



# Organic Certification

## of Farms and Businesses Producing Agricultural Products

By Ann H. Baier, National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) Agriculture Specialist and Lisa Ahramjian, National Organic Program (NOP) Publications Manager  
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## What is organic?

**O**rganic is a labeling term for food or other agricultural products that have been produced according to the USDA organic regulations. These standards require the integration of cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. This means that organic operations must maintain or enhance soil and water quality while also conserving wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife. Synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation, and genetic engineering may not be used.

All organic crops and livestock must be raised in a production system that emphasizes protection of natural resources; plant and animal health; preventative management of pests, diseases, and predators; and compliant use of allowed materials. All organic products must be protected from prohibited substances and methods from the field to the point of final sale, whether it is a raw agricultural commodity or a multi-ingredient, processed product.

This publication provides an overview of organic certification and provides some additional resources for prospective organic farms and businesses.

## What is organic certification?

Organic certification verifies that your farm or handling facility located anywhere in the world complies with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) organic regulations and allows you to sell, label, and represent your products as organic. These regulations describe the specific standards required for you to use the word “organic” or the USDA organic seal on food, feed, or fiber products. The USDA National Organic Program (NOP) administers these regulations, with substantial input from its citizen advisory board and the public.

Your farm or handling facility would be certified by a private, foreign, or State entity. These certifying agents are accredited by the USDA and are located throughout the United States and around the world. Certifying agents are responsible for ensuring that USDA organic products meet or exceed all organic standards. Certification provides the consumer, whether end-user or intermediate processor, assurance of the organic product’s integrity.

## Who needs to be certified?

If your farm or business receives *more than* \$5,000 in gross annual organic sales, it must be certified.

If your farm or business receives *less than* \$5,000 in gross annual organic sales, it is considered “exempt” from two key requirements.

**Certification.** Your farm or business doesn’t need to be certified in order to sell, label, or represent your products as organic. However, you *may not* use the USDA organic seal on your products or refer to them as *certified* organic. If your operation is exempt and you would like to use the USDA organic seal, you are welcome to obtain optional organic certification.



### Related ATTRA publications

[www.attra.ncat.org](http://www.attra.ncat.org)

Preparing for an Organic Inspection: Steps and Checklists

Organic Standards for Crop Production: Excerpts of USDA's National Organic Program Regulations

Organic Standards for Livestock Production: Excerpts of USDA's National Organic Program Regulations

Organic Standards for Handling: Excerpts of USDA's National Organic Program

Guide for Organic Crop Producers

Guide for Organic Livestock Producers

Guide for Organic Processors

**Organic System Plan.** You are not required to document the specific practices and substances used to produce and/or handle organic products.

You must follow all other requirements in the USDA organic regulations, including production or handling requirements and recordkeeping. You may not sell your products as ingredients for use in someone else's certified organic product. Buyers may require that you sign an affidavit stating that you adhere to USDA organic regulations.

## What types of products are eligible for organic certification?

USDA standards recognize four categories of organic production:

- Crops. Plants that are grown to be harvested as food, livestock feed, or fiber used to add nutrients to the field.
- Livestock. Animals that can be used for food or in the production of food, fiber, or feed.
- Processed/multi-ingredient products. Items that have been handled and packaged (e.g., chopped carrots) or combined, processed, and packaged (e.g., bread or soup).
- Wild crops. Plants from a growing site that is not cultivated.

## Why is certification required?

In the 1980s, there were multiple organizations in the United States offering certification to different, and often conflicting, organic standards. Coupled with fraud and resulting consumer mistrust, this landscape created a need for Federal standards and oversight. The Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 established national standards for the production and handling of organic agricultural products. The Act authorized USDA to create the NOP, which is responsible for developing, and ensuring compliance with, the USDA organic regulations.

Consumers choose to purchase organic products with the expectation that they are grown, processed, and handled according to the USDA organic regulations. A high-quality regulatory program benefits organic farmers and processors by taking action against those who violate the law and thereby jeopardize consumer confidence in organic products.

## How do I choose a certifying agent?

You may choose any of the USDA-accredited certifying agents listed at [www.ams.usda.gov/NOPACAs](http://www.ams.usda.gov/NOPACAs), which lists certifying agents by U.S. State and around the world.

Each of these certifying agents is authorized to issue an equivalent organic certificate to operations that comply with the USDA organic regulations. When selecting a certifying agent, you may wish to consider the following criteria:

- Distance to your farm or business.
- Fee structure.
- Accreditation to other standards. See “What about other labeling claims?” below.
- Additional services, such as educational resources or member services.

Additional tips from the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Institute on selecting a certifying agent are available at <http://bit.ly/certifiersselection>.

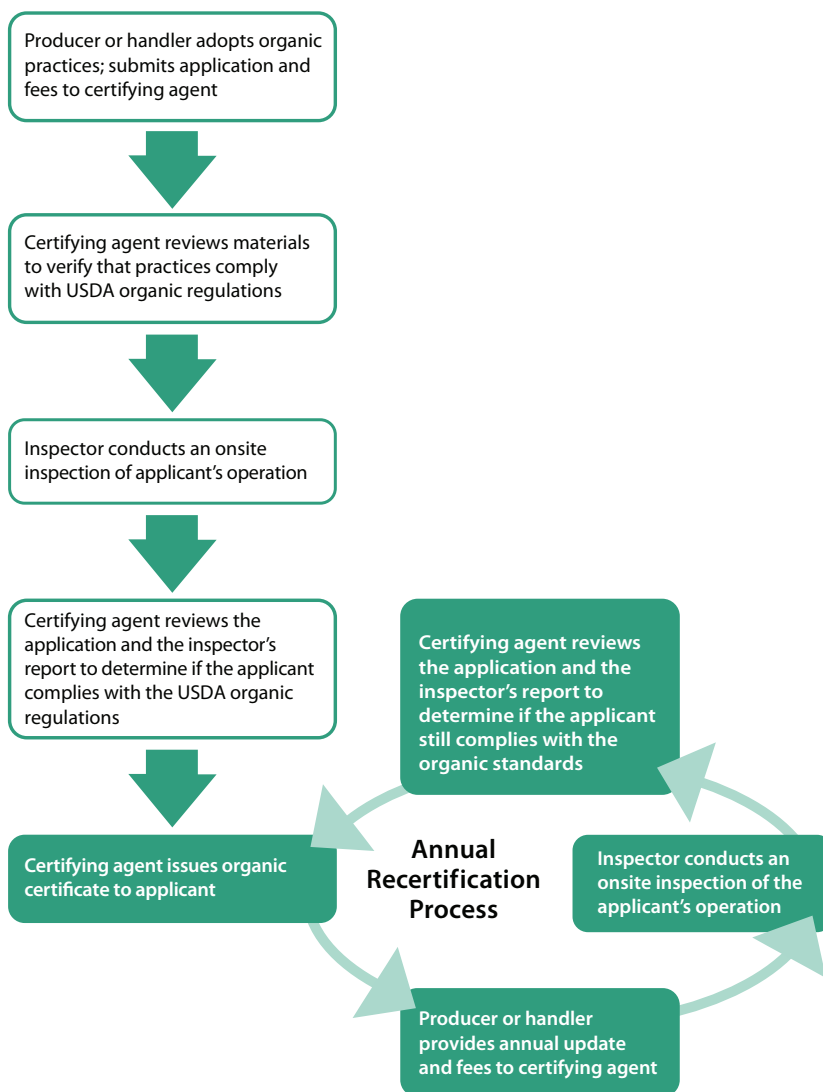
# How do I get certified?

To become certified, you must submit an application for organic certification to a USDA-accredited certifying agent, which may be a State, private, or foreign organization. This application must include:

- A detailed description of the operation to be certified.
- A history of substances applied to land during the previous three years.
- The names of the organic products grown, raised, or processed.
- A written Organic System Plan (OSP) describing the practices and substances to be used.

Certifying agents first review your written application in order to ensure that practices comply with organic regulations. They will also schedule a qualified inspector to visit your operation to verify that you are following your OSP, maintaining appropriate records, and meeting all requirements of the USDA organic regulations. Afterward, the certifying agent reviews the inspector's report. If the written application and the inspection report show that your operation complies with the organic regulations, the certifying agent will grant an organic certificate to your operation. The process is described below:

Figure 1: The Organic Certification Process



**Y**<sup>our</sup>  
certification  
will need to be  
renewed each year.

## Is there a transition period?

Yes. Any land used to produce raw organic commodities must not have had prohibited substances applied to it for the previous 3 years. Until the full 36-month transition period is met, you may not do the following:

- Sell, label, or represent the product as “organic.”
- Use the USDA organic or certifying agent’s seal.

The USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service provides technical and financial assistance during the transition period through its Environmental Quality Incentives Program. For more information, go online at [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov).

## How much does organic certification cost?

Actual certification costs or fees vary widely depending on the certifying agent and the size, type, and complexity of your operation. Certification costs may range from a few hundred to several thousand dollars. Before you apply, it is important that you understand your certifier’s fee structure and billing cycle. Typically, there is an application fee, annual renewal fee, and assessment on annual production or sales, as well as inspection fees. If you are well prepared for an efficient inspection, your inspection fees will typically be lower. Some certifiers combine these costs into a single, fixed annual fee calculated for each operation; others charge them separately.

Once certified, the USDA Organic Certification Cost-Share Programs reimburses producers and handlers up to 75 percent of organic certification costs. To learn more, visit [www.ams.usda.gov/organicinfo](http://www.ams.usda.gov/organicinfo).

## How often does my certification need to be renewed?

Your certification will need to be renewed each year. Your certifying agent will request recertification fees and an updated application (including an OSP) that reflects any changes since your initial certification. The certifying agent will also schedule a qualified inspector to visit your farm or business to verify that you are following your updated OSP, maintaining appropriate records, and meeting all requirements of the USDA organic regulations. Most inspections are scheduled with you in advance, but some inspections are unannounced. The inspector then submits a report to the certifier, and, as described in the steps above, the certifier makes the certification decision based on information provided in the report and your OSP.

## How are the certifying agent and inspector related?

Since the inspector is often the only person you meet face-to-face throughout the certification process, it is natural to equate the inspector with the certifying agent. Since both parties have distinct roles, it is important to understand which services each party can and cannot provide.

**Certifying agent.** The certifying agent is responsible for collecting fees, reviewing your application and the inspection report, and determining whether your operation is certified organic. The certifying agent must maintain strict confidentiality, protect your proprietary information, and prevent conflicts of interest among the three key parties: you (the certified operation), the certifying agent, and the inspector.

**Inspector.** The primary role of the inspector is to gather onsite information and provide an accurate report to the certifier. The inspector works at the direction of, and on behalf of, the certifier.

The knowledge and experience of many inspectors make them an excellent resource on matters ranging from pest management and livestock health care to marketing and sources of purchased inputs. You have the option of hiring an organic consultant who may or may not also be an organic inspector. To manage potential conflicts of interest, the following rules apply:

Organic inspectors *can* do the following:

- Provide you with information about the certification process.
- Answer general questions about requirements of the USDA organic regulations.
- Describe the range of practices and/or types of documentation that the certifier considers sufficient to demonstrate compliance.
- Make referrals to public resources or sources of information, such as Cooperative Extension services or publications, USDA agencies, farm organizations, trade associations, and ATTRA resources.

Organic inspectors *cannot* do the following:

- Make the certification decision.
- Give you advice or provide consultancy services for overcoming identified barriers to certification.
- Inspect your operation if he/she is an immediate family member.
- Inspect your operation if he/she holds any type of financial interest in it.
- Inspect your operation if he/she has provided paid consulting services within one year of application.
- Accept gifts, favors, or payments from you other than the prescribed fee.

## What does the inspector typically look for?

On the farm, an inspector would observe your onsite practices and compare them to your OSP; assess the risk of contamination from prohibited materials; and perhaps take soil, tissue, or product samples as needed. The inspector will also look at the following depending on your farm:

**Crop inspection.** Fields, soil conditions, crop health, approaches to management of weeds and other crop pests, water systems (for irrigation and post-harvest handling), storage areas, and equipment.

**Livestock inspection.** Feed production and purchase records, feed rations, animal living conditions, preventative health management practices (vaccinations and other medications used or planned for use), health records, and the number and condition of animals present on the farm.

At a handling or processing facility, an inspector would inspect your facility and compare their observations with your OSP. The inspector would evaluate the receiving, processing, and storage areas used for organic ingredients and finished products. The inspector would also analyze potential hazards and critical control points in your operation. The inspector would also ensure that your organic control points—procedures to prevent contamination from sanitation systems, pest management materials, or nonorganic processing aids—are adequate. If your facility also processes nonorganic ingredients or products, the inspector will also evaluate your measures to prevent commingling with nonorganic ingredients or products.

**A** n organic  
inspector must  
not make the  
certification decision.

**I**f the USDA or your certifying agent suspects that your farm or business is violating the USDA organic regulations, they may do an unannounced inspection as part of their investigation.

## What happens if an operation violates the USDA organic regulations?

Punishments may include financial penalties up to \$11,000 per violation and/or suspension or revocation of an operation's organic certificate. If the USDA or your certifying agent suspects that your farm or business is violating the USDA organic regulations, USDA or the agent may perform an unannounced inspection as part of the investigation.

## Can I use the USDA organic seal?

The following products may be labeled with the USDA organic seal:

- Raw agricultural commodities that have been certified organic.
- Processed or multi-ingredient products that have been certified organic and contain 95 to 100 percent organic content.

The following products may not be labeled with the USDA organic seal:

- Any product that has not been certified organic by an accredited certifying agent. This includes exempt operations, described in "Who needs to be certified?" above.
- Processed or multi-ingredient products that contain less than 95 percent organic content.

If your product contains at least 70 percent organic content, it may be labeled as "made with" up to three specified organic ingredients but not labeled with the USDA organic seal. For example, a soup label's principle display panel could state, "made with organic carrots, lentils, and potatoes." These products must be overseen by a certifying agent.

If your product contains less than 70 percent organic content, any organic ingredients may be specified on the list of ingredients.

## What about other labeling claims?

All marketing claims, including organic, must reflect reality and fulfill truth-in-advertising rules. Many of these claims also require additional certification to government or association standards before they can be used. Examples of other claims that may or may not be appropriate for you to include on your organic product label include: Kosher, Halal, Fair Trade, biodynamic, free-range, grass-fed, humane, wildlife-friendly, and pesticide-free. Be sure that any and all terms are appropriately used.

## Once certified, can I export USDA organic products to another country?

The United States currently has organic trade agreements that allow USDA organic products to be exported to Canada, the European Union, Japan, and Taiwan as long as the terms of the agreement are met. These partnerships avoid the need for you to maintain certification to multiple organic standards. You can learn more about each partnership at [www.ams.usda.gov/NOPInternationalAgreements](http://www.ams.usda.gov/NOPInternationalAgreements).

If you want to export organic products to a country not listed above, you will need to use a certifying agent that is accredited to that country's organic standards. If you want to sell products in both the United States and that country, you will need to maintain certification to both standards.

# Resources

## ATTRA

[www.attra.ncat.org](http://www.attra.ncat.org)

ATTRA-National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service is managed by the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT). ATTRA has produced more than 300 publications on a variety of sustainable-agriculture topics as well as a number of webinars and other resources.

## Independent Organic Inspector's Association (IOIA)

[www.ioia.net](http://www.ioia.net)

IOIA is a professional, nonprofit association of organic farm, livestock, and processing inspectors. IOIA provides comprehensive organic inspector training worldwide, promotes consistency and integrity in the certification process, and addresses issues and concerns relevant to organic inspectors.

## International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)

[www.ifoam.org](http://www.ifoam.org)

IFOAM is the worldwide umbrella organization for the organic movement, uniting more than 750 member organizations in 116 countries.

## Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES)

[www.mosesorganic.org](http://www.mosesorganic.org)

MOSES serves farmers striving to produce high-quality, healthy food using organic and sustainable techniques that support thriving ecosystems and vibrant rural communities.

## National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT)

[www.ncat.org](http://www.ncat.org)

The National Center for Appropriate Technology is a national, nonprofit organization that offers programs in sustainable agriculture, sustainable energy, and community development. One of the sustainable-agriculture programs is ATTRA, listed above.

## Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI)

[www.omri.org](http://www.omri.org)

OMRI evaluates materials for use in most aspects of organic production and handling, including processing. It publishes guides of approved inputs to help you understand which substances are allowed (including restrictions or annotations, as applicable) and prohibited in your operation.

## Organic Trade Association (OTA)

[www.ota.com](http://www.ota.com)

This membership-based business association represents the organic industry in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. It works to promote organic products in the marketplace and to protect the integrity of organic standards.

## USDA National Organic Program (NOP)

[www.ams.usda.gov/nop](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop)

NOP's mission is to ensure the integrity of USDA organic products in the United States and throughout the world. The NOP implements the Organic Foods Production Act through development and enforcement of the USDA organic regulations. One of its publications, the NOP Program Handbook, helps organic operations and certifying agents comply with the USDA organic regulations.

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This publication is available online at:  
[www.attra.ncat.org](http://www.attra.ncat.org)  
or by calling NCAT's ATTRA project: 800-346-9140  
IP222  
Slot 92

For more information, please contact the  
USDA National Organic Program:

National Organic Program  
Agricultural Marketing Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Stop 0268, Room 2648-S  
Washington, DC 20250-0268  
Tel. 202-720-3252  
Fax 202-205-7808  
[www.ams.usda.gov/NOP](http://www.ams.usda.gov/NOP)