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[search](#)

- [Albania](#)
- [Austria](#)
- [Belgium](#)
- [Cyprus](#)
- [Czech Republic](#)
- [Denmark](#)
- [Estonia](#)
- [Finland](#)
- [France](#)
- [Germany](#)
- [Great Britain](#)
- [Greece](#)
- [Hungary](#)
- [Iceland](#)
- [Ireland](#)
- [Italy](#)
- [Latvia](#)
- [Liechtenstein](#)
- [Luxemburg](#)
- [Macedonia](#)
- [FYROM](#)
- [Montenegro](#)
- [Netherlands](#)
- [Norway](#)
- [Poland](#)
- [Portugal](#)
- [Slovenia](#)
- [Slovakia](#)
- [Spain](#)
- [Sweden](#)
- [Switzerland](#)
- [Turkey](#)
- [Ukraine](#)

Organic Farming in Slovenia

Anamarija Slabe

1 Agriculture in Slovenia

Slovenia has an agricultural area of 785,000 hectares (1998), which is 38.7 of the total area. In comparison to other central and eastern European countries (CEECs), the macroeconomic importance of agriculture is relatively low. The agricultural sector accounts for 6% of total employment. The share of the gross domestic product (GDP) from agriculture is less than 4% and is declining. However, the economic importance of agriculture is higher than these data indicate; it is an important developmental, social and political factor.

Natural conditions in Slovenia are relatively disadvantageous for agriculture. Approximately 50% of the total surface is covered by forest. Over 70% of the farmland is classified as less favoured area; most of it is grassland and the proportion of arable land is relatively low.

Slovenia's agricultural structure reflects the political and economic conditions of the socialist era. There were larger estates owned and run by the state and small private family farms. The latter owned over 90% of the total agricultural area. Nowadays, an average farm has only 5 hectares, and more than 85% of agricultural land is cultivated by farmers who hold less than 20 hectares.

Agricultural production has decreased in the last years. The most important branch is animal husbandry, especially dairy and fattening cattle. Pig and poultry breeding are also important. Sheep breeding has increased quickly in the last few years.

Plant production corresponds to the needs of animal breeding: maize (corn and silage) is grown on over 40% of the arable land. Sugar beets and hops are important industrial crops for export. Viticulture and orchards are traditional. The most important fruit is the apple.

Slovenia is a net importer of agricultural and food products. It mostly imports cereals, sugar and pork. It exports hops, quality wine and beer and quality beef and meat products.

2 History and Development of Organic Agriculture in Slovenia

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, garden plot holders started an organic gardening movement, and in 1991, people interested in bio-dynamic farming formed a club.

The latter developed into the bio-dynamic association AJDA. Very few farmers were involved in these initiatives; the majority of their members were garden plot holders and people not occupied in farming. Nevertheless, their activities were an important contribution to the development of organic farming in Slovenia.



contents

- [1 Agriculture in Slovenia](#)
- [2 History](#)
- [3 Organisations](#)
- [4 Regional Distribution](#)
- [5 Land Use, Animal Husbandry](#)
- [6 Certification](#)
- [7 EU-Regulation 2092/91](#)
- [8 State support](#)
- [9 Marketing](#)
- [10 Training](#)
- [11 Advisory Service](#)
- [12 Research](#)
- [13 Challenges](#)
- [14 Author](#)

[top of page](#)

[top of page](#)

[top of page](#)

In 1997, the *Slovenian Organic Farmers' Association (S.O.F.A.)* was founded. This was the first national association of pioneer organic farmers who were producing for the market, and who were therefore interested in the development of a certification system.

The association adopted the standards for organic agriculture in Slovenia that were prepared by the *Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD)*, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), specifically for this purpose. These standards were published by the Slovenian Ministry of Agriculture. They were prepared in accordance with the IFOAM Basic Standards and are similar to the standards of Austrian and German organic farmers' associations (Ernte and Bioland).

[top of page](#)

A few months later, another farmers' association was founded in Northeast Slovenia, which adopted the same standards.

In 1998, there were three certification programmes in Slovenia:

1. S.O.F.A. developed a system of internal control and certification with the help of Austrian experts. Training for farm inspectors was organised. In 1998, 25 farms applied for certification and 22 farms were certified.
2. In the same year, 13 farms of the *Association for Organic Farming in Northeast Slovenia* were certified by the Austrian certification organisation Austria Bio Garantie.
3. Eighteen bio-dynamic farms were certified by German bio-dynamic inspectors.

[top of page](#)

One farm was certified under both the first and second programmes, so the total number of farms certified under programmes (1) and (2) is actually 34. Likewise, eight bio-dynamic farmers decided to apply for certification under one of the first two programmes as well as the third, which brings the total number of organic farms in 1998 to 44 (table 1).

In 1998, two identical training courses for organic farming inspectors were organised, one in Ljubljana by ISD and another in Maribor by a state agricultural institute.

[top of page](#)

Both were held by experts from Austria Bio Garantie. The course in Ljubljana was part of the international NGO project "Certification of Organic farms in Slovenia, Bosnia and Croatia". At the end of 1998, S.O.F.A., ISD and the Maribor Agricultural Institute reached an agreement to join efforts to develop an inspection and certification system. Inspection activities would henceforth be co-ordinated by the Maribor Agricultural Institute, while ISD and S.O.F.A. would focus on other activities which are incompatible with inspection and certification (e.g. marketing, advisory services and publicity). That means that programmes (1) and (2) merged. The Maribor Agricultural Institute made a contract with Austria Bio Garantie to develop an EU-compatible inspection and certification system. The inspections are performed by Slovenian inspectors. However, bio-dynamic farms are still inspected by German Demeter inspectors.

[top of page](#)

In 1999, a total of 300 farms applied for certification under the new joint programme, and 22 applied for certification under the Demeter programme. Again, some farms were certified under both programmes (table 1).

Table 1: Increase in the Number of Organic Farms and Organic Area in Slovenia

Year	Total number of farms – organic and in conversion	Hectares (estimate)	% of agricultural area

[top of page](#)

1998	44 (34 organic + 18 bio-dynamic*)	400	0.05 %
1999	315 (300 organic + 22 bio-dynamic*)	3,000	0.38 %

* some of the bio-dynamic farms were inspected and certified under bio-dynamic as well as under 'plain organic' programmes, thus the discrepancy in the sum of all certified organic farms; see text above.

Source: Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD)

[top of page](#)

3 Organic Agriculture Organisations

Today there are two major organisations of organic farmers: *The Union of Slovenian Organic Farmers' Associations (USOFA)* and *AJDA*.



The Union of Slovenian Organic Farmers' Associations (USOFA) was established in June 1999 by five associations. They all share the same production standards and stand for whole-farm conversion. The *Union* is developing a common trade-mark for organic products. A total of 210 *USOFA* farms applied for certification in 1999; the rest of the inspected farms belonged to other associations (see below), except for a few who were not members of any farmers' organisation. *USOFA* members currently are:

[top of page](#)

- *The Slovenian Organic Farmers' Association (S.O.F.A)*, established in May 1997, an IFOAM member;
- *The Association for Organic Farming in Northeast Slovenia*, established in August 1997;
- *The Organic Farmers' Association of the Coastal Region*, established in June 1998;
- *Healthy Living* (an organic farmers' association), established in March 1999; and
- *The Gorenjska Association for Organic Farming*, established in May 1999.

[top of page](#)

After the Union was founded, two more associations were established in 1999, both of which aim to join the Union:

- *Deteljica* (an organic farmers' and producers' association), and
- *The Association for Organic Farming in Dolenjska, Posavje and Bela krajina*.

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AJDA, a society for bio-dynamic husbandry, was established in 1991 (see above) and inspected 22 in 1999. It numbers approximately 400 members, the large majority of which are non-farmers. For the certified bio-dynamic products the international Demeter-Logo is used.

[top of page](#)

There are also several other organisations who sympathise with organic farming or support its development, such as the *Slovenian Permaculture Society* and some local organisations.

4 Regional Distribution of Organic Farms in Slovenia

[top of page](#)

Organic farms are spread all over the country, with the exception of the far north-east region Prekmurje, where organic farming has not yet developed.

Organic farms in Slovenia are generally not specialised; they are mixed, combining animal husbandry and plant production.

Animal husbandry, mostly cattle breeding and lately also sheep breeding, prevails in the north-western alpine regions and in the hilly regions that compose the major part of the country.

In the Northeast, Southwest (Karst coastal region) and south-east regions, there are some organic vineyards, as well as more sheep and goat breeding. Sheep breeding has also expanded to the Kocevka region (middle South).

[top of page](#)

Orchards are spread all over the country. The most important fruit tree is the apple, followed by pear, plum, peach and cherry trees. In most cases the orchards are older and extensive. From 1998 to 2000 there have been some projects to establish new and more intensive organic orchards. A few farms in the coastal region produce olives (for olive oil), figs and khakis, but in very small amounts.

Vegetable production is mainly concentrated in the vicinity of bigger cities.

[top of page](#)

5 Land Use, Animal Husbandry

Most organic farms combine animal husbandry and plant production. The majority is involved in cattle breeding (meat, milk). Sheep and goat breeding is the second most important activity. Plant production comprises grain and animal fodder, vegetables, orchards and a few vineyards and olive groves.

6 Standards and Certification, State Regulations

[top of page](#)

In 1996, the Institute for Sustainable Development prepared a proposal for the first Slovenian standards for organic production and processing, in accordance with the IFOAM Basic Standards and the EU Regulation on organic farming (Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2092/91).

It was intended to provide the already existing organic farmers with a framework for further development. This effort was supported by the state Farming Advisory Service. The standards were published by this service and the Ministry of Agriculture as "Guidelines for Organic Farming in Slovenia", but as a legally non-binding document. These standards have been adopted by all organic farmers' associations that have emerged since 1997.

[top of page](#)

The first certifications took place on the basis of these standards, as described above.

Activities to regulate organic farming at the state level started in 1997. The "Slovenian Regulation on Organic Farming" is expected to be adopted by the end of 2000 at the latest. The Ministry of Agriculture made this commitment in the context of EU pre-accession negotiations. The proposal for this regulation was prepared in accordance with Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2092/91.

[top of page](#)

7 Implementation of EU-Regulation 2092/91

Farmers who apply for certification are obligated to respect their association's standards as well as Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2091/92.

8 State support, Policy Initiatives and Implementation of Agenda 2000

[top of page](#)

In 1997 a Slovenian programme for an agricultural policy reform for the years 1999 to 2002 was elaborated with the aim of meeting the EU agricultural policy model. Among other things, a four-level agri-environmental programme is planned, in which organic farming forms a part of the fourth and highest level. New policies endeavour to meet the guidelines of Agenda 2000.

Farmers whose farms were certified as organic in 1999 or as in conversion in 1998 (a total of 44 farmers) could apply for direct subsidies per hectare of agricultural land. The subsidies offered were:

- 200 Euro for grassland
- 300 Euro for fields
- 370 Euro for intensive orchards, vegetable production and vineyards
- 450 Euro for glasshouses
- 50 Euro per farm as a subsidy for inspection and certification costs.

[top of page](#)

Farmers who applied for those payments were required to farm organically for four more years (a minimum of five years altogether).

These subsidies were not part of a long-term strategy; it is not clear yet whether the same support will be available in the future, nor is it known how many years an organic farmer may apply for this support.

According to the [Ministry of Agriculture](#), support for organic farming shall continue in 2000, but the amounts and conditions have not yet been defined.

[top of page](#)

There are similar subsidies for integrated fruit and vegetable production which do not differ greatly from those for organic production. In the context of the EU accession policy, in 2000 there will also be acreage subsidies for conventional production as a compensation for the decrease in market prices for agricultural products caused by accession to the EU (Slovenian prices for agricultural products are generally similar to or higher than those in the EU). The result may be that the acreage subsidies for organic production will not be very appealing to farmers, as they will not be much higher than other available subsidies but will demand far greater commitments from the farmers.

[top of page](#)

9 Marketing

A market for domestic organic products started to develop at the end of 1998. After the first farms were certified, S.O.F.A. promoted organic products for the first time at the "Nature - Health" fair in Ljubljana in autumn 1998. The media and public response was very good, as a certain demand for organic products already existed and certification had actually been awaited.

At present, the most important marketing channels are:

- direct marketing;

[top of page](#)

- an organic farmers' market in Ljubljana (vegetables, fruit, grain);
- sales at conventional markets; and
- sales to health shops.

The main items sold are non-processed farm products or simple processed products such as wine, vinegar, juice, seed oils, cheese and a few meat products. The range of organic farm products is relatively wide due to the diversity of agricultural production in Slovenia, but the amounts available are still low, as is the turnover. There are no exports of certified organic products yet.

However, a certain amount of certified (processed) organic products are imported to Slovenia, mainly from the EU. Both the turnover and the range of imported organic products are increasing. The most important imported products are various vegetable and nut spreads, rice and pasta.

[top of page](#)

Consumers interested in organic products have formed a few groups of steady customers.

The first organised marketing of organic products was launched by S.O.F.A. and ISD in Ljubljana, accompanied by the promotion of organic farming and products in the form of a weekly organic farmers' market. This project is supported by the Municipality of Ljubljana.

In 2000 there are plans to extend the organic farmers' market in Ljubljana, and to start an organic market in Maribor.

[top of page](#)

10 Training

Until 1998, training and education in organic farming was offered exclusively by NGOs. Since 1998 the state Farming Advisory Service has become involved and has organised several basic training courses in organic farming. However, in order to offer quality training, there is a need for more practical experience and theoretical knowledge.

In 1999, there were first efforts to present very basic information on organic farming to the students of the two agricultural faculties in the country.

[top of page](#)

11 Advisory Service

The first advisory service for organic farming was offered by private advisors from NGOs (e.g. the Institute for Sustainable Development and foreign bio-dynamic advisors from AJDA). Lately, some branch offices of the state Farming Advisory Service have started to offer advice for organic farming, but the demand is much higher than the available services.

[top of page](#)

12 Research Situation

Until now, there has not been any research on organic production technologies, with the exception of some limited research on the suitability of vegetable cultivars for organic production (Agricultural Institute of Ljubljana) and some graduate theses (Maribor Agricultural Faculty (Maribor Agricultural Institute)).

Some research has been done on marketing issues (consumer opinions

[top of page](#)

and attitudes towards organic products) as well as in economics (University of Ljubljana, Agricultural Faculty).

There have been some development projects on the standardisation of organic farming (Institute for Sustainable Development). Development projects on conversion to organic farming and on marketing are in progress, and some demonstration trials will start in 2000 (by ISD).

13 Challenges and Outlook

[top of page](#)

In the author's opinion, the greatest challenge lies in ensuring an adequate level of quality in organic farming, both technologically and conceptually. This will be crucial with regard to consumer response and confidence. An effective and professional inspection and certification programme (or more of them) is also very important.

As there is a lack of properly trained advisors and instructors, it is important that experienced organic farmers be included in the training process and that advisors receive more training and co-operate closely with experienced farmers. The development of demonstration farms is necessary.

The next challenge is to encourage co-operation between existing farmers' associations in promoting organic farming and organic products. In January 2000, the Union of Slovenian Organic Farmers' Associations adopted a logo which will be used as a common trademark by all of its members (by the associations themselves and by their individual members, the farmers). This promises well for a unified and strong public appearance.

[top of page](#)

The success of organic farming will also depend on the ability to link organic farming and tourism and on the development of organic food processing. Slovenia has a very attractive and well-preserved natural environment. Several conservation areas are now in the process of being established, which may further the development of organic farming in those areas. However, since Slovenian agriculture is unable to compete with cheaper production from other countries due to natural conditions and the agricultural structure, organic farming may be an important opportunity to produce high-quality food products primarily for the domestic market and for tourist consumption.

[top of page](#)

With state support and a new agricultural policy oriented towards multifunctional agriculture, there are good chances that the number of organic farms will grow fairly quickly, as the rise in the number of farms applying for certification in the second year of conversion indicates.

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[top of page](#)

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URL <http://www.organic-europe.net>
Last modified 7.8.2002
Comments to helga.willer@fibl.ch



The setting up of this internet site was co-funded by the [European Commission, Agriculture Directorate-General](#)

[top of page](#)



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[top of page](#)

[top of page](#)

[top of page](#)

[top of page](#)