ORGANIC FARMING

Geography drives agronomy

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Organic agriculture accounts for only 1% of all farmland in the United States, but is distributed heterogeneously throughout the country with wide regional disparities. Hui-Ju Kuo and David Peters have examined county-level data on the prevalence and progression of organic farms and find that the West Coast, New England, and upper Midwest of the country have the highest intensity of organic agriculture, along with scattered areas of the Mountain West in Colorado, Utah and New Mexico. Most counties with a low intensity of organic agriculture fall within the Midwest and Southern regions.

The 'hot-spots' of organic farming are thought to be determined in part by socio-economic factors such as the existence of community-supported agriculture, where consumers subscribe to monthly deliveries of fresh food products directly from the farms. However, Kuo and Peters' data show that the location of organic farming is primarily influenced by a region's agroecological characteristics. Areas with more organic farms tend to have colder winters and summers, as well as more bodies of water and topographical variation, which may reduce the effectiveness of intensive, industrial agricultural operations.

Areas with high organic cultivation also have more women operating farms, but fewer family-run concerns. Instead farms in 'organic' counties are more often run as partnerships or cooperatives, reflecting their higher capital value. However, regression models find that some variables thought to be influential in the siting of organic agriculture — such as farm size and population density — have marginal or even negative effects. Thus the distribution of organic farms reflects the complex and sometimes contradictory interactions of agriculture with its surroundings.

Ryan Scarrow

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