

## DEVELOPMENT OF ORGANIC FARMING IN WALLONIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Belgium is a highly densely populated country where agricultural methods usually consume large quantities of inputs, including pesticides and chemical fertilizers. However, organic farming is practiced since many years and has registered a significant development during the last years, reaching 7% of the number of farmers in Wallonia (South of Belgium) and 7% of the Walloon agricultural area. Presently, the Walloon Minister for Agriculture strongly supports this sector and has proposed a strategic development plan of organic farming, the target being to reach 14% of the Walloon agricultural area in 2020. This paper presents and discusses the situation of organic farming in Wallonia and the main features and challenges of the new strategic development plan.*

### KEY WORDS

*Organic farming, Wallonia, development plan, regional policy.*

### INTRODUCTION

After the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy, beginning in 1962, Belgian agriculture (Flanders in the North, Wallonia in the South) started an "intensification" process, using larger and larger quantities of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. A positive consequence was a remarkable increase in yields, which are today among the highest in Europe and the world (9-10 tons of wheat per hectare are usual).

However, a movement in favour of organic farming rapidly appeared, promoting an agricultural model more respectful of the environment, farms less depending on the market, and more direct contacts with the consumers.

Later on, environmental problems appeared (organic manure excesses, air and water pollution, excess of pesticides residues...) and European policies turned to be more environment-oriented (regulation on nitrates, NATURA 2000, agri-environmental measures,...).

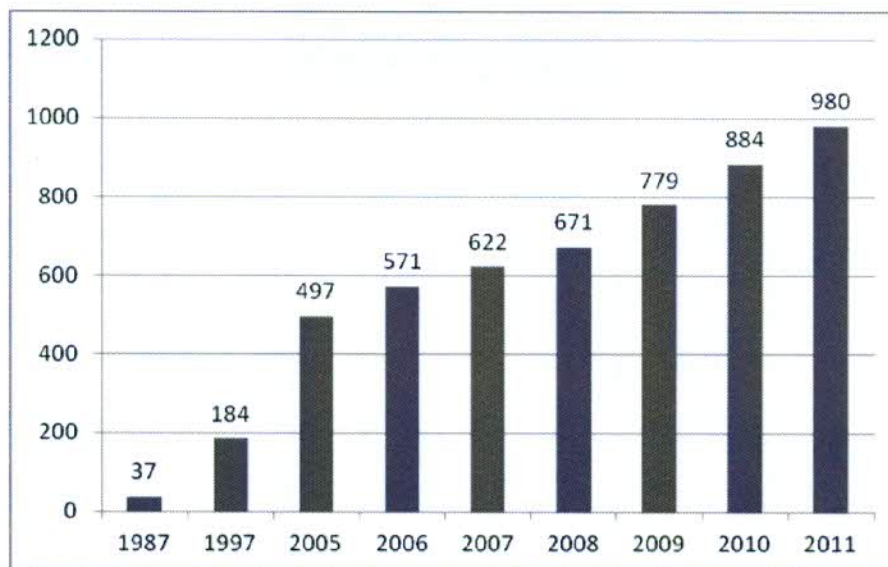
So, organic farming in Wallonia began to slowly develop. During the last years, thanks to the EU and regional policies support, organic farming becomes more and more significant in Walloon agriculture. In front of the persisting problems of modern agriculture, the regional Minister for Agriculture continues to support organic farming and has even proposed to the regional Government a specific strategic development plan for organic farming, with the target to reach 14% of the regional agricultural area in 2020 and also to significantly increase the number of farmers involved in this production method.

This paper describes first the situation of organic farming in Wallonia, and then presents and discusses the measures proposed in the strategic development plan for 2020.

### 1. EVOLUTION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF ORGANIC FARMING IN WALLONIA

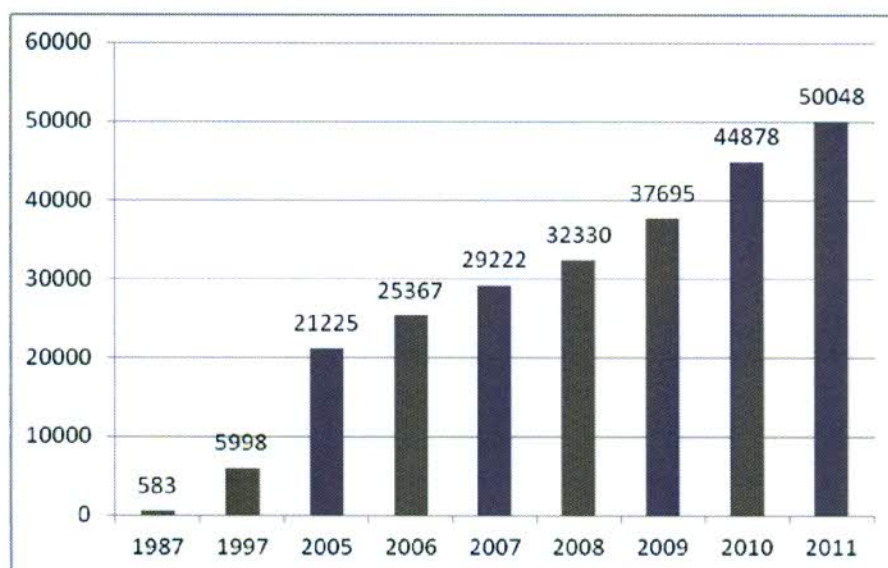
The first census about organic farming in Wallonia dates from 1987. At this time, only 37 farmers were implementing the organic methods. This number stagnated during several years; in 1997, there still were only 184 organic farmers in Wallonia.

However, thanks to the stronger support of the public authorities, from the European Union and the Walloon Region, organic farming began to develop significantly during the last decade. In 2005, the number of organic farmers approached 500, and in 2011, it approached 1,000 (figure 1).



(Source: Service public de Wallonie, Direction générale de l'Agriculture, des Ressources naturelles et de l'Environnement, 2012)

**Figure 1. Evolution of the number of organic farmers in Wallonia (1987-2011)**



(Source: Service public de Wallonie, Direction générale de l'Agriculture, des Ressources naturelles et de l'Environnement, 2012)

**Figure 2. Evolution of the area (ha) devoted to organic farming in Wallonia (1987-2011)**

As the total number of farms is still decreasing by 3-4% every year, the share of organic farmers in the total number of farmers is steadily increasing, reaching 7% in 2011, which becomes significant.

The area devoted to organic farming followed the same path. From only 583 ha in 1987, it reached nearly 6,000 ha in 1997, 21,000 ha in 2005 and 50,000 ha in 2011 (figure 2), which also represents 7% of the Walloon agricultural area.

So, it is clear that organic farming is no longer "confidential", but really constitutes a component of Walloon agriculture to be taken into account.

## 2. PRESENT SITUATION OF ORGANIC FARMING IN WALLONIA

The area devoted to organic farming (table 1) is mainly constituted by meadows (85%).

In fact, it can be said that these meadows, mainly situated in the South-Eastern part of Wallonia, where soils are acid and of relatively bad quality, inconvenient to produce wheat or sugarbeet, have always been managed in a way which was not far from deserving the organic farming label. These areas are traditionally devoted to bovine production, with dairy cows and suckling cows or double-end (meat and milk) animals. In such a case, it can be said that many farmers did not really



convert their enterprises to organic farming, as they did not use important quantities of chemical fertilizers or pesticides in the past. So, in such a case, the increase of organic farms is only due to labelling, and not to a deep change in management practices.

**Table 1. Area of the main organic productions in Wallonie in 2011 (ha)**

<b>FRUITS</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>Vegetables</b>	372
<b>General crops</b>	5862
<b>Meadows</b>	42882
<b>Fallow</b>	872

(Source: Bioforum, 2012)

The situation is different for general crops, which represent around 12% of the total organic area (table 2). In this case, farmers had to change significantly their practices, as high quantities of chemical fertilizers and pesticides are used in conventional agriculture. One of the results is, for example, that the yields for wheat reach from 2 to 6 tons in organic farming against 9 in conventional agriculture.

**Table 2. Organic area in general crops in Wallonia in 2010 (ha)**

<b>MOSTARD</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Buckwheat</b>	5
<b>Corn for grain</b>	30
<b>Rapeseed</b>	37
<b>Mixed crops</b>	82
<b>Broad bean</b>	94
<b>Rye</b>	104
<b>Alfalfa</b>	125
<b>Corn for silage</b>	195
<b>Oats</b>	249
<b>Mixed cereals for forage</b>	262
<b>Lupin</b>	267
<b>Barley</b>	433
<b>Wheat</b>	584
<b>Spelt</b>	674
<b>Other crops</b>	1197

(Source: Service public de Wallonie, Direction générale de l’Agriculture, des Ressources naturelles et de l’Environnement)

Among general crops, cereals are the most important.

Among cereals, spelt, wheat and barley are the most common.

Wheat is the most important vegetal production in Wallonia, barley is less important and spelt is produced on a small area, notably on the plateau of the Ardenne, where it is often used to feed dairy cows. So, the share of organic farming is only significant for spelt.

A small noticeable area is also devoted to mixed crops, like triticale - oats - peas.

The other areas are small, but diversified.

It could have been expected that the largest areas for organic farming would have been devoted to fruits and vegetables, which are often eaten directly by the consumers, without being previously processed, as it is generally the case for cereals. However, it is not observed in Wallonia, where the areas for fruits and vegetables reach only 102 and 372 ha, respectively, in 2011, in sharp decline compared to the previous years. The large quantities of labour which are needed can be a cause of this decrease, while labour is not such a problem for bovine and cereals productions.

The general development of organic farming is partly due to the increase of the demand. However, the market share of organic products in Belgium is only 1.7% in 2010. So, it is obvious that the financial support to farmers is really important to explain the conversion of more and more farmers to organic farming.

The financial support for organic farming in Wallonia is presented in table 3.

Table 3. Financial support for organic production in Wallonia (€/ha)

	FROM 0 TO 32 HA	FROM 32 TO 64 HA	FROM THE 64 <sup>TH</sup> HA	AREA IN CONVERSION (2 YEARS)
- Group 1 Meadows and forage	275	150	75	150
- Group 2 Fallow	275	150	75	150
- Group Other annual crops	450	325	150	150
	From 0 to 14 ha	Other the 14 <sup>th</sup> ha		
- Group 3 Horticulture	750	450		

(Source: Service public de Wallonie, Direction générale de l'Agriculture, des Ressources naturelles et de l'Environnement)

### 3. THE ORGANIC FARMING DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The Minister for Agriculture in the Walloon Region is favourable to organic farming and has charged private advisers (COMASE) to study the organic farming sector and to propose measures in order to support the development of this sector.

In December 2012, the main features of the development plan have been approved by the Walloon Government (Cabinet du Ministre wallon de l'Agriculture, 2012)..

The main points of the plan are the following:

A) To be done by the Minister

- create a platform gathering all the actors in the field of organic farming
- coordinate the implementation of the organic farming development plan by the different administrations
- create a research unit on organic farming at the Walloon Centre for Agricultural Research, including some existing field trials and already existing centers

B) To be done by the administration

- coordinate the actors which produce information
- organize the communication towards professionals
- inform the actors about the possible financial supports
- harmonize the nomenclature in coordination with the certification bodies
- continue the direct payment regime through the period 2014 - 2020
- try to find financial support outside the agricultural sector
- make conventional farmers aware about organic farming
- organize the cooperation among the actors of the organic chain
- promote the consumption of organic products in communities
- support farmers in order to build up organic food chains
- support direct sales
- support cooperatives and farmers associations in order to produce, process and distribute organic products
- support research projects in organic farming
- make a census of all the actors in the organic sector
- include the Walloon research on organic farming in the European network
- have a permanently up-to-date register of research programmes on organic farming
- implement demonstration trials and support innovation transfer among the actors of the organic chain
- support training in organic farming
- make teachers aware of the importance of organic farming
- build up a specific teaching programme on organic farming
- organize training programmes for organic farmers
- promote the consumption of organic products among citizens and communities
- implement a communication plan on organic farming for the public and the farmers
- manage a website on organic farming

In addition, the development plan has defined precise targets for the year 2020 :

- double the share of organic farming in the Walloon agricultural area, and so to reach 14%
- increase the number of organic farmers to 1750, compared to 980 in 2011
- double the number of organic products processing enterprises, and so reach 500 units
- increase the value of organic products sales of the processing enterprises from 222 million € in 2009 to 500 million € in 2020



- increase the share of organic products in the household food expenses from 1.7% in 2010 to 3.0% in 2020

## **CONCLUSION**

Organic farming in Wallonia appeared in the 1980's and developed very slowly during the first two decades. The farmers were not used with organic farming methods and to reach the highest yields was still in the farmer's mentality. However, the environmental problems, and also the economic difficulties (overproduction, low prices, heavy debts, ...) made more and more farmers interested in techniques which are more environmental – friendly, use less inputs, increase the self-sufficiency of farms for animal feed and make farm income less dependent of price variability.

Progressively, the importance of organic farming increased as far as the number of farmers and the agricultural area are concerned. This is particularly true since the European authorities (and the regional authorities the Belgian authorities being reluctant when organic farming approved) began to support efficiently this new method, more specifically with significant financial support.

In Wallonia, organic farming and direct sales are considered today, by the Minister for Agriculture, as good solutions for the future. A development plan for organic farming has been launched, including research and extension. The goal is ambitious: to reach 14% of the Walloon agricultural area in 2020, to nearly double the number of organic farmers and processors and to reach a share of 3% for the households expenses on food.

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