Switch to organic agriculture could help fight hunger

By Nicole Winfield
Associated Press

ROME — Organic food has long been considered a niche market, a luxury for wealthy consumers. But researchers at a U.N. conference Saturday said that a large-scale shift to organic agriculture could help fight world hunger while improving the environment.

Crop yields initially can drop as much as 50% when industrialized, conventional agriculture using chemical fertilizers and pesticides is converted to organic. While such decreases often even out over time, the figures have kept the organic movement largely on the sidelines of discussions about feeding the hungry.

Researchers in Denmark found, however, that food security for sub-Saharan Africa would not be seriously harmed if 50% of agricultural land in the food exporting regions of Europe and North America were converted to organic by 2020.

While total food production would fall, the amount per crop would be much smaller than previously assumed, and the resulting rise in world food prices could be mitigated by improvements in the land and other benefits, the study found.

A similar conversion to organic farming in sub-Saharan Africa could help the region's hungry because it could reduce the need to import food, Niels Halberg, a senior scientist at the Danish Research Center for Organic Food and Farming, told the U.N. conference on "Organic Agriculture and Food Security."

Farmers who go back to traditional agricultural methods would not have to spend money on expensive chemicals and would grow more diverse and sustainable crops, the report said. In addition, if their food is certified as organic, farmers could export any surpluses at premium prices.

The researchers plugged in data on projected crop yields and commodity prices until 2020 to create models for the most optimistic and conservative outlooks.

Alexander Mueller, assistant director-general of the Rome-based U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, praised the report and said that projections indicate the number of hungry people in sub-Saharan Africa was expected to grow.

Considering that the effects of climate change are expected to hurt the world's poorest, "a shift to organic agriculture could be beneficial," he said.

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Nadia El-Hage Scialabba, an FAO official who organized the conference, pointed to other studies that she said indicated that organic agriculture could produce enough food per capita to feed the world's current population.

One such study, by the University of Michigan, found that a global shift to organic agriculture would yield at least 2,641 kilocalories per person per day, just under the world's current production of 2,786, and as many as 4,381 kilocalories per person per day, researchers reported. A kilocalorie is one "large" calorie and is known as the "nutritionist's calorie."

"These models suggest that organic agriculture has the potential to secure a global food supply, just as conventional agriculture today, but with reduced environmental impacts," Scialabba said in a paper presented to the conference.

However, she stressed that the studies were only economic models.

The United Nations defines organic agriculture as a "holistic" food system that avoids the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, minimizes pollution and optimizes the health of plants, animals and people.