



Agricultural Marketing Service | National Organic Program Strategic Plan 2015-2018

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is the agency that leads the National Organic Program (NOP). The NOP team is an integral part of AMS, and supports the AMS mission, vision, goals, and values.

The AMS vision is a marketing system that quickly and efficiently moves wholesome affordable agricultural products from producers and traders to markets.

The AMS mission is to facilitate the strategic marketing of U.S. agricultural products in domestic and international markets. AMS supports producers, traders, and consumers of U.S. food and fiber products by ensuring fair trading practices and promoting a competitive and efficient marketplace.

The AMS 2014-2018 Strategic Plan outlines six strategic goals to realize this vision and mission:

1. Enhance Communication between Stakeholders and AMS Programs
2. Provide Market Information and Intelligence and Support the Development of New Markets
3. Provide Quality Claims and Analyses to Facilitate Agricultural Marketing
4. Provide Effective Oversight of Markets and Entities
5. Provide Premier Procurement and Technical Solutions to Identify and Fulfill the Needs for Agricultural, Food Assistance, and Other Programs
6. Sustain and Enrich a Diverse, Progressive, and Dynamic Organizational Environment

What Is Organic?

Organic is a labeling term for food or other agricultural products that have been produced according to the USDA organic regulations. The USDA organic seal indicates that a product has been certified as meeting the USDA's requirements.

The organic standards require the use of cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that support the cycling of on-farm 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.

USDA Agricultural Marketing Service National Organic Program

1400 Independence Avenue SW
Room 2646; Stop 0268
Washington, DC 20250
Phone: 202-720-3252
Web: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop>
Twitter: @USDA_AMS | #USDAorganic

April 2015



Organization and Activities

The National Organic Program

Supporting the AMS vision, the National Organic Program (NOP) has a core mission to protect the integrity of the USDA organic seal, from farm to market, around the world.

The NOP protects organic integrity by: establishing clear standards that create a level playing field; making sure that USDA-accredited organic certifying agents are properly certifying and overseeing organic operations; and taking appropriate enforcement actions if there are violations of the organic standards.

With an appropriated budget of approximately \$9-million in FY 2014 and 2015, the NOP oversees more than 80 certifying agents and 27,800 certified organic operations around the world. In the United States, there are 19,474 certified organic operations; a new record of \$39.1-billion in U.S. organic sales was reached in 2014.

Organization

The NOP team, primarily based in Washington DC, currently has 45 team members, with diverse expertise in organic agriculture, policy analysis and development, accreditation management, materials, compliance and enforcement, auditing, and public sector management.

The NOP is organized into four key groups: the Office of the Deputy Administrator, the Standards Division, the Accreditation and International Activities Division, and the Compliance and Enforcement Division.

VISION

**Organic Integrity from Farm to Table,
Consumers Trust the Organic Label**

MISSION

**Ensure the integrity of USDA organic
products in the United States and
throughout the world**

Activities

Together, the team leads the following activities:

- Investigates complaints alleging violations of USDA organic regulations; conducts proactive compliance and outreach activities; and enforces organic production, handling, and labeling standards.
- Accredits and oversees a network of third-party certifiers, who certify organic farms and businesses.
- Collaborates with other USDA agencies and foreign governments to establish and maintain organic equivalency arrangements with other countries.
- Sets standards for organically-produced agricultural products. We develop and update regulations and policies; and facilitate review of materials for use in organic agriculture.
- Supports the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), a Federal advisory committee.
- Administers the NOP appeals program.
- Engages stakeholders through communication, outreach, and training programs.
- Administers organic cost share grant programs.



A Five-Year Review: 2009-2014

In October 2009, at the beginning of fiscal year (FY) 2010, the National Organic Program first became its own program within the Agricultural Marketing Service. Here is an overview of critical successes over these five years.

- Continued to level the playing field for organic farms and businesses, by publishing **several critical amendments to the USDA organic regulations**, including the “Access to Pasture” rule, the “Residue Testing” rule, and several materials-focused rules to amend the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances.
- Guided USDA organic standards implementation and accessibility by publishing and now continuing to expand the **NOP Handbook**, with a definitive set of guidance, certifier Instructions, and policy memos.
- Increased transparency through the ongoing work of the **National Organic Standards Board**, by hosting meetings twice a year around the country, increasing public comment opportunities, regularly responding to Board recommendations, and increasing staff support and funding for Technical Reports.
- Increased audit consistency and regularity by Institutionalizing the process and checklists for conducting **initial, mid-term, and renewal accreditation audits** with organic certifiers around the world. Certifier compliance with accreditation criteria has exceeded 95% since 2013.
- Supported organic trade, by implementing **international organic equivalency agreements** with Canada (2009), the European Union (2012), Japan (2014), and Korea (2014). These agreements streamline certification requirements and provide new market opportunities.
- Responded to **audits and peer reviews of the NOP**, including a 2010 USDA Office of Inspector General (OIG) general audit of the NOP, two OIG audits on organic milk, an audit of the National List process, a NIST Peer Review in 2011, an ANSI Peer Review in 2014, and international peer reviews.
- Initiated an Age of Enforcement, establishing a complaint tracking database, and steadily increasing case closure rates for **complaint case investigations**. As a result, organic operators came into compliance, labels were corrected, and new operations became certified. In 2014, NOP completed 285 complaint investigations, exceeding the 2013 total of 260.
- Initiated a process to **publicize fraudulent organic certificates**, so the organic trade can be alert to their risk, and increased the use of **civil penalties** for willful violations of the Organic Food Production Act.
- Reengineered the **appeals process**, to streamline case evaluation and increase alternative dispute resolution approaches. As a result, appeals are now resolved in an average of 140 days, far faster than the 294-day average in 2012.
- Supported USDA’s launch of the **Organic Literacy Initiative**, designed to increase USDA employee knowledge of the organic standards and certification process. More than 30,000 employees have completed the training program since its launch.
- Continued annual **face-to-face training for certifiers**, and conducted training in Spanish for Latin American certifiers in 2014.
- Annually posted **lists of certified organic operations** for the public. Since 2010, the annual listing has improved in accuracy and data quality. In 2014, the NOP started developing the Organic Integrity Database, to enable more frequent list updates.
- Administered the National and Agricultural Management Assistance **organic certification cost share programs**, enabling thousands of organic operations across the country to recover certification -related expenses.
- **Expanded outreach and communication** through the Organic Insider, an email notification service with more than 10,000 subscribers; the Organic Integrity Newsletter; a fact sheet collection; and a Organic 101 blog series to explain organic principles. NOP leaders also regularly speak at organic conferences.

Stakeholder Analysis

AMS and NOP depend on and serve a range of stakeholder organizations. The needs and interests of these organizations are important forces, informing our direction and strategic goals.

The figure and table below show our relationships with our key stakeholders and how we regularly interact with them to accomplish our mission and make our vision real.



Stakeholder Category	Stakeholder Groups
USDA Leadership; Advisory Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USDA and AMS Leadership; Organic Working Group, and other USDA agencies • National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) • NOP Staff, Other AMS Programs, NOP auditors in the AMS Livestock, Poultry, and Seed Program • USDA Office of Inspector General (OIG)
External Stakeholder Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accredited Certification Agents, State Organic Program • Organic Farmers and Ranchers; Organic Handlers • Specialized Service Organizations: Trade Associations, Public Interest Groups, Peer Review Organizations, the Organic Materials Review Institute, International Organic Inspectors Association, and Accredited Certifiers Association • Other groups with interest in NOP activities, including media, lobbyists, standards groups, and data providers/analysts, and consultants • Consumers: Particularly complainants, and businesses investigated as a result of complaints
Other Government Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Congress, White House—Office of Management and Budget (OMB) • State Departments of Agriculture • U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) and Foreign Governments; International Trade Partners • Other Federal Agencies: Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); Food and Drug Administration (FDA); Federal Trade Commission (FTC); Department of Justice; Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB)

NOP Strategic Goals: 2015-2018

The Agricultural Marketing Service has established five strategic goals for the National Organic Program to drive decisions and investments (time and resources) for 2015-2018.

Goal 1: Protect Organic Integrity

The NOP protects the integrity of the USDA organic seal through an effective compliance, enforcement, and appeals program; effective audits and program peer reviews; and integrity-focused policies. Objectives:

- Operate effective and efficient enforcement and appeals programs, investigating all substantiated complaints and taking enforcement actions where appropriate
- Conduct effective audits to ensure certifier compliance with accreditation criteria
- Establish policies that increase consistency in the way regulations are enforced

Goal 2: Facilitate Market Access

The NOP supports candidate and existing organic businesses through sound and sensible organic certification, international trade arrangements, and educational outreach programs. Objectives:

- Facilitate sound and sensible certification and outreach projects to help make organic certification more accessible, affordable, and attainable
- Negotiate and maintain international organic trade agreements that open markets while maintaining organic integrity
- Present information about the USDA organic standards and certification to educate candidate farms and business about the organic option
- Support USDA and AMS projects that implement the Secretary's 2013 Guidance on Organic Agriculture across the Agency and Department
- Respond to information requests from candidate, transitioning, and certified operations, and inquiries from the general public

Goal 3: Create and Implement Clear Standards

Clear standards are core to our mission. Clear standards establish a level playing field across all organic farms and businesses. Objectives:

- Engage in priority rulemaking projects
- Develop sound and sensible policies that support certifier and operation compliance, while also reducing recordkeeping burdens
- Support transparency and public engagement by supporting National Organic Standards Board work and deliberations
- Conduct auditor and certifier training to encourage consistent implementation of the organic standards

Goal 4: Build Technology that Advances Organic Integrity

NOP continues to expand and deepen technology to support its mission areas. The 2014 Farm Bill provided funding to support these investments. Objectives:

- Build and deploy the Organic Integrity Database, a modernized database of certified operations
- Enhance and integrate management tools to facilitate program tracking, workload management, analysis, and reporting

Goal 5: Develop the Team and Organization

Our mission can only be realized through a strong and engaged team. Objectives:

- Develop and engage a diverse team, and provide a management and technology infrastructure that supports employee success
- Recruit exceptional and diverse new team members to achieve these strategic goals
- Maintain and further develop the quality management system, to ensure effective processes and high quality, consistent deliverables

Core Values

- **Independence and Objectivity.** We sustain trust in the program and in the organic seal by remaining objective and independent in our interactions with each other and with the organic community.
- **Customer Service.** We demonstrate the values of customer and public service by being available to each other and our audiences. We also demonstrate the value of customer service through listening and effective two-way communication.
- **Accountability.** Effective communication increases the accuracy and consistency of information and keeps us accountable to our customers.
- **Honesty and Integrity.** Organic integrity begins with personal honesty and integrity. We communicate honestly and openly, and uphold the laws and regulations in every action, every day.
- **Diversity.** We honor and support all forms of diversity, across our team and in our community. Part of encouraging diversity is meaningfully engaging our employees, through challenging and meaningful work, workplace flexibilities, and employee development. We also support diverse staff needs by investing in employee training, individual development plans, mentoring, and career development.

Mission Activities: A Division View

The NOP Office of the Deputy Administrator and the three NOP Divisions advance mission-critical activities on a daily basis through the following activities:

Office of the Deputy Administrator

- Leads overall policy and program formulation
- Leads the administrative, budgeting, contracting, and personnel elements of the NOP
- Manages the organic cost share program
- Coordinates with key stakeholder groups and legislative affairs
- Facilitates training, communication, media, and outreach programs
- Oversees NOP infrastructure and quality management
- Leads the appeals program

Standards Division

- Engages in rulemaking to amend existing regulations, develop new standards, and clarify regulations and policies through guidance
- Manages the administrative and technical aspects of the NOSB, and assures the accurate and timely implementation of NOSB recommendations
- Provides agency perspectives on organic regulatory issues with industry groups, international constituents (such as CODEX), U.S. interagency and Federal-State groups, and other organizations
- Serves as the Department's authority on interpreting the USDA organic regulations

Accreditation and International Activities Division

- Develops and manages all accreditation activities for USDA-accredited certifying agents and the State Organic Program
- Conducts accreditation audits and oversees certifier implementation of corrective actions
- Reinstates suspended certifications and accreditations, when warranted
- With the Foreign Agricultural Service and the U.S. Trade Representative, negotiates organic recognition or equivalency agreements that uphold principles of organic integrity
- Manages on-site audits of foreign entities to support existing and future recognition and equivalency agreements

Compliance and Enforcement Division

- Assures the efficient and effective handling and investigation of complaints received by NOP
- Develops and implements appropriate investigative policies, practices, procedures, methodologies, and techniques to address cases of program violations
- Assures efficient communication and interaction about compliance and enforcement issues with internal and external stakeholders
- Assures the appropriate and timely preparation of cases and evidence for USDA attorneys
- Coordinates with other government enforcement agencies to investigate cases and take enforcement action as appropriate

Special Projects: 2015-2018

In addition to ongoing mission-critical activities, we will invest in the following special projects that support strategic goals.

Priority Regulations

- Animal Welfare Standards for Organic Livestock Proposed and Final Rule
- Origin of Livestock Proposed and Final Rule
- Organic Practice Standards: Aquaculture, Apiculture, Mushrooms, and Pet Food Rules
- Revisions to organic regulation enforcement provisions, to tighten certification requirements and better detect and eliminate fraud

Policy Development

- Grower Groups Instruction/Guidance
- Pesticide Drift Guidance
- Classification of Materials
- Transitional Certification Policy
- Inspector Qualifications Description; Licensing Program Strategy
- Expand Compliance Instructions: Private Labels, Buyer's Groups, refine other definitions related to "certified operations"
- Develop and implement a strategy for targeted commodity-based or risk-based market surveillance

Market Development

- Implement Sound and Sensible certification and outreach projects through third-party partnerships
- Identify target countries and/or regions for organic equivalency agreements
- Identify opportunities for Latin American market integration and Spanish language outreach
- Work on cross-USDA programs to implement the Secretary's Guidance on organic agriculture

Infrastructure Development

- Develop and deploy a modernized Organic Integrity Database
- Establish an organic training and technical assistance resource list and network
- Maintain the NOP quality system, and implement annual schedule for Internal Audits and Peer Reviews

Organic Community Development

We envision one organic community, embracing both small and large organizations and institutions — all committed to and working towards a common vision of organic agriculture.

Employee Engagement Initiatives

The NOP has significantly improved its **effectiveness and efficiency** over the past five years, standardizing audit and accreditation procedures; developing checklists and guides for a variety of program processes; and developing its infrastructure.

The program has also invested significantly in **employee engagement and cultural transformation** activities, with regular individual and group training, team events, an employee onboarding program, focused employee development, mentoring, and detail opportunities.

We will continue these engagement activities in the years to come. Ongoing critical projects include:

- Increased collaboration through AMS and NOP-wide cross-Division teams working on shared problems and program-level needs
- Increased focus on project prioritization and applying project management tools to keep tasks within scope and on schedule
- Increase program-wide consistency by better capturing precedent-setting policy decisions across teams
- Continue to streamline approach for considering and responding to complex policy questions
- Continue refining internal communication approaches to keep staff informed of key initiatives, decisions, and upcoming priorities
- Engage and align projects with other AMS programs, and actively participate in AMS initiatives and events

Sound and Sensible Organic Certification: Accessible, Attainable, and Affordable

USDA continues to work towards a Sound and Sensible Certification system, to make organic certification more **accessible, attainable, and affordable** for farms and businesses.

Five Sound and Sensible Principles

1. **Efficient Processes:** Eliminate bureaucratic processes that don't contribute to organic integrity.
2. **Streamlined Recordkeeping:** Ensure that required records support organic integrity and are not a barrier for farms and businesses to maintain organic compliance.
3. **Practical Plans:** Support simple Organic System Plans that clearly capture organic practices.
4. **Fair, Focused Enforcement:** Focus enforcement on willful, egregious violators; handle minor violations in a way that leads to compliance; and share how enforcement protects the market.
5. **Integrity First:** Focus on factors that impact organic integrity the most, building consumer confidence that organic products meet defined standards from farm to market.

Examples of Sound and Sensible Initiatives

- Revise and update Instructions for certifiers to incorporate the five principles, reducing unnecessary processes and increasing accessibility through clearly written and presented NOP Handbook documents
- Increase outreach related to the organic certification cost share programs, to make organic certification more affordable
- Implement targeted Sound and Sensible certification and outreach projects, to support the learning process of candidate producers and facilitate streamlined certification practices
- Provide meaningful information about paths to compliance for uncertified operators and operations that have violated the regulations

International trade agreements open new market opportunities for organic farms and businesses. This photo includes NOP Accreditation and International Activities Division team members and Korean officials. The photo was taken during an assessment supporting the Korean organic equivalency agreement in 2014.



Key Performance Indicators

We regularly monitor **process indicators** to assess performance. These process indicators include case closure rates, audit activities, and review timelines. When assessing the impact of its work, however, we focus on the following **outcome measures**:

- **Percent certifier compliance with accreditation criteria.** The target for this measure is 95%. In 2013, certifiers were in full compliance with 95.4% of the requirements. In 2014, the level was 96.7%.
- **Consumer trust in enforcement of organic requirements** (measured by the Organic Trade Association's annual consumer survey). In 2012, the trust level was 37%; in 2013, the level jumped to 43%. The target is 50% for 2014 and 2015.
- **Number of U.S. certified organic operations.** This measure is assessed through an annual count of certified operations provided by certifiers. This number has been moving upward over time: there were 17,750 at the end of 2012; 18,513 at the end of 2013; and 19,474 at the end of 2014.
- **Program reach through Sound and Sensible Initiatives.** USDA is tracking the number of people impacted by Sound and Sensible outreach and technical assistance projects initiated during 2014.



TOP: Team members Valerie Schmale and Lynnea Schurkamp host an NOP information booth to meet organic producers. BOTTOM: Lars Crail meets with grower group farmers in South America while on an accreditation audit.



USDA Notice

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require

alternative means of communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-7600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.



Want to become an organic insider?

Sign up to receive email updates from the NOP

<http://bit.ly/NOPOrganicInsider>