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EUROPE

## Organic farmland in Europe doubles

European organic farmland has doubled since 1998 and the EU is implementing policies intended to spur more interest in organics.

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**Associated Press**

BRUSSELS --

Organic farming has more than doubled its share of European agricultural land since 1998, the EU statistics agency Eurostat said Tuesday.

Organic-food producers on Tuesday got another boost when European Union ministers agreed to guidelines that determine what can and cannot be labeled as organic.

Demand for food produced without artificial pesticides or fertilizers has been growing among Europeans following food scares and worries over new biotechnology.

The 15 nations that joined the European Union before 2004 -- mostly in Western Europe -- increased organic farmland from 1.8 percent of all land under the plow in 1998 to 4.1 percent in 2005, Eurostat said.

Italy had the largest area under organic production in 2005 with 2.7 million acres followed by Germany and Spain with 1.9 million acres.

Britain, at 1.5 million acres, scraped ahead of France at 1.2 million acres -- though France has much more farmland.

The EU's 25 members in 2005 had 15 million acres of organic farmland, Eurostat said. The average size of these farms tended to be double the norm at 96 acres for an organic holding compared to 39 acres for the average farm.

The biggest organic farms are found in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Britain, it said.

Under the new rules agreed upon Tuesday, an EU-wide organic logo can now be added to food if at least 95 percent of the ingredients are organic.

EU Farm Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel said it would help EU consumers understand exactly what they were buying.

"Organic food is a successful and growing market, and I hope that this new set of rules will provide the framework to allow this growth to continue -- through a combination of market demand and the entrepreneurship of European farmers," she said.

But groups opposed to genetically modified foods were upset that products can be labeled organic even if they contain up to 0.9 percent of "technically unavoidable" genetically-modified content.

Earth Europe and Greenpeace say the EU has accepted that organic crops will become mixed with genetically-modified material. The groups called for stricter rules to prevent modified crops from crossing with organic produce.

"As the success of organic farming shows, people are ready to pay for higher quality food free of genetically modified organisms," said Marco Contiero of Greenpeace. "The lax attitude towards contamination taken by the European Commission and some member states disregards the preferences of European consumers and may put the whole organic sector at risk."