



## Organic Certification Guidelines Q&A

### Q: Who develops the organic standards?

**A:** National standards for organically-produced agricultural products are created by the **National Organic Program** (NOP) with input from the National Organic Standards Board and the public. The NOP is a regulatory program housed within the USDA Agriculture Marketing Service. The Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 authorized USDA to establish the NOP and develop organic regulations.

### Q: How do I participate in the NOP rule-making process?

**A:** The **National Organic Standards Board** (NOSB) is a Federal Advisory Committee comprised of fifteen members. These members represent sectors of the organic community (ex: farmers/growers, environmentalists/resource conservationists, consumer/public interest advocates, etc.). The NOSB meets two times a year in a public forum to discuss issues regarding organic standards and materials review. These meetings invite both advance written and in-person oral public comments to gain perspective on recommendations. Final recommendations are submitted to the NOP.

### Q: Who certifies my operation?

**A:** The USDA is responsible for accrediting organic certifiers. Certifiers interested in becoming a USDA-**Accredited Certifying Agent** (ACA) must apply to the NOP for accreditation. The accreditation process is relatively similar to that of organic certification for farmers and processors. Following approval, ACA accreditation is valid for 5 years; at the end of this period the ACA must renew their accreditation.

### Q: How do I apply for certification?

**A:** The certification process is an annual process that generally involves the following steps.

1. Farmers, handlers and processors interested in becoming certified must submit an application, known as an **Organic System Plan** (OSP) to an accredited certifying agent (ACA). The OSP describes your operation's organic practices relative to the organic standards.
2. The ACA **reviews your application** to assess if anything is missing or needs further clarification. If it is complete, your application is assigned to an inspector.
3. An **on-site inspection** occurs. The purpose of the inspection is to verify that what is reported in your OSP matches what's happening in practice. The inspector will be looking to verify this through records, visiting all production sites and viewing all livestock (if applicable).
4. The ACA will **review the inspection report** and notify the producer of any issues or request further information.
5. Following the resolution of any issues, you will receive notification and an **organic certificate** from your ACA.
6. Certification must be **renewed annually**. This includes updating your certifier of any changes to the OSP and an annual inspection and certification fee.



Written and designed by staff at the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont. This product was developed with support from U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service, National Organic Program

**Q: How frequently will my operation be inspected?**

**A:** Following the initial organic inspection, your operation will be inspected annually. This annual visit will include the on-site inspection of each production unit, facility, and site that produces or handles organic products and that is included in your operation.

**Q: Is my certifier allowed to make an unannounced visit or inspection of my facility?**

**A:** Yes, the NOP standards state that additional inspections may be announced or unannounced at the discretion of the certifying agent or as required by the Administrator or State organic program's governing State official.

**Q: Who is my inspector?**

**A:** The organic inspector is an independent contractor or a staff member of the certifier who inspects your operation on behalf of the certifier. As defined by the NOP organic standards, organic inspectors are not permitted to: 1) make certification decisions, 2) offer consultation or advice to help you overcome identified barriers to certification, or 3) accept gifts, favors or payments other than the prescribed fee.

**Q: What happens if an operation violates the USDA organic regulations?**

**A:** If the USDA or your certifying agent suspects that your farm or business is violating the USDA organic regulations, USDA or the ACA may investigate and conduct an additional on-site inspection. Penalties, should the operation be found to be violating organic regulations, may include suspension or revocation of an operation's organic certificate or financial penalties with a maximum of \$11,000 per violation.

**Q: Are there any cost-share or financial aids to help with certification costs?**

**A:** The Farm Bill includes the National Organic Certification Cost Share Program. The program allows for reimbursement funds to be distributed to certified operations for up to 75% of their certification costs, with a maximum of \$750 per scope. These funds are administered on a state-by-state basis.

**Q: What is residue testing? Will samples be taken of my organic products?**

**A:** The NOP requires ACA's to perform residue tests (such as pesticides, GMO, antibiotic residues, etc.) on 5% of their clients' certified organic products annually. This requirement was established to maintain and verify organic integrity.



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