Science Societies

As organic acres expand, a new specialty certification takes shape to meet demand

By Denice Rackley

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Organic agriculture is expanding rapidly, bringing new complexity and higher stakes for growers navigating certification, inputs, and regulatory compliance. This article explores how a new CCA Organic Specialty Certification is being developed to equip advisers with the specialized knowledge needed to support producers and help the organic sector continue to grow.

Organic crop production is growing to keep pace with consumer demand. According to the Organic Trade Association, U.S. organic food sales in 2024 reached $71.6 billion, marking a 5.2% increase from the previous year. This rate is double that of the total food marketplace.

According to the USDA, between 2011 and 2021, certified organic cropland acres increased by 79% to 3.6 million acres. Additionally, the number of U.S. farms with certified organic production increased more than 90% to 17,445 farms.

Certified organic production presents challenges that conventional ag production doesn't face. It's a complex regulatory system that requires an understanding of the certification and inspection processes, which inputs (e.g., fertilizers and crop protection materials, etc.) are allowed, and the regulations for post-harvest handling. Helping producers navigate this complexity requires specialized knowledge.

To meet the increasing consumer demand for organic produce, grains, and fiber, a specially trained workforce is needed. No one is more aware of this than Dr. Matthew Grieshop, Director of the Grimm Family Center for Organic Production and Research at Cal Poly. Grieshop explained that the most recent report from the California Department of Food and Agriculture revealed that within the state, nearly 2.5 million acres were dedicated to organic production with certified organic production comprising nearly 1.8 million acres in 2023.

The western U.S. excels in organic vegetable production. Shown here is Oregon organic farmer Chris Roehm. Photo courtesy of Ron Nichols, USDA.

The western U.S. excels in organic vegetable production with California at the top, followed by Washington, Arizona, and Oregon. "Within California, there are thousands of acres dedicated to the production of organic vegetables," Grieshop notes. "Cal-Organics, the largest organic vegetable producer in the nation, produces 65 varieties of vegetables on more than 40,000 acres in California alone."

Contemplating the supportive role of CCAs and the Center's mission to develop a well-trained organic workforce, Grieshop began imagining a scenario in which CCAs specifically trained in organic production could fill this knowledge gap and help propel the organic industry forward.

Grieshop reached out to the American Society of Agronomy and was put in touch with Dr. Karl Wyant, a CCA/CPAg who was chair of the Western Region (CA and AZ) CCA board at the time. Exploring the need to enhance training for the organic industry, Grieshop and Wyant had conversations with the prominent organic growers in the U.S.

Southwest, including Grimmway, Taylor Farms, Braga Fresh, and Betteravia Farms.

Areas where CCAs could use organic education and training

These conversations revealed areas where additional organic education and training opportunities for CCAs would be beneficial. Nutrient and pest management and understanding organic regulations were areas that the growers often emphasized as areas of need.

“Nutrient management in organic production systems is one key area as organic fertilizers are much more complex than their conventional counterparts and nutrient inputs must be on the approved list. Pest management is an additional area as the IPM toolbox available to organic growers is typically more expensive and less forgiving than that available to conventional growers. There is also a need for CCAs to understand the organic regulatory framework as it pertains to the USDA, third-party certifiers, and allowed inputs and practices, in order to maintain USDA certification of the farm,” explains Wyant, Nutrien Director of Agronomy and past chair of the ICCA Board.

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Those initial conversations in 2023 sparked enthusiastic support for a new CCA specialty certification in organics.

Performance objectives

Over the last year and a half, the Organic Specialty Certification has been taking shape thanks to the collaboration and dedication of organic industry leaders, the Grimm Center, professors at Cal Poly, CCAs, and extension personnel. The team has identified 10 learning/performance objectives:

- USDA National Organic Program Regulations
- Certification, Inspection, and Record Keeping
- Organic Fertility Management
- Organic Integrated Pest Management (IPM)
- Organic Weed Management
- Organic Pest Bacteria and Fungi Management
- Organic Invertebrate and Vertebrate Pest Management
- Organic Irrigation Management
- Organic Post-Harvest Handling and Food Safety
- Allowed and Prohibited Substances (Inputs)

Group of organic Ag experts, including CCAs, working on the CCA Organic Specialty Certification. Pictured on the far right is Karl Wyant, past chair of the ICCA Board.

These 10 performance objectives provide the framework for the program. Extrapolating from their research and field experiences, the team has compiled exam questions that will evaluate a CCA's understanding of these key areas in organic production.

“With the performance objectives identified and the test questions written, we are working backward to create learning and study materials for the specialty exam and launch the accompanying continuing education credits so that individuals can maintain their hour requirements once they earn the Organic Specialty [certification],” Wyant says.

“Organic expertise will come with practice and time, but CCAs who complete the certification will have a good base of knowledge, so they can ask the right questions and know where to look for the answers."

“Currently, it’s hard to pinpoint what someone knows about organic production. Organics are not often a focus of education,” says Dr. Charlotte Decock, Associate Professor at Cal Poly and organic soil fertility specialist with the Grimm Center.

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know where to look for the answers," Grieshop notes.

The training

"The multilayered progression of engaging learning materials presented will be pragmatic, experiential lessons rooted in the understanding of biology and ecology to help certificate holders understand the science behind good choices," Decock says.

She explained that the educational materials that are in development consist of written, bulleted lessons and videos. "We envision interviewing organic experts and working with Dr. Moses Mike, Grimm Center's digital media communications wizard, to create multimedia lesson modules."

"As is the case with all the Society specialties, to sit for the organic specialty exam, you must be a CCA," Wyant notes.

The original discussion centered on developing the specialty for the Western Region, but the widespread interest has led the group to expand its vision with plans to launch the program on a wider scale as organic production continues to expand.

Having a skilled, highly trained workforce in place is critical due to the high stakes inherent in organic production. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/Zoran Zeremski.

High stakes inherent in organic production

Having a skilled, highly trained workforce in place is critical due to the high stakes inherent in organic production.

> “If a mistake is made adding a prohibited product on organic acres, producers can lose their organic certification, three years of production and possibly face stiff penalties,” Grieshop explains.
>
> But Martha Zwonitzer, a CCA at Arable Labs, notes that finding agronomists who are trained specifically in organic production is challenging.

“The need for certified agronomists within the organic sector will only increase with an increase in demand and acres. This area of specialization needs to go beyond the scope and scale of the traditional CCA. Organic agronomists require a focused understanding of the organic system to assist growers in producing a certified organic crop. Additionally, unlike conventional agronomists who have the luxury of being both proactive and reactive—with tools and technologies to do both—organic agronomists must be primarily proactive in their approach, which requires a more intimate knowledge of systems management.”

Program rollout surrounded by enthusiastic support

“The development of an organic specialty certificate in response to grower demands is a great opportunity for the CCA program to partner with unique stakeholders to address a demonstrated need in the marketplace and stands as an example of public and private partnership coming together to envision a program that can expand alongside the industry’s growing organic sector,” Grieshop says.

Decock is planning to incorporate relevant materials into her courses and encourage students to pursue their CCA and Organic Specialty Certification. “It is exciting to work on this program and develop materials with industry experts that will assist interested

individuals in developing their knowledge of organics, setting them up for successful ag industry careers."

"We have assembled a talented team to create this specialty that spans the organic farming world across industry, growers, government, academia, university extension, and organic certifying bodies. Thanks to their hard work and dedication, we expect to roll the specialty exam out in late Q2/Q3 2026," Wyant notes.

Organic CCA Development Team

Current members

Industry (Paul Crout from Helena; Gina Bella Colfer from Wilbur Ellis; and Jose Ramirez from Impello Bio)

Organic Production (Martha Zwonitzer from Arable Labs; and Eric Morgan from Rooted Ag, Inc.)

Non-Profit Training (Mallory Krieger from OATS)

Academia (Charlotte DeCock and Matthew Grieshop from Cal Poly SLO)

Certifiers (Jessy Beckett Parr, Adrian Fischer, Molly Nakahara, and Brian Coltrin from CCOF)

CDFA (Danny Lee, Scott Renteria, Yanhong Li)

Extension UCANR (Joji Muramoto)

WRCCA Board Members (Karl Wyant, Christopher Hight, and Patrick Mackenzie)

ICCA (Dawn Gibas and Luther Smith)

Former members

WRCCA (Nicole Nunes)

Industry (Dave Goodrich from Nutrien Ag Solutions; and Ben Duesterhaus from Mid Valley Agricultural Services)

CDFA (Martin Berger)

Everyone who is working on the Organic Specialty Certification or has heard about it believes that this program, designed to guide and ensure CCAs working in organic systems have the specialized training and access to organic industry networks, will help growers succeed and propel the organic agriculture industry forward.

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