

Barriers to the adoption of organic farming by cash-crop producers in Austria

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Abstract. Most of Austria's organic farms are located in mountainous areas and produce mainly milk and beef, whereas a low percentage of cash-crop farms are organic. As a result, the demand for organically grown crops cannot be fully met by domestic production. This paper investigates the barriers to adoption of organic agriculture by cash-crop farmers in Austria. In a written survey, 383 conventional farmers provided information on their perception of organic farming and rated the importance of potential barriers to adoption. Technical challenges in cropping and additional labor requirements were rated as the most important barriers, followed by fear of decreased income and marketing problems. Structural and social issues, such as farm size and lack of support from family members, were less important.

Key words: barriers to conversion, conventional farming, European Union, organic agriculture, organic cereals, organic management, organic vineyards, regulations

Introduction

There has been a rapid increase in the number of organic farms in Austria since the early 1990s (Vogl and Hess, 1999). In 1999, 9.8% of the 201,500 Austrian farms were under organic management (BMLFUW, 2000; Statistik Austria, 2001). This is largely due to an effort by the Austrian government to encourage both the conversion to, and the maintenance of, organic farming through the Austrian Agri-environment Program 'ÖPUL' (the full title of the ÖPUL in German is: Österreichisches Programm zur Förderung einer umweltgerechten, extensiven und den natürlichen Lebensraum schützenden Landwirtschaft, which can be translated as: Austrian program to promote an environmentally conscious, extensive and natural habitat protecting agriculture). Organic agriculture is one of the 31 defined practices or 'measures' included in the program, and farmers implementing one or several of the practices on a voluntary and contractual basis receive compensatory payments.

The organic farms are concentrated in the mountainous areas of western Austria and are predominantly dairy farms with permanent grassland (Kirner and Schneeberger, 1999). In the eastern and northern parts of Austria, where land use is dominated by arable farming, conversion to organic production methods has proceeded at a slow rate. As a result, domestic production of organic milk and organic beef exceeds the demand, whereas the domestic production of organic grain is well below demand (Michelsen et al., 1999). This shortage persists despite calculations which indicate that conversion to organic farming could be economically advantageous for cash-crop farmers (Eder, 1999). Thus, it is likely that other barriers are limiting the adoption of organic practices.

Several studies have analyzed the barriers to the conversion of conventional farmers to organic methods and practices (Freyer et al., 1994; Hollenberg et al., 1999; Kirner and Schneeberger, 2000; Köhne and Köhn, 1998; Lockeretz, 1999; Loibl, 1999; Noe, 1999; Padel and Lampkin, 1994; Schneider, 2001). However, few studies (e.g., Kirner and Schneeberger, 2000) have specifically addressed the barriers to conversion as perceived by cash-crop farmers.

The overall objectives of this study were to (1) identify barriers to adoption of organic farming by conventional arable cash-crop farms in Austria, and (2) derive efficient strategies for increasing the number of organic cash-crop producers. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- describe differences in farm size and cropping patterns of conventional and organic farms in the study area;
- assess the attitudes and perceptions of conventional farmers towards organic farming;
- investigate the importance of various potential barriers to adoption of organic farming methods by conventional farmers;
- investigate various variables that could influence farmers' perceptions of barriers to adoption; and
- compare the findings of this survey with other studies focusing on barriers to the adoption of organic farming by conventional farmers.

Database and Methods

Study area

The Weinviertel, as defined by the nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (NUTS III) of the European Office for Statistics, was selected as the study area. This region in north-east Austria was chosen as it has a low percentage of organic farms (1%), cash-crop farming is dominant, and it is close to Vienna with its large demand for organic products. Also, its dry

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