Maricopa and Yavapai Counties.

Interviews were conducted over Zoom or by phone and lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. Each participant received a $75 e-gift card as compensation for their time. This funding was provided by the ASU Swette Center through the TOPP program. Verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview. The interviews followed a semi-structured format guided by a set of open-ended questions covering themes such as motivations for organic transition, certification challenges, support systems, and recommendations for further support of organic agriculture in Arizona (see Appendix).

RESULTS

Insights from the interviews were varied, reflecting the broad characteristics of the operations, such as their scope, size, location, and history. Still, many themes emerged around the challenges Arizona producers and handlers face when transitioning to organic practices and navigating the process of organic certification.

Complicated Paperwork

Many interviewees emphasized the burden that paperwork and recordkeeping place on certified organic farmers. A farmer from Little Lighthouse Farm, who recently became certified organic this year, described the paperwork process as having “far too much jargon” and being “way too complicated.” This producer expressed a need for more support to make completing the paperwork, particularly the required Organic System Plan, less daunting.

Other farmers also highlighted the ongoing administrative burden of maintaining organic certification. A producer from Everkrisp Vegetables, a farm with both conventional and organic acreage, shared that staying certified is more difficult than it was to originally get certified, largely due to the daily recordkeeping and annual audits.

Burdensome and Futile Costs

The initial and annual cost of organic certification came up repeatedly as a significant challenge, especially for small-scale farmers. Interviewees agreed that certification only made financial sense for them if the organic premium offset the associated expenses.

A farmer from Maya's Farm had their certification previously suspended due to payment issues but they are now pursuing certification again in anticipation of expanding to a retail market where the organic label will hold more value. Similarly, a producer from BKW Farms noted that they voluntarily surrendered their certification because it added costs without improving profit margins. They also observed that selling certified organic products at a premium made them less accessible to their customers.

Several small farmers expressed that certification is only worthwhile if they sell retail, since their direct customers already trust their organic practices without the USDA organic label. The label was perceived as more useful in retail markets to communicate values and farming practices to consumers that are not familiar with the farm.

A producer from Emerald Roots Farm Collective also emphasized the need for more accessible financial support for small and minority farmers pursuing certification.

Importance of Community

Nearly all interviewees highlighted how supportive and valuable their local farming

communities have been in their organic journey. Several farmers are sharing land, knowledge, resources, advice, and best practices with each other. This sense of mutual support was described in the interviews as helpful for both new and existing organic farmers.

The interviewee from Everkrisp Vegetables shared that "any time farmers can work together more or just help each other, it's usually good for everybody." They recommended that local organic farmers cost-share within the community to manage expensive overhead costs like tractors and inputs. This sentiment echoed a reflection from the BKW Farms interviewee, who noted that purchasing organic inputs is a challenge.

The Arizona TOPP program was mentioned in many interviews as a helpful source of support, particularly because of the mentorship component. However, some producers in rural southern Arizona shared that they need more localized support and technical assistance in their part of the state, since most of the TOPP workshops and field days have been located in central Arizona. A few interviewees also felt that mentorship through TOPP would be more helpful if their mentor had experience in their specific production type.

Market Challenges

Several interviewees pointed to market access as a major hurdle in becoming, and remaining, financially successful as an organic producer. Small and mid-sized farmers conveyed that they are struggling to find buyers for their organic products, and need more support after becoming certified organic.

A livestock producer from Windmill Mountain Ranch explained that their current buyers are not interested in purchasing organic, meaning they would need to find new ones if they complete the transition to organic. Two newly certified organic farmers said the certification has not yet benefited their operations at all. One farmer from Nitty Gritty Acres attempted to sell to

their local co-op, but was disappointed that they could not honor the organic premium prices.

A rancher from Stewart Pastures, currently transitioning to organic, expressed doubts about market potential, saying that "Sprouts isn't going to buy from me" because they prefer to buy from livestock producers that are organized in a cooperative or from suppliers that can provide product consistently throughout the year. Two ranchers expressed interest in selling to restaurants, which they viewed as more flexible with seasonal availability.

The interviewee from Little Lighthouse Farm, which is smaller than an acre, said that none of the market avenues presented since becoming certified have worked out, noting "there's no opportunity and there's no help with that." In contrast, a representative from Duncan Family Farms, an established large-scale organic operation with clients such as Sprouts, Safeway, and Albertsons, described the USDA organic seal as a helpful marketing tool.

Supply Chain Barriers for Ranchers

The three rancher interviewees described a unique set of supply chain challenges compared to crop producers. A major barrier for them is the lack of facilities that can process organic livestock without cross-contamination.

The rancher from Windmill Mountain Ranch noted, "There are a bunch of good processors around here, but there aren't any that would particularly take in organic or take extra steps to keep organic product away from their conventional product to be an organic certified facility."

However, a rancher from Heartquist Hollow Farm is working to overcome this hurdle. Instead of pursuing organic certification for their livestock, they are first planning to certify their on-site USDA-inspected processing facility. This would enable them to process their own organic animals in the future while also serving as a facility that supports other Arizona ranchers

seeking organic certification. For the rancher at Heartquist Hollow Farm, finding time to manage the paperwork, processes, and infrastructure needed for organic certification remains their biggest constraint.

Another key issue for ranchers is sourcing certified organic feed. The rancher from Stewart Pastures explained that to be able to qualify for organic certification, they need to find a source of certified organic hay to feed their livestock. Currently, this type of hay is not grown in Arizona and most producers outside the state are unwilling to cross state lines to deliver it. At Heartquist Hollow Farm, they are running into a similar issue with alfalfa. The interviewee explained that sourcing certified organic alfalfa would currently be challenging and expensive, with the nearest source located in Texas.

Conversion of Conventional to Organic

The interviewee from Everkrisp Vegetables shared unique insights into managing a farm with both conventional and organic acreage. For them, the biggest challenge is the three-year transition period when they leave their land fallow. This results in lost income for three years, and it still requires labor to work the fields periodically to prevent the soil from drying out. Organic weed control also poses a financial challenge as synthetic herbicides are cheaper for them to use on their conventional fields than managing weeds organically. Even so, they continue to grow organically due to higher profit margins and consumer demand.

Managing equipment separately between the two systems of conventional and organic adds another layer of complexity at Everkrisp Vegetables. The producer shared, “It’s a daily process of making sure that we have our stuff separate and there’s no cross contamination.” Organic certification has required them to purchase and maintain separate equipment and

infrastructure, including a second boom sprayer and dedicated storage barns for their conventional and organic inputs.

At Windmill Mountain Ranch, the transition to organic is further complicated by generational and cultural factors. The operation is co-owned by older family members who are hesitant to shift from conventional practices. While they are interested in making more profit with the organic premium, the interviewee estimated it could take another 20 years to persuade the family to take the leap and adopt organic methods. They attributed this delay to a lack of concrete data on the financial benefits of organic, the complexity of transitioning their interconnected dairy, feedlot, and farm, and a perception in their conservative community that organic is a liberal concept. This has created what they described as "tribalism" between conventional and organic producers.

Hurdles of Handling

Two small-scale food handlers who distribute produce from Arizona farms described significant barriers to becoming certified organic. While both source exclusively from farms that use organic practices, many of those farms are not certified.

Therefore, to qualify for certification themselves, the handlers explained that they would need to keep certified and non-certified products completely separate. This would require doubling their CSA bags and having separate containers for certified organic produce, adding significant logistical difficulty and more expenses to their day-to-day operations. Alternatively, if they chose to stop working with either certified or non-certified producers, they estimated that it would probably put them out of business and create ripple effects throughout the local food system. Both handlers emphasized that organic certification would not benefit their business and that their priority remains sourcing local.

DISCUSSION

This study offers important insight into the range of barriers that Arizona food producers and handlers encounter when it comes to organic practices and certification. While many of these challenges mirror those identified in nationwide research, such as the burden of paperwork and the cost of certification, some are particularly profound in Arizona. Livestock producers, for example, face a unique set of constraints due to the lack of organic processing facilities and limited access to certified organic feed.

The experiences shared by small farmers in the study point to the need for better support in navigating organic certification paperwork and recordkeeping. Many expressed that applying for certification and creating an Organic System Plan was overwhelming and filled with confusing language. Additionally, even when certified, the burden of recordkeeping and annual audits remains substantial, particularly for those who lack administrative support. These findings suggest a clear opportunity to create more user-friendly, step-by-step guidance tailored to new organic producers. Templates, toolkits, and real-world examples could go a long way in making the process feel less intimidating and more manageable.

Financial hurdles were another consistent theme. For small farmers especially, certification only makes sense for them if they are able to recoup the cost through organic price premiums. Several interviewees noted that they have already built trust with their customers through direct-to-consumer sales, making the USDA organic label unnecessary unless they expand to retail markets. Others shared that organic certification made their products less accessible to the communities they serve due to the increased cost. This tension reflects a broader issue: certification can be both a marketing asset and a financial risk, especially for operations not selling into retail channels. Expanding access to organic cost-share programs and targeted

financial support for small farmers would help reduce this pressure and make certification more feasible.

One of the more striking findings was that, despite the common narrative in literature, weed and pest management were not significant challenges for any of the producers interviewed. While the cost of organic weed control was mentioned as a factor, no one expressed frustration with pest pressure or weed control strategies themselves. This suggests that many Arizona producers have already developed effective systems to manage these aspects organically, even if they are not formally certified. The biggest hurdles to certification for the interviewees in this study were more administrative and structural, not agronomic.

Market access remains a persistent concern. Several newly certified organic producers shared that certification has not yet opened up new sales channels for them, and that retail or cooperative buyers are often uninterested or unable to meet the prices required for organic production to be profitable. Livestock producers in particular noted challenges in accessing retail buyers who are aligned with the organic model. Some expressed more optimism about local restaurants as potential partners. Localized market research and matchmaking efforts could help bridge this gap by connecting producers with buyers who value their practices and products.

This study also highlighted the importance of community. Many producers are already informally sharing land, tools, inputs, and knowledge, and they deeply value these connections. Building on this, Arizona would benefit from a more formal organic resource-sharing network. One such network is already in development through the ASU Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems, which aims to support producers by facilitating knowledge and resource exchange across the state. This type of peer-driven support is practical and empowering for local producers. One interviewee mentioned specifically that this resource will be “huge” to help

producers connect the dots and find what they need to be successful.

The Heartquist Hollow Farm processing facility presents a unique opportunity for Arizona to strengthen its organic infrastructure. By investing in the development of their USDA-inspected on-site facility, and supporting other similar efforts, the state could significantly increase capacity for organic meat processing. This would directly benefit operations facing processing bottlenecks like Windmill Mountain Ranch and Stewart Pastures. Additionally, addressing the lack of certified organic feed in Arizona will be essential for enabling livestock producers to pursue and maintain certification.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Simplify the paperwork and recordkeeping process**

Producers need help understanding and completing the paperwork required for organic certification, including the detailed application and Organic System Plan. They also need support on establishing and maintaining rigorous recordkeeping practices. Clear, practical guides co-created with producers, inspectors, and certifying agents that walk through the process step-by-step, line-by-line, would help reduce frustration and make certification more manageable.

2. **Conduct local market research to expand sales opportunities**

Newly certified, small-scale producers often struggle to find buyers and take advantage of the organic price premium. Continual market research focused on retail outlets, food cooperatives, restaurants, and institutions could help match certified organic producers with new customers. This research could be a collaborative project between organizations such as Local First Arizona and the ASU Swette Center. Use-inspired research of this kind would help meet consumer demand for Arizona-grown organic products and encourage more producers to transition by

making market opportunities visible.

3. Invest in research and outreach on the financial aspects of organic agriculture

Many producers hesitate to transition to organic without strong evidence that it will benefit their bottom line. More Arizona-specific data on profitability, price premiums, and long-term economic outcomes could help producers and their families make informed decisions. Additionally, this research must be easily accessible for farmers. As suggested by the interviewee from Windmill Mountain Ranch, organic researchers could increase their presence at conventional farm events, like livestock shows, to share financial insights and resources directly with farmers.

4. Increase the amount of organic certifying agents in Arizona

Research shows that counties in the U.S. with a high number of certifying agents tend to have more organic farms, often forming so-called "organic hotspots" (Marasteanu & Jaenicke, 2015). Arizona currently has no organic certifying agents based in the state, thus being a potential factor limiting the growth of organic. State and local-governments, such as in Texas, Washington, and Iowa, have been able to establish themselves as certifying agents. This presents a clear opportunity for the Arizona Department of Agriculture to fill a major gap and directly support the growth of Arizona's organic sector.

5. Support infrastructure for organic livestock processing

Investments should be made to support the organic certification of Heartquist Hollow Farm's USDA-inspected facility and similar projects to expand organic meat processing in Arizona. This would directly benefit livestock producers who are currently unable to become certified due to a lack of organic processing options. Additionally, the University of Arizona's Cooperative Extension could designate a staff member to serve as a state affiliate with the Niche Market

Processor Assistance Network, a national program that connects meat processors, producers, buyers, regulators, and others by sharing resources and improving access to processing infrastructure.

6. **Address the shortage of certified organic feed**

In addition to processing, livestock producers also cannot become certified organic without access to organic feed for their animals, which is currently unavailable in Arizona. Supporting the transition of one or more farms to produce organic hay, or improving cross-state distribution of organic feed, would make certification more feasible for livestock operations. An agricultural production contract could be useful in this regard to establish a secure partnership and reduce market risks.

7. **Formalize a statewide resource-sharing network**

Farmers in Arizona are already sharing equipment, labor, and knowledge informally. A more structured resource-sharing network, such as the one currently in development through the ASU Swette Center, would help scale this cooperation, making it easier and more cost-effective for producers to access resources and strengthen the organic farming community. For this network to be truly meaningful, it should offer detailed information while remaining easy and convenient to use, with search features and a clear, categorized map of available resources. Having the network on a website and an app that stakeholders can use anywhere would be ideal.

8. **Establish an Arizona Transition to Organic Cost-Share Program**

Minnesota's Transition to Organic Cost-Share Program shows how state governments can support local organic producers by assisting with transition expenses such as certification, soil tests, and educational events (Minnesota Department of Agriculture, n.d.). When paired with the USDA's Organic Certification Cost-Share Program, these two programs can significantly lighten

the financial burden of the entire transition and certification process. The Arizona Department of Agriculture already participates in administering OCCSP and could go further by developing its own program focused specifically on the transition period.

9. Advocate for a USDA Organic Transition Label to support transitioning producers

Farmers in pursuit of organic certification, particularly those starting as conventional, face a financial disadvantage. During the transition period, they must follow organic production standards without being able to market their products as organic or earn associated price premiums. As researchers have suggested, a USDA-sanctioned Organic Transition Label would reduce financial stress by allowing producers to establish themselves in a new market and begin earning a small premium (Merrigan et al., 2021). Stakeholders in Arizona, including nonprofit organizations like Local First Arizona, research centers like the ASU Swette Center, and government entities like the Arizona Department of Agriculture, could play a role in encouraging USDA to create such a label, particularly benefiting operations like Everkrisp Vegetables and Windmill Mountain Ranch.

10. Host an Arizona Organic Conference

Many states and regions annually host organic conferences (i.e., Iowa Organic Conference, Minnesota Organic Conference, South Dakota State Organic Conference) that bring together local producers and food system stakeholders. To overcome the barriers to organic in Arizona, an event like this is critical to create collaborative solutions, share resources, and form strong partnerships within the organic community. The ASU Swette Center has hosted a variety of organic workshops and field days through the TOPP program, therefore they are well-positioned to lead the creation of an annual event that brings everyone together for continual improvement of organic in Arizona.

CONCLUSION

Arizona stands at a crossroads when it comes to the future of organic agriculture. Despite a robust agricultural economy, with over $5 billion in annual sales, and clear consumer demand, with 90% of Arizona households purchasing organic, only about 1% of farms in the state were certified organic in 2022 (USDA, 2024b; Organic Trade Association, n.d.). This limited presence reflects structural challenges facing organic producers in Arizona, including a lack of certifiers, processing infrastructure, tailored financial support, and consistent market access.

Despite these challenges, the USDA's TOPP program has made meaningful progress in strengthening Arizona's organic community. Through mentorship, training, and peer learning opportunities, TOPP has helped farmers and ranchers connect and share knowledge. These efforts have created valuable momentum and a sense of community. However, the program is set to end in 2026. Without a longer-term, more secure plan in place, much of this progress risks stalling just as more producers are gaining interest and taking steps toward certification.

The interviews conducted in this study highlight that Arizona producers are not lacking in motivation or innovation. They are experimenting with organic practices, supporting one another, and looking for practical solutions to make certification feasible. What is needed now is a more stable and supportive system that reduces the burden of paperwork, eases financial risk, expands access to organic markets, and strengthens local infrastructure, particularly for organic livestock processing and feed.

Arizona has a real opportunity to grow its organic sector in a way that supports small and mid-sized producers, meets strong consumer demand, and keeps more economic opportunity in the state. Investments in cost-share programs, a state-based certifier, a formal resource-sharing network, and an annual Arizona Organic Conference could provide the foundation needed for

lasting growth.

The future of small-scale handlers also warrants closer attention. With current certification requirements, many face logistical and financial barriers when sourcing from both certified and non-certified farms. More research is needed to identify clear and practical pathways for these businesses to participate meaningfully in the organic supply chain.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Barriers to Organic Transition

- What motivated you to transition to organic and obtain USDA Organic certification?
- What challenges, if any, did you face throughout the process of transitioning and getting certified (e.g., cost, time, or access to information)?
    - Did you encounter any difficulties with finding markets or buyers for your organic product(s)?
    - Were there any challenges related to your location (e.g., climate, neighbors, infrastructure for processing)?
    - Were there any internal challenges in your operation? (e.g., staff buy-in, training, or operational changes)?
- What challenges, if any, have you faced with maintaining your USDA Organic certification?

Support Systems and Enablers

- What types of support, if any, did you receive during the transition process? (e.g., technical assistance, funding, mentoring)
- Were there any programs, organizations, or individuals that were especially helpful?
- Did you participate in any government programs, such as NRCS programs, TOPP, or extension services?
- What kind of education or training resources did you use, and were they effective?
- Did you receive help with certification paperwork or record-keeping? If so, from whom?

- Were there community or network-based supports that were helpful in the transition process?
- What role, if any, did buyers or customers play in supporting your transition?

Reflections and Recommendations

- Looking back, what would have made the process of transitioning to organic and obtaining certification easier for you?
- What advice would you give to someone in Arizona who is thinking about transitioning to organic and becoming certified?
- Are there any types of support you think are currently missing or underdeveloped?
- Overall, how has being USDA certified organic benefitted your operation?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience with organic practices or certification?