



Certification

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) accredits State, private, and foreign organizations or persons to become "certifying agents." Certifying agents certify that organic production and handling practices meet the national standards.

Who needs to be certified?

Operations or portions of operations that produce or handle agricultural products that are intended to be sold, labeled, or represented as "100 percent organic," "organic," or "made with organic ingredients" or food group(s).

Who does NOT need to be certified?

Producers and handling (processing) operations that sell less than \$5,000 a year in organic agricultural products. Although exempt from certification, these producers and handlers must abide by the national standards for organic products and may label their products as organic.

Handlers, including final retailers, that:

- Do not process or repackage products;
- Only handle products with less than 70 percent organic ingredients;
- Process or prepare, on the premises of the establishment, raw and ready-to-eat food labeled organic;
- Choose to use the word organic only on the information panel; and
- Handle products that are packaged or otherwise enclosed in a container prior to being received by the operation and remain in the same package.

How do farmers and handlers become certified?

An applicant must submit specific information to an accredited certifying agent.

Information must include:

- The type of operation to be certified;
- A history of substances applied to land for the previous 3 years;
- The organic products being grown, raised, or processed;
- The organic system plan (OSP) – a plan describing practices and substances used in production. The OSP also must describe monitoring practices to be performed to verify that the plan is effectively implemented, a record-keeping system, and practices to prevent commingling of organic and nonorganic products and to prevent contact of products with prohibited substances.

Applicants for certification must keep accurate post-certification records for 5 years concerning the production, harvesting, and handling of agricultural products that are to be sold as organic.

These records must document that the operation is in compliance with the regulations and verify the information provided to the certifying agent. Access to these records must be provided to authorized representatives of USDA, including the certifying agent.

Certification

Inspection and certification process

Certifying agents review applications for certification eligibility. A qualified inspector conducts an on-site inspection of the applicant's operation. Inspections are scheduled when the inspector can observe the practices used to produce or handle organic products and talk to someone knowledgeable about the operation.

The certifying agent reviews the information submitted by the applicant and the inspector's report. If this information demonstrates that the applicant is complying with the relevant standards and requirements, the certifying agent grants certification and issues a certificate. Certification remains in effect until terminated, either voluntarily or through the enforcement process.

Annual inspections are conducted of each certified operation, and updates of information are provided annually to the certifying agent in advance of conducting these inspections. Certifying agents must be notified by a producer or handler immediately of any changes affecting an operation's compliance with the regulations, such as application of a prohibited pesticide to a field.

Compliance review and enforcement measures

The regulations permit USDA or the certifying agent to conduct unannounced inspections at any time to adequately enforce the regulations. Certifying agents and USDA may also conduct pre- or postharvest testing if there is reason to believe that an agricultural input or product has come into contact with a prohibited substance or been produced using an excluded method.

October 2002
Updated April 2008



National Organic Program
www.ams.usda.gov/nop
202-720-3252