



Extension FactSheet

Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2120 Fyffe Road, Columbus, Ohio 43210

The Organic Certification Process for Crops

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Background

Certification is the process of proving the truth of something, such as a statement or a method. The issue of third-party certification in the organic industry came from the need to prove to consumers that farmers did, indeed, use organic methods to grow their crops.

In 1990, Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act that included provisions for the establishment of the National Organic Program (NOP) and the development of national standards. By October 2002, all organic farmers, processors, handlers, and certifiers had to be in full compliance with the regulation. The NOP does not certify individuals, but it does accredit certifiers to assure that farmers, processors, or retailers are complying with the national standards.

If you market less than \$5,000 annually, you will not need to obtain certification, although you still will have to follow the federal standards for organic production and handling. You will be able to label your product as organic, but you will not be able to use the USDA or a certifier's seal. Also, you will not be able to sell your products to processors to be used in certified organic products.

Steps to Organic Certification

During Transition

The initial steps to obtaining certification are:

1. Stop applying, for a period of three years, any prohibited inputs to your farm or the portion of your

farm where you will begin the transition process. Prohibited materials include: all salt soluble products; urea; sewage sludge; synthetic insecticides, fungicides, and herbicides; and ammonia-derived nitrogen products. If you have a field that has not received any of these prohibited substances in the past three years, you can seek certification for that field right away.

2. Choose a certifying agency or organization. These entities serve as an extension of the federal government's National Organic Program. The different certification organizations and agencies offer different services and sometimes have specialties in different areas. Ask yourself these questions in order to pick the best certifier for your farm:
 - How willing and able are they to answer questions about their certification program?
 - Are they members of prominent and valuable organizations such as the Organic Trade Association (OTA) and the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI)?
 - Do they have a history in certifying your kind of enterprise?
 - How stable of an operation is the certifier? Will they be around next year?
 - Do they offer additional certifications, such as Kosher or Free Farmed?
 - Does your potential market recognize the certifier's logo?

- Do your potential buyers have specific certification requirements?
- Is the certifying organization accredited beyond the NOP by international certification bodies, such as the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)?
- What are the costs of certification?

Source: Organic Farm Certification and the National Organic Program, ATTRA (2002)

3. Obtain an application packet from the certifying organization. Read all materials received, including the standards and materials list. It is important that you fully understand the standards. Now is the time to ask questions to clear up any confusion. You will need to make sure that your transition plan addresses all of the relevant provisions in the standards. For instance, a minimum of a 25-ft buffer zone between certified crops and potential contamination sources is required by the OEFFA certification standards. Not including this zone in your farm design could unnecessarily delay certification.
4. An important part of obtaining and keeping your organic certification is the ability to keep complete records. You will need to get the records in good order for the land you want to transition and develop a system that will allow you to keep efficient records in the future. You will need to maintain records concerning the production, harvesting, and handling of all products that are or that are intended to be sold, labeled, or represented as “100% organic,” “organic,” or “made with organic (specified ingredients or food group(s)).” According to the national standards (§205.103), “such records must:

- “a. Be adapted to the particular business that the certified operation is conducting.
- “b. Fully disclose all activities and transactions of the certified operation in sufficient detail as to be readily understood and audited.
- “c. Be maintained for not less than five years beyond their creation.
- “d. Be sufficient to demonstrate compliance with the Act and the regulations in this part.”

Individual certification organizations may provide you with record-keeping forms for you to use, or you can make up your own. The Global Organic Alliance, an organic certifier in Ohio (www.goa-online.org), requires that its applicants for organic certification keep these types of information:

- Accurate maps showing field locations, field ID and acreage, production beds, greenhouse

units, adjoining land use, buffers, storage locations, water sources, etc.

- Accurate field histories for the previous three years, providing crops, material application, and the last application date of prohibited materials for each field.
- Previous land-use statements for recently acquired or rented land.
- Correspondence/notices informing neighbors, utilities, and road authorities of your organic status.
- Verification of organic seeds, seedlings, and planting stock or attempts to source such materials.
- Non-GMO verification for purchased inputs.
- Field activity logs.
- Input records and receipts/ingredient labels for all purchased soil amendments, seeds, manure/compost, pest/disease control products, etc.
- Monitoring records (*i.e.*, soil, manure, tissue, pest/disease, etc.)
- Compost production records.
- Equipment cleaning records.
- Harvest and storage records for organic and non-organic products.
- Clean transport statements.
- Shipping and sales records for organic and non-organic products.
- Product Inventory Certificates (PIC).
- Complaint Log.

Finishing the Process

Once your transition stage is complete and you are ready to apply for certification for the fields you have transitioned, you need to take a few more steps:

- Submit your application to the certifier you have chosen. The application commonly includes a questionnaire about your organic farm plan. You will have to provide details about your entire farming operation.
- Pay an application fee. A base fee of several hundred dollars is usually charged for each certification. A user fee may also be charged on a per-acre basis or a percentage of sales revenue.
- An inspector will be assigned to complete an on-farm inspection. The purpose of the inspection is to verify that you are operating according to your organic plan and that you are in compliance with the organic

standards. The inspector will check your fields, machinery, buildings, buffer zones, use of adjoining land, and contamination/commingling risks. She or he will also check all of your farm records. Once the inspection is completed, you and the inspector will sign an affidavit. The inspector will review all areas of non-compliance and give you a report.

- The farm plan and inspector's report are submitted to the certifying agency or organization to be reviewed by their certification committee. It is the certification committee that makes the final decision regarding certification. There are four possible outcomes from the final review — certification, request for more information, notification of noncompliance, or denial of certification. Notification of noncompliance is given when certification will be granted once the producer fixes problems identified in the review. If the certifier finds that a producer is clearly not going to be able to comply with the organic standards, a denial of certification will be issued.
- When certification is approved, you can begin marketing your farm products as organic, and your transition process will be complete.

Resources

The NOP (National Organic Program) web site includes a copy of the national organic standards, information about the certification process, and a complete list of domestic and international certifying organizations.

www.ams.usda.gov/nop/indexIE.htm

The Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that specializes in the review of substances for use in organic production, processing, and handling.

www.omri.org

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ATTRA Publication:
Organic Field Crops Documentation
www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/cropforms.pdf

Organic Livestock Documentation
www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/livestockforms.pdf

Organic Orchard, Vineyard, and Berry Crop Documentation Forms
www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/orchardforms.pdf

Organic Certification Organizations in the Midwest:

Certified Organic
406 S. Pennsylvania Ave.
Centre Hall, PA 16838
Contact: Leslie Zuck
814-364-1344
leslie@paorganic.org
www.paorganic.org

Global Organic Alliance, Inc.
P.O. Box 530
Bellefontaine, OH 43311
Contact: Betty Kananen
937-593-11232
kananen@logan.net
www.goa-online.org

Indiana Certified Organic
8364 SSR 39
Clayton, IN 46118
Contact: Cissy Bowman
317-539-4317
cvoof@iquest.net

Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA)
9665 Kline Road
West Salem, OH 44287
Contact: Steve Sears
419-853-4060
organic@oeffa.com
www.oeffa.org

Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA)
International, Inc.
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www.michiganorganic.org

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