

Organic farming systems

www.new-ag.msu.edu

New Ag Network
Midwest Organic Team
Fact Sheet 04
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A farmer and certifier review a farm plan.



Raub-Rae Organic Farm. Brown City, MI.

Organic certification

The National Organic Program's (NOP) definition of organic farming practices is as follows:

“Organic farming is a farming production system that integrates cultural, biological and mechanical practices that foster the cycling of resources, promote ecological balance and conserve biodiversity.”

The organic certification process and the standards required to meet an “organic” designation are guidelines to successful organic farming.

The information on the New Ag Network Web site (www.new-ag.msu.edu) is designed to assist:

- ◆ New farmers seeking information on organic practices and certification.
- ◆ Conventional farmers seeking to transition to organic production.

Certification requirements

- ◆ Food labeled as organic must be USDA certified.
- ◆ Only USDA accredited certifying agencies can certify an organic farm.
- ◆ Farms that gross less than \$5,000 per year are exempt from certification, but if they use the term organic they are required to follow the guidelines of the National Organic Program (NOP).
- ◆ To export organic produce outside the United States, certification is required by the export location.
- ◆ Visit the USDA-NOP Web site for more information at www.ams.usda.gov.
- ◆ For additional information, see Fact Sheets 8 and 9.

Whether or not to certify a farm

- ◆ Do you have the means to obtain the knowledge necessary to grow using organic practices?
- ◆ Will those who benefit from the farm benefit if it is organically certified?
- ◆ Does this method of farming fit with your short- and long-term goals?



A farm plan that explains land use, inputs, etc., for the past three years is necessary for organic certification.

Possible reasons to certify a farm

- ◆ Land stewardship or environmental concerns.
- ◆ To ensure your customers that you follow organic practices.
- ◆ To enter into a market growing at a rate of 20 percent per year (USDA/ARS).
- ◆ To gain a price premium on your agricultural products.

What is needed for certification?

- ◆ Land that has not had any NOP-restricted inputs for three years or more.
- ◆ A farm plan that explains how the land was managed for the past three years.
- ◆ Records of your inputs and harvests for the past three years.
- ◆ An inspection of the farm by a certifying agency.

Steps to organic certification

1. Select and contact a USDA organic certifying agency. Review the available agencies. Ask them questions to determine if they offer the expertise and resources you expect and request an application from the agency you select.
2. Prepare a farm plan. Similar to a business plan, this plan indicates how the land was managed three years prior and what the plans are for the next three years. ATTRA (www.attra.ncat.org/) offers a farm plan template for reference. This information is useful when deciding crop rotations, how different varieties or breeds perform on the farm and which farm practices work well and which do not. The farm plan information must be maintained and supported by receipts and invoices for the land to become organically certified. These records will help improve the farm business as it grows.
3. Complete and submit the application and certification forms. Complete the general information and the sections that are applicable to your operation (grower, handler, processor, trader, broker, private label, livestock or retailer). The certification application will include the farm plan. Following submission, the agency has up to six months to inspect your farm. Make a copy of the documents for future use prior to submitting the forms.
4. Arrange for an inspection. The application will be reviewed by the certification agency to assure that NOP guidelines have been followed. A trained inspector will be assigned to your farm and will perform the on-site inspection with you. It is important that you are prepared to meet with the inspector and have your records available for review. Allow three to six hours for the majority of inspections, depending on the size and various aspects of your operation.
5. Certification status notification. Upon completing the review process, you will receive a letter from your certification agency. Common reasons farms are not approved for certification include the use of treated seed, the use of prohibited substances and livestock or poultry that were not managed organically.



The Midwest Organic Team is a division of the New Ag Network. The team consists of researchers, extension educators and certified organic farmers.

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