

# Kentucky

*Tobacco transition country pivoting to organic vegetables, grains, and diversified farm systems*



**MIDWEST**  
TRANSITION TO ORGANIC  
PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

A FARMER'S TOOLKIT  
State Module | August 2026

Kentucky ranks 28th nationally with 251 certified organic operations and 19,435 certified acres. Kentucky's organic sector is being shaped by the generational transition away from tobacco: farms that built their identity on high-value specialty crops are finding organic vegetables, herbs, and grains to be a compelling alternative. With \$7.1M in OREI/ORG funding and UK Extension's statewide network, Kentucky is building on its small-farm tradition to develop one of the South's most diverse organic sectors.

|                                    |                                  |                                     |                                                 |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <b>251</b><br>CERTIFIED OPERATIONS | <b>19,435</b><br>CERTIFIED ACRES | <b>\$7.1M</b><br>OREI / ORG FUNDING | <b>+26%</b><br>MORE WORKERS VS.<br>CONVENTIONAL |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|

## STATE PROFILE

### AT A GLANCE

|                                    |                              |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Certified operations               | <b>251 (28th nationally)</b> |
| Certified organic acres            | <b>19,435</b>                |
| OREI / ORG funding (cumulative)    | <b>\$7.1M</b>                |
| Worker employment vs. conventional | <b>+26%</b>                  |
| Split operations                   | <b>48% of farms</b>          |

## OPPORTUNITIES & BARRIERS

### OPPORTUNITIES

- Support tobacco-exiting farmers transitioning to high-value organic vegetables and herbs using existing skills.
- Expand organic grain production to supply Midwest feed demand and reduce national organic import dependence.
- Develop organic beef and dairy supply chains leveraging Kentucky's extensive pasture and hay infrastructure.

### TOP ORGANIC COMMODITIES

- ▶ **Vegetables & Herbs:** organic vegetables and herbs on former tobacco farmland.
- ▶ **Grains:** organic corn, soybeans, and wheat for Midwest feed demand.
- ▶ **Cattle & Beef:** organic grass-fed beef on Kentucky's productive pastures.
- ▶ **Dairy:** organic dairy in central and eastern Kentucky serves cooperatives.

### BARRIERS

- Former tobacco infrastructure is not directly transferable, requiring new equipment and market relationships.
- Limited organic processing and distribution infrastructure for vegetables and specialty crops outside metro areas.
- High conventional cash crop rental rates pressure organic transition economics, especially during the 3-year period.

## KEY TAKEAWAY

Kentucky's tobacco transition creates a unique organic opportunity: thousands of experienced small-farm operators with high-value crop expertise and flexible infrastructure are actively seeking alternatives. Midwest TOPP mentorship and UK Extension's tobacco-to-organic transition programming are the direct bridge for this generational farm shift.

## Resources for Farmers

Kentucky organic farmers are supported by the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, University of Kentucky Extension, Organic Association of Kentucky, and Midwest TOPP. Together they address the state's unique tobacco transition context with tailored certification, technical assistance, and market development.

### Kentucky Dept of Agriculture

#### STATE AGENCY PROGRAMS

- Organic Certification Cost Share: federal pass-through, up to \$750/yr
- Kentucky Proud branding program for state-produced organic products
- NRCS Kentucky: EQIP Organic Initiative and Transition Assistance programs
- Agricultural Development Board funding for tobacco transition enterprises

[kyagr.com](http://kyagr.com)

### University of Kentucky Extension

#### RESEARCH, EXTENSION & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

- Organic vegetable, grain, beef, and herb production specialists statewide
- Tobacco to alternative crops transition research and demonstration programs
- Soil health, cover crop, and integrated pest management for organic systems
- 120-county extension network delivering statewide organic outreach

[extension.ca.uky.edu](http://extension.ca.uky.edu)

### Organic Association of Kentucky

#### FARMER ADVOCACY & PEER LEARNING

- Kentucky's primary organic farmer advocacy and networking organization
- Annual conference and farm tour program connecting organic producers
- Organic certification guidance and cost-share navigation support
- Farmer-to-farmer peer learning and organic transition mentorship

[oak-ky.org](http://oak-ky.org)

### Midwest TOPP (MOSA-led)

#### MENTORSHIP & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

- Serves AR, IL, IN, IA, KY, MI, MN, MO, OH, TN, WI
- Paid organic mentor matching for vegetable, grain, and beef operations
- Workshops on organic transition from tobacco and diversified farm systems
- Market access and supply chain support for Kentucky organic producers

[organictransition.org/region/midwest](http://organictransition.org/region/midwest)

#### DID YOU KNOW? KENTUCKY

**Kentucky lost over 90% of its tobacco acreage since the federal tobacco buyout in 2004, leaving thousands of small farm operators actively searching for high-value alternative crops.** Organic vegetables, herbs, and specialty grains match the high-value, small-acreage, intensive-management profile that Kentucky tobacco farmers have cultivated for generations. UK Extension's tobacco-to-organic transition research and Midwest TOPP's mentorship programs are actively connecting this experienced farmer base with organic markets, making Kentucky one of the Southeast's most promising organic expansion states.

#### KEY SOURCES

Organic Trade Association. "Kentucky Organic Profile." OTA State Advocacy, 2025, [ota.com](http://ota.com).

Organic Trade Association. "Organic Industry Survey." OTA Market Report, 2025, [ota.com](http://ota.com).

USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. "2021 Organic Survey." USDA NASS, 2022, [nass.usda.gov](http://nass.usda.gov).

Kentucky Department of Agriculture. "Kentucky Organic Program." KDA, 2025, [kyagr.com](http://kyagr.com).