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Organic Farming Builds Better Soil But Needs More Tools

Foster, R.I. – Building better soils is one of the most important benefits of organic farming systems. The Organic Center released today a report proposing a new method to quickly and cost-effectively track changes in soil quality brought about by the transition to organic farming.

Alan Franzluebbbers, Ph.D. and Richard Haney, Ph.D., two leading soil scientists working for the Agricultural Research Service, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, wrote The Organic Center's Critical Issue Report (CIR 2006.2), "Assessing Soil Quality in Organic Agriculture." The full report is available for free at: <http://www.organic-center.org/science.environment.php>.

The report explains why better tools are needed to manage the transition of soils when farming methods change from chemical-based to organic.

"How we manage soil and how the soil responds to this management are critical issues facing the long-term success of our society," says Alan Franzluebbbers, ecologist with the USDA-Agricultural Research Service in Watkinsville, Georgia and co-author of the report. The proposed minimum-data-set (MDS) approach for assessing soil quality is composed of routine chemical and biological assays that can be carried out in most soil testing laboratories for a collective cost of less than \$100 per sample.

In 2007, The Organic Center plans to begin a national survey of soil quality on conventional, transitional and organic acreage. The Center's project will apply, test and refine the MDS approach, and integrate the measures into an index of soil quality.

"Farmers and scientists have recognized for decades that well-managed organic systems improve soil quality," says Chuck Benbrook, Ph.D., and chief scientist of The Organic Center. "But better tools and solid data are needed to quantify these benefits and identify the best strategies to maximize them."

The degradation of soil quality continues in the United States as a result of erosion, the compaction of soils, leaching of nutrients, and loss of soil structure and biodiversity. Organic farming methods have great potential to reverse these losses by increasing soil organic matter content, building the pools of nutrients cycling within soils, and enhancing soil microbial communities. The Organic Center's work on soil quality seeks to accomplish two goals.

First, development of practical tools for farmers, crop consultants, extension specialists, and agronomists to use in the field in mapping the course for cost-effective transitions from conventional production to organic management. New tools are needed to determine how quickly a soil can be transitioned, how resilient the soil is likely to be during the transition process, and how soils and crop yields are likely to respond to key organic farming practices and inputs. Soil microbial activity, in particular, can offer a benchmark for transitioning from conventional to organic farming systems.

"There is a need to provide farmers with a soil test tool to guide a cost-effective transition," says Richard Haney, soil chemist with the USDA-Agricultural Research Service in Temple, Texas. "Microorganisms are very sensitive to changes in the soil and we can take advantage of this fact by tracking the impact our management practices have on soil microbes."

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The Organic Center's second goal is to develop methods to quantify the benefits to farmers, rural communities, and the nation from improvements in soil quality possible through organic management. Key benefits that will follow expansion of organic production, and which need to be quantified, include: increased efficiency of nitrogen use; less reliance on purchased sources of nutrients; reduced runoff and leaching of nutrients and pesticides, and hence improved water quality; more stable crop yields; and higher returns to farm labor and management.

The Organic Center's next Critical Issue Report focusing on soil quality will be released in the spring, 2007. It will address the potential of organic farming systems to increase the efficiency of nitrogen use in corn production in the Midwest.

The Organic Center is a 501 (c) (3) organization founded in 2002 to present and provide peer-reviewed scientific evidence on how organic products benefit human and environmental health. The Organic Center's research and educational efforts are funded through individuals, foundations, businesses and government programs. For information about The Organic Center, its current programs and scientific reports log on to www.organic-center.org.

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