

# Organic hop acres rising as Jan. 1 deadline nears

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*The number of organic hop acres is on the rise, even as the crop proves challenging to grow without the use of conventional methods.*

The impetus for the increase was the U.S. Department of Agriculture's announcement in October 2010 that it would remove hops from a national list of non-organic ingredients that can be used in organic products.

The rule change, which was requested by the American Organic Hop Growers Association, means that beginning Jan. 1, organic beer brewers have to use organic hops.

"That triggered quite a bit of market activity and organic hop acreage has increased significantly since then," said AOHGA President Pat Leavy, who grows organic hops in Aurora, Ore. "We were not going to have a healthy organic hop market without that change."

Leavy estimates that about 10 percent of the nation's hop growers are producing at least some organic hops. While it's difficult to track total acres, interest is certainly up, he said.

"I get calls once a month from brewers interested in organic hops," he said.

A handful of growers had been growing organic hops for awhile before the USDA rule change, but in very small amounts and along experimental lines to develop the practices and procedures necessary to grow the crop organically, said Ann George, executive director of the Washington Hop Commission.

"When you can't demand a premium price for your product ... there wasn't any incentive to do it," she said. "Now that the opportunity presents itself, organic hop growers will be able to operate on a more commercial scale. That is why you're starting to see the acreage increase."

Spider mites and powder mildew are the biggest pest and disease concerns for organic hop growers in Idaho and Washington, and Oregon growers constantly battle downy mildew and hop aphids, said Roger Keske, a professional soil and crop agronomist who consults with hop growers in Washington and Idaho.

The USDA rule change has definitely been a benefit to the hop industry, but those growers who are producing organic hops face a challenge to do so, he said.

"There is a market for it and the prices are higher, but it's a real challenge to keep organic hops clear of diseases and pests," he said.

Idaho farmer Nate Jackson, who grows 20 acres of organic hops near Wilder, said many people originally told him it wouldn't be possible to cost-effectively produce organic hops because pest and disease challenges would be too high without being able to use conventional methods to control them.

There are organic spraying options out there that are not as effective as conventional methods and a lot more expensive, "but they do work," Jackson said.

"I would say it's definitely an experiment at this point," he adds, "but we have two successful harvests under our belt."