

Meeting the Research Needs of Organic Farmers:

Learning from Experience

Kathleen Delate

Iowa State University

James Boes

Heartland Organic Marketing Cooperative, Greenfield, Iowa

Organic agriculture has become a major industry in the U.S. and Europe in the past 15 years. The industry has grown at a rate of 20% annually and is now a \$4.5 billion industry in the U.S. "Certified Organic" is defined as crops produced on land free from petroleum-based chemicals for at least three years. Iowa's organic acreage has increased from 22,000 in 1996 to more than 120,000 acres in 1998. Organic producers/marketers are still in a pioneer position, as institutional support (in the form of research information, markets, transportation, and distribution) lags far behind that established for conventional commodities.

In 1998, six organic agriculture focus groups were held across the state with selected farmers, Extension and researcher staff, and agricultural community leaders (from cooperatives, banks, and non-profit groups) to discuss organic research and educational needs. From these discussions came the establishment of 35 acres of organic crops/agro-ecological research and demonstration sites across Iowa. Eight organic farming

field days attracted 600 people in 1999 to document the savings in economic, energy (BTUs), and environmental terms (nitrate contamination avoided; beneficial insects conserved) when organic practices are employed.