**Buffer zones for organic production**

Once a field is eligible to produce a crop sold as organic, the farmer will need to manage the borders of the fields if the neighboring field has had substances applied that are not allowed under organic regulations. The National Organic Program (NOP) Section 205.202(c) states that any field or farm parcel from which harvested crops are intended to be sold, labeled, or represented as “organic,” must have distinct, defined boundaries and buffer zones such as runoff diversions to prevent the unintended application of a prohibited substance to the crop or contact with a prohibited substance applied to adjoining land that is not under organic management.

A buffer zone is defined as “an area located between a certified production operation or portion of a production operation and an adjacent land area that is not maintained under organic management. A buffer zone must be sufficient in size or other features (e.g., windbreaks or a diversion ditch) to prevent the possibility of unintended contact by prohibited substances applied to adjacent land areas with an area that is part of a certified operation.”

The federal rule does not specify that a buffer zone be a specific width, but it must be of sufficient size to prevent drift or runoff of non-approved substances. The size of the buffer is determined by the organic producer and approved by the certifying agent on a case-by-case basis, depending on the risk of contamination by prohibited materials used on adjoining lands. Typically, 25 to 30 feet is generally accepted by certifying agents as adequate to prevent most contamination from a neighboring field.

**Buffer zones** can be planted to grass, permanent trees, and/or shrubs. These plantings can provide habitat for birds, wildlife, and beneficial insects. Significant height in a buffer has the added benefit of protecting fields and organic crops from contamination by aerial movement of pesticides and from wind erosion. Buffer zones can be planted to a crop that is managed organically but is sold as conventional. If a crop is taken from the buffer zone it will need to be harvested separately from the organic crop and documented that it was harvested, stored and sold as non-organic. If the buffer is mowed for hay, the farmer must keep a written record of the hay harvest (name, date, location of buffer and crop harvested).

Buffer zones are only needed when there is an organic crop being grown and only needed during the crop year when a prohibited product is being used by the neighbor. Certifying agents may require the farmer to have a signed statement from the neighbor when they are not using prohibited substances. Also, road crews, utilities, aerial spray companies, etc. can be notified not to spray along an organic farmer’s field. If a no-spray agreement cannot be reached, then the organic farmer can grow non-organic crops in the buffer zone, or leave it fallow.

While it is important to remember that organic standards are process-based, (rather than product-based), the regulation does contain a maximum tolerance level for residues of prohibited substances. If there is reason to suspect contamination, and tests reveal that a product contains over 5 percent of the Environmental Protection Agency’s tolerance for a particular substance, then the product can no longer be sold as “organic”.

**References:**

[1]. See the National Organic Program S205.202(c). Land Requirements.

[2]. See the National Organic Program s205.2. Terms defined for buffer zones.

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