

Organic farming systems

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New Ag Network
Midwest Organic Team
Fact Sheet 09
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Certified organic farmers Don and Anthony Cinzori. Branch Co., MI.



Organically grown lettuces grown in a hoop house. Nashville, IN.

Frequently asked questions

Are there any financial resources to assist me with transitioning to an organic farming operation?

The Illinois Department of Agriculture offers cost sharing for certification costs on a first-come, first-served basis. For more information, contact Delayne Reeves at (217) 524-9129 or delayne.reeves@illinois.gov. An application is available at www.agr.state.il.us/marketing.

The Indiana State Department of Agriculture (ISDA) administers a cost-share program for organic certification that reimburses 75 percent of the cost of organic certification up to \$500. These grants are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. The application forms for this program are available at <http://www.in.gov/isda/2399.htm> or by calling (317) 232-8770.

Indiana's USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). One of the eligible EQIP practices is Conservation Cropping Rotations, with an incentive payment of \$50 per acre per year for cropland that is being converted to organic farming. Organic farming must meet the established USDA definition of organic farming. The incentive is capped at \$5,000 per applicant per year. Organic producers may also be eligible for other EQIP incentives, such as Nutrient Management, Pest Management, No-Till, Cover Crops, etc. More information on EQIP in Indiana is available at www.in.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/eqiphomepage.html. Interested parties can contact their NRCS district conservationist. A county listing of contact information is available at www.in.nrcs.usda.gov/contact/directory/dclist.html.

The Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) can be reached by contacting:

Organic Program Manager
Michigan Department of Agriculture
Pesticide and Plant Pest Management Division
P.O. Box 30017
Lansing, Michigan 48909
(517) 373-0280
collierc@michigan.gov
www.michigan.gov/mda/0,1607,7-125-1569_25516-182051--,00.html

Are there any technical assistance resources to assist me with transitioning to an organic farming operation?

The USDA accredited certifying agent will be the best resource to answer questions about National Organic Program (NOP) standards. University Extension offers educational programs, workshops and tours relating to production, marketing and business planning. They also have access to research-based information from Land



Organically grown sunflowers.
Lapeer County, MI.

Grant universities throughout the United States. Contact information for county extension offices is available at www.ces.purdue.edu/extension/pages/counties.aspx; web.extension.uiuc.edu/state/findoffice.html; web1.msue.msu.edu/home/directory.htm.

How long will it take to certify my farm operation?

The NOP standards outline a 36-month time frame for transitional status. This time is the minimum necessary from the last input of prohibited substances or non-organic practices. If the grower can provide assurance that this time has effectively passed, the land may be certified in the first year. This depends on available records, related information and requirements of the inspection agency.

How do I know which pesticides or soil amendments are allowed?

The NOP hosts a searchable database of approved inputs for organic production at www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/nop. This list includes a description of the input's use and its standing within the USDA program. Inputs are classified as allowed, regulated or prohibited. This classification system is determined largely by the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) (www.omri.org). OMRI has a searchable database of products listed by generic and trade names that it has reviewed. While not legally binding, this list is a good reference for organic farmers of what can be used in an organic system including pesticides, soil amendments, foliar applications and animal treatments: www.omri.org/OMRI_datatable.htm. For new inputs or inputs you have not used in the past, be sure to check with your certifier as they have the final say on what inputs are allowed.

Who will inspect my farm?

Organic inspectors are hired by the certifying agency. The inspectors are trained and accredited by the inspection agency, enabling them to inspect all types of operations from orchards and gardens to complex processing plants. The inspectors are committed to organic farming practices and are expected to exercise the highest level of integrity, confidentiality and professionalism.

How much will it cost?

Costs vary among certifying bodies. Some fees are all-inclusive and some are broken down between certification, administration and inspection. Certification is an annual process, so the farmer is charged annually. Some certifying agencies charge a percentage of what the farmer sells in addition to the certification fee. Currently, one to two percent of a farmer's gross receipts is common. Since each certifying agency has its own fee structure, it is important to ask about fees before submitting your completed application.

What records should I keep?

It is up to the farmer to choose a record system and decide if it will be computer-based or handwritten. You must keep records that demonstrate crop rotations, soil building and farm biodiversity for the required farm plan. Record each management step including dates and rates used. All of this information will not only support your farm business to be certified organically, but will guide your plans to maximize your returns on inputs and production. The receipts also will be useful for tax preparation.



Organic farmers often find marketing opportunities that allow them to grow “non-traditional” crops that contribute to greater rotational diversity. Sunflowers growing in Lapeer County, MI.

Items to include in your records

- ✓ Receipts
- ✓ Package labels
- ✓ Order forms and invoice sheets
- ✓ Crop and animal care and treatments
- ✓ Sanitation and cleaning records
- ✓ Product labels and Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS)
- ✓ Soil inputs and management
- ✓ Soil and water analyses results
- ✓ Field maps
- ✓ Correspondence and records from certifying agencies
- ✓ Repair and maintenance records

How do I find a certifier?

The NOP maintains a comprehensive list of USDA Accredited Certifying Agents (ACAs), organized alphabetically by state for domestic ACAs and by country for foreign ACAs. The list is available at www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/nop (click on “Certifiers”). Farmers can certify with out-of-state certifying agencies.

Where can I find a local source of organic seed?

Ask your certifier for possible sources or contact a local/regional organic cooperative or other organic farmers. If a crop has limited organic seed or rootstock availability, your certifier may make an exception for this requirement. However, be aware that almost all treated seeds are prohibited.

Who is exempt from organic certification?

The following information is taken from the Electronic Code of Federal Regulations (e-CFR) at ecfr.gpoaccess.gov.

Growers who follow the national organic standards and sell less than \$5,000 (total gross sales) of organic product per year. §205.101(a)(1).

Handlers (processors) who sell less than \$5,000 (total gross sales) of organic product per year. §205.101(a)(2).

Retailers and other handlers who do not process or repack organic products. §205.101(a)(2).

If a farmer does not use chemicals and sells less than \$5,000 worth of organic products a year, they cannot necessarily consider their farm organic. The only thing the exempt provision exempts is filing an organic system plan and paying for certification/inspection. The farmer still has to follow the national organic standards. The standards require more than not using synthetic chemicals. They include provisions for handling contamination and how to make proper label claims. If the farmer is a grower or a handler, he or she should review the exemption/exclusion requirements in §205.101 thoroughly. They must understand and follow the requirements and maintain records for at least three years. §205.101(c).

Additional resources

“A Guide to Marketing Organic Produce.” <http://sustainable.tamu.edu/publications/organicproduce/intro.html>.

The Organic Consumers Association. www.organicconsumers.org.

“Organic Production: Opportunity, Requirements and Pitfalls.” <http://aggiehorticulture.tamu.edu/alternatives/riskmanagementseries/organicproduction.html>.

The Organic Trade Association (OTA). www.ota.com/index.html.

Rodale Institute’s “Organic Price Report.” www.rodaleinstitute.org/Organic-Price-Report.

The National Sustainable Agriculture Resource Service. <http://attra.ncat.org/organic.html>.

Extension/eOrganic. General organic agriculture resources. www.extension.org/organicproduction.

Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES). www.mosesorganic.org.

Michigan State University’s Organic Farming Exchange. www.michiganorganic.msu.edu/.

Michigan

Once your farm is certified organic, you should complete an application for the Certified Organic Farm Registry with the Michigan Department of Agriculture. The registration form and information can be found at http://www.michigan.gov/mda/0,1607,7-125-1569_25516-178262--00.html. This is an annual registration due by March each year. This registration allows you to sell your produce in Michigan.

For the road commission and drain commission and commercial pesticide firms to know the location of your organic farm, you must register with MDA and submit an organic farm location map or visiting http://www.michigan.gov/documents/ORGN-96MAP_44045_7.pdf or by calling 517-241-1169.

Reference

“Transitioning to Certified Organic in Michigan: Where to Start?” MSUE Bulletin 3067, Dec. 2008, Vicki Morrone, Michigan State University, C.S. Mott Group.

This fact sheet was created by members of the Midwest Organic Team of the New Ag Network. www.new-ag.msu.edu.



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