

# POLICY SUMMARY: **ORGANIC MANAGEMENT ON PUBLIC LAND**



## **OVERVIEW**

This policy summary provides recommendations on why and how to organically manage public land. It outlines options for providing this support, followed by examples from various countries.

## **SUMMARY OF POLICY OPTIONS**

Several policy approaches are possible:

- Mandatory organic management of all public lands or certain types of lands in a jurisdiction (e.g. parks and schools). This policy option can be implemented at the levels of municipality, district (e.g. counties), region (e.g. state/province), or nation.
- Leasing of public agricultural land to organic farmers.
- Organic management of selected public spaces, usually those with high public profiles.
- Encouragement of organic public land management in general action planning and land use planning.

## **RATIONALE**

Toxic pesticides and chemical fertilizers are still being used on land that is under public management, such as roads and paths, parks, schoolyards, playgrounds, sport fields, areas around public buildings, botanical gardens, riverbanks, and railroads. However, the same principles used in organic agriculture can be used for the organic management of public lands. Particularly at the municipality level, elected politicians have the power to pass local decrees or instruct city managers to stop the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers in areas under public management and to transition to safe, effective (organic) alternatives.

There is clear evidence from around the world that the organic approach is both achievable and effective in both rural and urban areas and that it is reducing environmental contamination and the exposure of millions of citizens around the world to the potentially harmful effects of pesticides.

## **SCOPE**

This measure will be most suitable to governments who prioritize achievement of certain environmental and public health and safety objectives. For example, a government may prioritize improvement of regional water quality and implement related policy measures at the level of its



own operations. The measure is suitable to all stages of organic sector development in the country or region and whether or not there is an organic regulation.

## POLICY OPTIONS

Several approaches are possible:

- This measure may be a political decision (by voters or legislators) or a government administrative decision at municipal, district, regional or national levels to mandate organic public land management. At local levels, it may arise in response to strong public advocacy, often related to public (especially children's) health and safety. The policy can either apply to all public land in the jurisdiction or to certain types of lands e.g. schools and parks.

Often the policy decision is framed as prohibiting the use of synthetic pesticides. However, it is recommended that policymakers go further and adopt the systems approach of organic management, taking into account all land-management objectives and practices, including soil fertility and nutrient management as well as pest control. Furthermore, the systems approach of full organic management reduces the need for using pesticides.

In any case an important component of the implementation process is to educate and train government employees or contractors responsible for land care on organic approaches. There is a growing body of information and training, for example on organic turf management. The transition usually takes several years, as gardeners and landscapers may need to rethink the design of gardens and green areas and the choice and location of species best suited to organic management.

- Some government units own agricultural land that they lease to farmers. In this case, a policy option is to lease to farmers who will farm the land organically.
- Less impactful in terms of land area, but of symbolic value, is the choice to convert selected highly renowned sites (e.g.) gardens or parks to organic management, and to publicize this.
- Short of mandating organic management, regional and national governments can encourage more organic management of public lands in general action plans and land use planning.



## COUNTRY EXAMPLES

**France:** In 2014 France passed a law that prohibits public entities from using chemical pesticides in the management of their non-agricultural land, such as green spaces, parks, forests and pathways open to the public. The prohibition is included in a broader reform aimed at abolishing the use of all non-agricultural pesticides by 2022, except for railways, roads and airports. The law requires that by January 2020 public entities (including the State, regions, municipalities, departments, inter-municipal collectivities, and public institutions) owning public or private land stop using pesticide products on such land, except for low-risk substances and substances allowed in organic agriculture. Currently there are 400 towns and villages in France that do not use chemical pesticides and a further 400 that have severely restricted their use. The 2014 law will require the remaining 34,600 municipalities in France to also abandon pesticide use in public areas.

**Other EU:** A number of municipalities have not used chemical pesticides in the management of their green spaces for several decades. Pioneer cities that took action in the 1980s and 1990s include, Allerød and Furesø (in Denmark), Witten an der Ruhr, Bielefeld, Münster, Eckernförde, Saarbrücken, and Celle (in Germany). The movement of pesticide-free towns is spreading and scaling up to regional or national levels.

In Italy, since 2013 a number of regions have approved regional laws to support the creation of land banks and other new governance systems that allow for better management of publicly-owned land through a direct involvement of citizens. Under those systems, public authorities apply selection criteria for the assignment of the land to private farmers. In some cases (for example in the Latium region), the call for proposal requires that the production system be organic.

**United States:** There is a program for accreditation of organic land care professionals, and several organically maintained urban parks in the country are managed by such accredited professionals. For example, the entire horticulture staff of the Greenway Conservancy, which manages a set of parks called the Rose Kennedy Greenway in Boston, Massachusetts, has attained Accredited Organic Land Care Professional status through the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA). In managing these parks, the Conservancy complies with NOFA's Standards for Organic Land Care.

Boulder County in the state of Colorado has set a goal to have at least 20% of its public agricultural land area certified organic or in transition by 2020. The county owns approximately 25,000 acres of agricultural land and leases it to



qualified operators. The Parks and Open Space Agricultural Resources Division oversees the land and manages the leases.

**Fiji:** Cicia Island in Fiji's Lau group is the first organic island in the Pacific. With support from the Ministry of Agriculture and Provincial Council of the Lau Island Group, the elders

of the island community decided to stop using agricultural pesticides and fertilizers on all the island's lands including collectively-owned areas and farm plots, and they have replaced them with organic materials and practices. The island's farmers are certified organic through a participatory guarantee system.