Hello, and welcome to the small farms podcast, a prediction of the small farms program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life.

In this episode I visit with Amanda Weigel, agriculture program specialist with the Iowa Farm Service Agency. Today we are talking about the organic certification cost share program and the organic and transitional education and certification program. I'm Olivia Hanlon, small farms education extension specialist and we hope you enjoy the show. Amanda, welcome. We're glad to have you joining us today.

Thanks for having me today Olivia.

Amanda, I think this is your first time on our podcast. So why don't we start with you telling us a little bit about yourself and what your role for the Iowa FSA consists of?

Yes, I also believe this is my first time here and I am excited to be on with you guys. As you said, my name is Amanda Weigel. I grew up here in central Iowa and I later attended Iowa State University. After college, I worked for a seeding chemical dealer here in central Iowa. And I kind
of decided that that wasn’t for me. So I started working for the farm Farm Service Agency eight years ago, I spent six years of my career with FSA in the county office. But my last two years I have been in the state office in our price support department. And in that department, I work with our specialty crops and a lot of the disaster programs you’ve seen over the last couple of years.

Olivia Hanlon 01:48
Okay, Amanda so today we’re going to talk about two organic programs that the FSA is currently accepting applications for, um, can you give us a little bit of background and detail on these programs?

02:01
Yes, of course. So FSA is currently accepting applications for both the organic certification cost share program otherwise known as OCCSP, and the organic and transitional educational and certification program. mouthful there so we call that OTECP. So let’s first start with OCCSP to give you a little bit of background on that. And USDA started implementing OCCSP through AMS back in fiscal year 2008 For the years 2008 through 2016. AMS actually administered the program through grants and agreements with state agencies. And this allows the agencies to accept applications from producers and handlers and make cost share payments after receiving funds through AMS. Then in fiscal year 2017, the Secretary delegated FSA authority to administer OCCESP. There are still states out there that do accept OCCESP applications through state agencies. But here in the state of Iowa FSA is currently the only agency accepting applications. So if we do have interested organic producers, they will have to go to their county offices to apply for the past year. When we talk OTECP this is something that came on during the COVID 19 pandemic. and this is because a certified organic and transitional operations face losses of market increased costs labor shortages and expenses related to obtaining or renewing their organic certifications. Transitional operations also faced the financial challenges of implementing practices required to obtain these organic certifications, but they didn’t get the bump in prices that some of our organic producers do because they’re still transitioning. So in response to the struggles these organic and transitioning organic producers faced on November 5 to 2021, FSA announced the availability of $20 million through the OTECP program. And this was first certified operations and transitional operations that incurred eligible expenses in fiscal years 2020 2021 and 2022. So OTECP currently is just a temporary program and 2022 is going to be the last year that we accept applications for it.

Olivia Hanlon 04:29
Okay, a lot of information there, Amanda and a lot of letters there.

04:34
Oh, yes, those two programs that are a mouthful.
So let's talk a little bit about who's qualified to participate in either the cost share program or the OTECP program.

Yeah, yes. So OSI CSP provides cost share assistance to producers and handlers who are obtaining organic certifications, either for the first time and or renewing their previous organic certifications. So organic cache must be obtained through certifying agents that are accredited by the USDA National organic programs in order for us to be able to provide that cost share, and those eligible producers will need to bring in proof of payment. So this is going to be a reimbursement program and you'll have to bring in copies of paid invoices. OTECP provides assistance to certified operations as well as crop and livestock operations that are transitioning to organic production methods in anticipation of a obtaining a USDA organic certification, unlike OCCESP, OTECP is a self certification program. So the producer is going to come into local FSA office and let us know what their expenses were. However, it is important to remember that if you are participating in OCCSP and OTECP, these programs do have a very similar guidelines. And if you've already applied for OCCSP we're going to have it your records on file and we can utilize that information it to collect the data needed for OTECP.

Okay, so moving on what costs are reimbursable through each of those programs.

So this is going to be another one that has a lot of information. So bear with me on this one and we'll get through it for OCCSP our allowable costs that we're going to accept are going to be our application fee is an administration fees, we're going to cost share on inspection fees. And that's going to include the inspectors travel costs and per diems. If that charge does go down to the producer who is getting the inspection done, we're gonna cost share on USDA organic certification costs and cluding fees necessary to access the international market to with it, which AMS has equivalency agreements or other agreements with and then state organic program fees. We do accept that through OCCSP currently, Iowa does not participate in any of the state organic program fees. So we won't see any participants with that bill currently, but maybe down the road. We are also going to cost share on postage and user fees for sales assessments. So that's for OCCSP. And when we talk about OCCSP, and what we're actually going to cost share on, we have scopes that we pay on and those scopes are crops, livestock, wild crops, processing and handling, and then those state organic program fees, which as I said earlier, Iowa doesn't currently participate in but on each one of those scopes, if they are listed on your organic certification, we are going to cost share up to 50% of each eligible item not to exceed $500. And again, that is per scope. So in the state of Iowa, if you are certified organic on all four scopes, you could be eligible for up to $2,000 in cost share. And then we go into our OTECP, production and what is eligible in there. And we have several different categories for this. So the first is going to be eligible applicants that are already certified, organic. And we're going to look at those same four scopes here in the state of Iowa. So crops, livestock, wild crops, and handling. And on each of those scopes, OTECP is going to cost share an additional
25% up to $250. Again, per scope. And then we're going to look at eligible producers that are still transitioning in to operations. And those are just going to be eligible transitional expenses, producers will need to bring in their bills, and FSA will review them. And we're going to cost share 75% up to $750 on all of those eligible expenses. So when you look at your already certified operations, and you look at your transitioning operations, and they're eligible expenses, by the time you include OCCSP and OTECP, those certified operations are going to be getting that the same amount of cost shares are transitioning operations. It's just they're getting it through two separate applications versus the one that the transitional operations are going to apply through. Then we're going to look at some additional expenses that both the certified and transitional operations are going to be eligible for and that's going to include educational events, registration fees, and soil testing. The registration fees we're going to cost your 75% up to $750 and soil testing, we're going to cost your 75% up to $100. So if any participant is going to any kind of outreach program for anything listed as organic or talks about organic, that is going to be eligible for those registration fees and then make sure you just bring those bills in or self certify too as having gone to that and retain that information for three years in case you're pulled for a spot check. And we're going to cut share on those. So those registration fees in that soil testing one is for both OCCSP and OTECP right.

10:38
So the soil and the educational that is only through the OTECP application, both certified operations and transitioning operations are both eligible for those expenses.

Olivia Hanlon 10:53
Okay, perfect. Thank you for clarifying that for me. So you mentioned this a little bit with the OTECP program, but what kinds of market support are these programs providing during the transition years?

11:07
Yeah, so all of this support for our transitioning operations is going to come through our OTECP program. And again, currently, we only have funding available through program year 2024 for these producers, OCCSP currently does not provide any kind of support for those producers that are transitioning. So if you guys are need that support, please make sure that you're taking full advantage of the current OTECP applications that we currently have and are accepting applications for.

Olivia Hanlon 11:41
Okay, perfect. So moving on for either of these programs does it matter which certifying agency producers are using in order to get their reimbursement.

11:53
It does matter. So when you work with the agencies that you're accepting your certification.
It does matter. So when you work with the agencies that you're accepting your certification through, you need to check with them and make sure that they are accredited through the USDA National Organic Program. If they are not, then you're going to need to, you aren't going to be eligible. And you'll want to see if it you can find a different agent. And you can also use the AMS website to confirm that these agents are accredited through NOP.

Olivia Hanlon 12:21
Okay, we talked about costs a little bit, but our costs varying based on agencies that people choose, and if so, is that a problem with the program?

12:31
So FSA does not set certification costs through these agencies, rather, that's going to be the agencies themselves. And that is going to be with NOP. So while we do look at the bills, I cannot speak to, you know, what is what costs more and what costs less through each agency, we don't care about that. What we're going to do with each application, and each applicant is we're going to take a copy of your bills, and we're going to review them to make sure what what bills are acceptable and what ones are not filtered them out and then process them through. So we're not evaluating them here at FSA and scrutinizing you know, this agency costs more to certify through them this agency. So for that, you're gonna have to reach out to the actual agencies and see what they're offering for their certifications, whether you could maybe get certified through internationally with them, and what how they set their prices, but FSA currently cannot provide any information on that.

Olivia Hanlon 13:38
Okay. So Amanda, if someone thinks that this program is a good fit for them, how do they go about applying for either OCCSP or OTECP?

Amanda Weigel 13:49
Yes, so for our Iowa producers, it's going to be very important to remember that OCCSP only accepts only accepts applications through FSA and we currently do not have any state agencies that are accepting applications. So for OCCSP and OTECP, producers are going to need to make sure that they stop in their local county office, and they bring copies of their paid invoices to apply for OCCSP and OTECP.

Olivia Hanlon 14:19
Okay, when is the timeframe on those applications, Amanda?

Amanda Weigel 14:24
Yeah, so FSA started accepting applications on May 16 of 2022 for program year 2022. And
Yeah, so FSA started accepting applications on May 16 of 2022 for program year 2022. And we’re going to accept those applications through October 31 2022. So we’re going to give some time for people to collect all of the their bills for this year and then they can either continually turn those in through the county office throughout the year and accept payment at the end of the year, or you know, just bring everything in at one time and get that lump sum payment.

Olivia Hanlon 14:54
Perfect. Amanda if people are wanting any more information on each of the two programs that we talked about today or if they have general questions, where should they look for that information? Or who should they reach out to?

Amanda Weigel 15:08
So I always tell our producers that the best resource is going to be our county office. They are wonderful to work with. They are a wealth of knowledge for all of our FSA programs. But if you can't make it into the office, or you just want to start looking it up online farmers.gov is always a great resource to dive into and look at all of our FSA program information.

Olivia Hanlon 15:31
Perfect. Is there anything that we didn't cover today that you would like to add Amanda?

15:37
The only other thing that I'd like to add is that a lot of our organic producers while they are growing the traditional corn and soybeans, we also do have some producers that are organic or transitioning to organic, that are growing some more specialty crops, and those crops can't collect it. Federal crop insurance through RMA like a traditional crop can. And for those producers, we do offer a nap program which is a crop insurance coverage for those specialty crops that they can't obtain crop insurance through RMA. So if you're interested or want more information, please again reach out to your local county office or take a look at that on farmer.gov.

Olivia Hanlon 16:22
All right, thank you very much, Amanda, for that and thank you for joining us today. It was great to have you on.

Amanda Weigel 16:27
Yes, thanks so much for having me.
This program is brought to you by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. This institution is an equal opportunity provider for the full non discrimination statement or accommodation inquiries, go to www.dot.extension.dot.iastate.edu/diversity/ext