Additional Information

NOP's *Is Organic an Option for Me* webpage (www.ams.usda.gov/organicinfo) contains a wealth of resources on making the transition to organic production and handling, including:

- **Guide to Organic Certification** — Provides an overview of the organic certification process and additional resources for prospective organic farms and businesses.
- **Guide for Organic Crop Producers** — Provides more in-depth information for those interested in transitioning to organic crop production.
- **Guide for Organic Livestock Producers** — Supplements the Guide for Organic Crop Producers with additional information on raising organic livestock.
- **Guide for Organic Processors** — Provides information on organic regulations and certification for processors and handlers.
- **Is Organic and Option for Me?** — Provides an introduction to organic standards and certification, including frequently asked questions and available USDA resources.
- **USDA Organic Resource Guide** — Provides information on relevant USDA programs, organized into four sections: Direct Organic Producer Support; Organic Research, Data, and Technical Information; Marketing and Infrastructure; and USDA General Services.

Through the *Sound and Sensible Initiative*, NOP and organizations in the organic community have implemented a series of projects to help make the organic certification process more affordable, accessible, and attainable. Information on this initiative and the resources it has generated for operations transitioning to organic production is available at www.ams.usda.gov/resources/nop/sound-sensible

In addition, NOP has developed a series of factsheets covering a variety of topics related to organic production and certification, including:

- About the National Organic Program
- Introduction to Organic Practices
- Labeling Organic Products
- Organic Labeling at Farmers Markets
- USDA Oversight of Organic Products
- How to File a Complaint about Violations of the Organic Standards
- What is Organic Certification?
- Do I Need To Be Certified Organic?
- The Organic Certification Cost Share Program
- The National Organic Standards Board
- Organic Processing and Handling Standards

These factsheets along with many others from the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service are available at www.ams.usda.gov/publications/Fact_Sheets.

For more information on any of these resources, or organic practices and certification, please visit USDA's Organic Agriculture page at www.usda.gov/organic or the USDA AMS NOP homepage at www.ams.usda.gov/NOP.

You may also write or call us at:

United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 2642-South, Stop 0268
Washington, DC 20250-0268
Phone: (202) 720-3252

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Making the Transition to Organic Production and Handling

Adopting organic conservation practices can help producers and handlers access new customers and markets as well as comply with regulatory policy. However, making the transition to organic production and handling takes both time and planning. Implementing an organic system requires a tactful approach to successfully carry out common agricultural activities, such as managing pests, building soil health, and improving animal health. Organic producers and handlers must also take care to prevent organic substances from contacting non-organic and other prohibited substances.

Organic agriculture uses cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. Conservation practices are typically bundled into a conservation system to maintain or enhance soil and water quality as well as conserve wetlands, grasslands, forests, and wildlife habitat. Avoiding the use of synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation, and genetic engineering are paramount to organic farming. To learn more about organic practices, see the "Introduction to Organic Practices" factsheet at www.ams.usda.gov/publications/.

Transition Overview

Before producers can use land to raise organic products, they must ensure that no prohibited fertilizers or pesticides have been applied to the land during a three-year transition period. Some lands, such as fallow or pasture lands, may be immediately certified if three years have already passed.

Producers interested in participating in United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs should ensure they follow policies for highly erodible land and wetland conservation. View information at 1.usa.gov/1ij4gYd.

The USDA National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances (National List) identifies substances that are prohibited in organic production. To evaluate whether land needs to undergo a three-year transition, view information at 1.usa.gov/1uOTSHD.

After completing the transition, producers and processors must get certified. This requires preparing an Organic System Plan (OSP), submitting it to a USDA-accredited certifier, and having an onsite inspection. Initial certification can take three to six months. Maintaining certification status through annual inspections is a key part of the organic regulations.

To support organic system planning, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides financial and technical assistance for the development of a "Conservation Plan Supporting Organic Transition." This conservation activity plan documents decisions by producers/growers who agree to implement a system of conservation practices which assist the producer to transition from conventional farming or ranching systems to organic production systems. Once certified, organic producers and processors can label their products as organic as long as they continue to follow the organic regulations.

Assistance for Transitioning Producers

Additional support offered by USDA NRCS to producers who are either in transition or already certified is listed below:

- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative** provides financial and technical assistance to certified or transitioning organic producers who are interested in conservation planning and who voluntarily implement conservation practices. View information at 1.usa.gov/1rXFWLi.
- **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)** provides financial assistance to producers that have demonstrated a benchmark for ecological conditions on their farm and are voluntarily enhancing their stewardship activities through advanced level conservation activities. Typically, producers will be guided to CSP after they have successfully completed EQIP conservation practices. View information at 1.usa.gov/1NBvJzB.

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- **Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMA)** (available in certain states) provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers who voluntarily address issues such as irrigation water management, water quality, and erosion control. View information at http://1.usa.gov/Qrlo0i

NRCS also provides to all agricultural producers including certified organic and transitioning farmers conservation technical assistance (CTA) for implementing general conservation practices, a critical component of organic agriculture. This support includes direct conservation technical assistance from field staff, informational materials and webinars on conservation practices that align with organic farming, and technical information about soils through the web soil survey: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/soils/survey/. For more information on NRCS programs, please visit NRCS' Programs webpage at www.nrcs.usda.gov/organic.

NRCS provides technical assistance to all agricultural producers

For a more comprehensive list of USDA programs for transitioning and organic producers and handlers, please see the "Technical and Financial Assistance for Organic Producers" factsheet available at www.ams.usda.gov/publications/Fact_Sheets.

Organic Regulations and Certification

USDA organic regulations describe the standards farms and processing facilities must meet to label their products as "organic" or to use the USDA Organic Seal. The Agricultural Marketing Service's (AMS) National Organic Program (NOP) is responsible for administering and enforcing these regulations.

Organic certification lets people know that an operation follows USDA organic regulations. Certification is required for most producers and handlers who market their products as organic. The only exception is for operations that sell less than $5,000 in organic products each year—these operations do not have to be certified. They may, however, voluntarily choose to get certified. Either way, they must follow all organic production practices.

Getting Certified

Organic producers and handlers are certified by state or private certifiers. These certifiers are accredited by the NOP. The entire certification process typically takes three to six months, and it must be completed before products can be marketed as organic. To get certified, an operation must submit an application to an accredited certifier. A list of certifiers is at www.ams.usda.gov/resources/organic-certifying-agents.

The organic certification application includes:

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

Organic certifiers review applications and then schedule an on-site inspection. The inspection verifies that the producer or handler is implementing the OSP, maintaining appropriate records, and following all organic regulations. If the written application and inspection report show that the operation complies with organic regulations, the certifying agent will grant an organic certificate, which must be renewed each year.

Organic Certification Costs

Organic certification costs vary and are often on a sliding scale, based on the size of the operation. Before starting the certification process, producers and handlers should review a certifier's fee structure and billing cycle. Total fees range from a few hundred dollars for small, simple operations to several thousand dollars for larger, more complex operations. Producers and handlers must pay fees in order to get certified.

USDA Organic Certification Cost-Share Programs reimburse producers and handlers for up to 75 percent of organic certification costs once certification is complete, with a maximum of $750 per category (crops, wild crops, livestock, and processed products).

For additional information on the organic certification process and financial assistance, please visit www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/occsp.

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The Organic System Plan

In an Organic System Plan (OSP), producers describe how their farming and processing practices meet organic standards. When writing an OSP, producers should clearly explain their operating plan, including information on crops, animals, harvests, sales, records, soil-building practices, pest management, health care, pasture, and any other practices related to organic production.

Organic records include:

- **Materials list** outlining all substances used during the production of organic crops and animals, including composts, fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, health-care products, and feed
- **A map** of all farmlands and production areas, illustrating how organic products are protected from contact with non-organically managed land
- **Complete field history** for growing areas and pastures used in organic production, which includes plot size, crops, and any substances that have been used
- **Biodiversity plan** outlining natural resource conservation

Once completed, producers and handlers will send the OSP to a certifier as a part of their certification application. Many certifiers provide downloadable OSP templates on online.

The entire certification process typically takes 3 to 6 months and must be completed before products can be sold as organic

Split Operations

Many transitioning producers choose to convert only a portion of their land to organic production, while continuing to use conventional practices on other plots. This is known as a "split operation" and allows producers to begin raising organic products gradually. Producers may chose to transition to a fully organic operation over time or maintain split operations indefinitely.

When completing an OSP, it is particularly important for split operations to document any way that organic products might mix or come in contact with non-organic products or prohibited substances. Split operations may need to provide information on both conventional and organic activities so that certifiers and inspectors can make sure the products are separated.

Livestock and Poultry Producers

Organic livestock and poultry producers must also follow organic guidelines for growing organic pasture and feed, as well as raising organic animals. Generally, organic livestock must be raised organically from at least the third trimester of gestation. Birds used for poultry or egg production, may come from any source, but must be raised organically beginning the second day of life. Dairy animals must be raised organically for at least one year before their milk and milk products can be sold as organic.

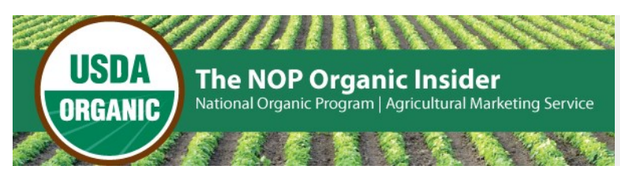
Organic livestock and poultry may only eat certified organic feed. Similarly, any pastures, forages, and plant-based bedding (such as hay) that livestock use or eat must be certified organic. Ruminant animals (cattle, sheep, and goats) must spend at least one-third of the year on pasture.

Handlers and Processors

Since their operations don't use land for production, organic handlers and processors do not have a three year transition. However, they must still complete an OSP that describes their handling and processing activities, including information about the type of business, ingredient purchases, transportation of raw ingredients, storage, cleaning and sanitation, processing, pest management, sales, and records.

The OSP for handlers also includes the following items:

- **Flowchart** that shows the movement of organic products from the time they are received at the facility to the time they are sold as finished products
- **Facility map** with enough detail to show the inspector where processing equipment is located
- **Product profile** for each individual product that lists all ingredients and processing aids used and the suppliers from which they were obtained
- **Organic certificates** from each supplier that verify ingredients are organic
- **Labels** for each organic product produced
- **List of materials** used on food-contact surfaces, including cleansers and sanitizers
- **List of substances** used during or after products are washed



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