



### What Support Does NRCS Offer to Certified Organic Producers, or Producers Transitioning to Organic Production?

NRCS can provide technical and financial assistance to certified organic producers, certification exempt producers, and producers transitioning to organic production. This conservation assistance can also help producers meet the requirements of the USDA National Organic Program. Examples of conservation assistance include erosion control, nutrient management, implementing crop rotations, improving soil organic

matter, establishing buffers and enhancing biodiversity through hedgerows and pollinator habitat, managing pasture and livestock grazing, planting diverse pasture, and establishing fencing, walkways, and watering facilities.

Producers should visit their local USDA Service Center (offices. [usda.gov](https://www.usda.gov)) to meet with an NRCS conservationist, or contact their state NRCS office and ask for the State organic point of contact.

In advance of your visit, it's a good idea to think about what resource concerns you have, and what you might like assistance with.

### Examples include:

- ◆ Maintaining and improving soil health
- ◆ Watering crops and/or livestock and improving water quality
- ◆ Minimizing drift of pesticides and GMO pollen
- ◆ Improving plant productivity and health of crops, and minimizing pests
- ◆ Providing feed and forage for livestock and enhancing wildlife habitat or biodiversity
- ◆ Improving the energy efficiency of equipment, facilities, farming/ranching practices and field operations

### Select Organic Resources

NRCS Organic Agriculture: [www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/other-topics/organic](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/other-topics/organic)

The National Organic Program: [www.ams.usda.gov/about-ams/programs-offices/national-organic-program](https://www.ams.usda.gov/about-ams/programs-offices/national-organic-program)

Find an Organic Certifier: <https://organic.ams.usda.gov/integrity/Certifiers/CertifiersLocationsSearchPage>

Find Certified Organic Operations: <https://organic.ams.usda.gov/integrity/>

Organic Materials Review Institute: [www.omri.org/omri-search](https://www.omri.org/omri-search)

(Database of materials allowed in organic production)

Tennessee Organic Growers Association: <https://tnorganics.org/>

## Organic Certification and NRCS Assistance for Organic Producers



### Background

Organic agriculture is an ecologically based system of growing and harvesting crops and raising livestock using cultural, biological, and mechanical practices to conserve natural resources and biodiversity, foster ecological balance, and adapt to site-specific conditions.

Many Tennessee producers see organic production as an opportunity to gain a premium for their products while implementing farming practices that support environmental health.

Certified organic producers, producers transitioning to organic production, and producers following organic principles can receive conservation technical assistance and can apply for all NRCS programs.



### Making Sense of Food Labels: What Do They Mean?

**Organic:** The term “organic” and variations of the term are regulated by the USDA National Organic Program. Producers wanting to make organic claims, including “grown using organic methods” must have completed the organic certification process as outlined below. The one exception is for farms and businesses with less than \$5,000 in gross annual organic sales, which can make organic claims if they are following the USDA organic standards, but they cannot use the USDA Organic seal.

**Natural:** The use of the term “natural” is largely unregulated in the U.S., and no formal definition for this term exists, except for the USDA’s definition of natural meat and poultry (*a product containing*

*no artificial ingredient or added color and is only minimally processed*). Producers might use clarifying explanations for the term “natural” on packaging or when speaking directly to consumers, such as “no artificial ingredients” or “minimally processed.”

**Local:** There is no formal definition for the term “local,” but common definitions include food that was grown or raised within 100 miles of where it is consumed, or within the same state. “Local” refers to proximity only and does not necessarily imply anything about production methods that were used. “Pick Tennessee Products” is one label used to designate products raised, grown, or processed in Tennessee.







**Grass-Fed:** The term “grass-fed” and variations of this term for meat products are regulated by the USDA and can be used after a documentation submission process to Food Safety and Inspection Services. Grass-fed certification programs, often requiring additional standards be met related to animal welfare, are available through organizations such as the American Grassfed Association, A Greener World, and Organic Plus Trust’s Certified Grass-Fed Organic Livestock Program (*an add-on to organic certification*). Multiple certification programs are also available for humane raising of livestock.

**Certified Naturally Grown:** Certified Naturally Grown is a grassroots certification program that is based on the USDA Organic standards but uses a peer-to-peer certification system, which may result in lower certification fees. Certified Naturally Grown operations cannot make organic claims unless they are also certified organic.

### How Do I Become Certified Organic in Tennessee?

The National Organic Program (NOP) establishes standards for the production, handling, and labeling of organic products. The NOP also accredits and oversees third-party certifiers, who are responsible for certifying and overseeing producers and handlers, making sure that products meet the organic standards.

There are over 75 certifiers that certify to the USDA National Organic Program regulations, with 17 certifying operations in Tennessee as of 2023. Annual organic certification fees can range from \$500 to \$1,500 or more depending on the certifier and there is a federal cost share program through FSA that can reimburse 50 percent of certification expenses, up to \$500 per scope (crops, livestock, handling, and wild crops).

The steps to organic certification are:

1. The producer implements organic practices
2. The producer selects a certifying agent and submits an Organic System Plan detailing the management practices that will be used to meet the organic standards. Applicable fees are also submitted to the certifying agent at this stage (Note: Certifying agents can be searched by state here: <https://organic.ams.usda.gov/integrity/Certifiers/CertifiersLocationsSearchPage>. Each one may have a slightly different fee structure and paperwork to submit)
3. The application is reviewed by the certifying agent to ensure practices are in compliance with the organic regulations
4. An inspector conducts an inspection of the producer’s operation
5. The certifying agent reviews the inspector’s report to determine if the producer complies with the organic regulations, and to ensure that practices being implemented match what is written in the Organic System Plan
6. An organic certificate is issued by the certifying agent, and the operation can now use the USDA Organic seal and market their products as “organic”
7. The operation renews with the organic certifier each year, submitting updated documents and an annual renewal fee.

### What is Required to Become Certified Organic?

A producer must follow all the USDA National Organic Program regulations (<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-I/subchapter-M/part-205?toc=1>) to become certified organic. Land must go through a “transition” period, in which it must be free of substances prohibited by the organic regulations for 36 months before the first organic harvest.

These regulations for crop producers include: generally using natural inputs, such as pesticides and fertilizers, rather than those derived from synthetic sources (although some exceptions do exist); implementing a crop rotation; maintaining and enhancing natural resources and biodiversity; using certified organic seed and

annual seedlings and planting stock when commercially available; maintaining buffer zones to prevent the unintended application of a prohibited substance; and employing prevention and avoidance techniques for managing insect pests, disease, and weeds.

Livestock producers must follow the above regulations for land and pasture management, as well as employing prevention and avoidance methods as a first defense against parasites and disease; providing access to the outdoors, shade, shelter, exercise areas, fresh air, clean water for drinking, and direct sunlight; following pasture grazing standards for ruminants; and slaughtering animals at a certified organic slaughter facility. New installations of treated lumber in contact with soil

or livestock are generally not allowed.

### How Does a Producer Stay Certified?

Producers must maintain detailed records including field maps, planting, harvest, and input records, sales documentation, and more. Certified organic producers go through an annual process of updating their Organic System Plan as needed, paying certification fees, and having an annual inspection to maintain their certification. Producers often go through a process of ongoing updates with their certifier as well, as any new input or practice not already listed in the Organic System Plan must have certifier approval before implementation.

