



Transitioning to Certified Organic Grain Production

The transition to certified organic production requires a knowledge of the applicable regulations as well as new skills, an open mindset, investment in equipment, and capital. As the organic market continues to expand both nationally and globally, higher prices are offered for organic products. This presents a significant opportunity for grain farmers to diversify their operations and capture premium markets, yet the transition to organic production takes time and dedication.

What is organic certification?

USDA certified organic foods are grown and processed according to the federal guidelines. These guidelines are housed in the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service and address soil management/quality, animal husbandry, and pest/weed control, among other production aspects. Organic farmers apply physical, mechanical, and biologically/ecologically-based farming methods. For example, an organic producer uses animal and green manures as well as naturally-derived products to supply plant nutrients, rather than synthetic inputs. Organic certification allows a producer to sell, label, and represent their marketed goods as organic.

What is the timeline for transition and certification?

The time required to obtain organic certification (that is, the “transition period”) takes 36 months. This timeline begins the day after the last application of a prohibited substance (prohibited substances include products such as synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, and fungicides, as well as the use of GMO and treated seed). Depending on how a field is managed and when a prohibited substance is applied, the transition period may require two or three seasons of selling a conventional or transitional product while adopting organic practices, with the third or fourth season considered organic if certification is successful. It is beneficial for a farmer to work with a certifier during this time; this relationship facilitates access to any specific forms required by the certifier, access to a resource for questions, and additional assurance that a prohibitive substance or practice is not inadvertently applied.

What is required for certification?

Records! A farmer considering the transition to organic production must be willing to commit the time needed to keep detailed records required for the inspection and certification process. There are several approaches to record keeping---the possibilities include calendars, photographs, notebooks, paper files/documents, as well as web-based programs created specifically for the organic certification. These records need to be maintained through the period of transition and beyond. Records are needed to detail (1) items, such as seed, organically-approved pesticide, fertility, and other inputs (receipts, application records, product labels and tags); (2) field activities, such as tillage, planting, cultivation, and harvest; (3) storage and sales of products; and (4) clean-out records of equipment and bins. Ideally, these records are also helpful toward guiding future management and marketing decisions. At the end of the transition period, and annually thereafter, an inspector will visit the farm to review these records as well as tour the field and storage facilities. The inspector’s report then goes to the certifier for evaluation; if all is in compliance, certification is awarded.

How does a farmer begin the process?

The first step of certification is to become familiar with the regulations for organic farming (<https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/organic>). The next steps are to ensure that no prohibited substances are applied to a field and to keep records of all inputs and field activities. It is helpful at this point to choose

an organic certification agency – there are many based in the US. This choice may be influenced by agency location, customer support, fee structure, and specialization in a certain type of production (livestock, grain, vegetables, etc). A list of certifiers can be found on the USDA website, at: <https://organic.ams.usda.gov/integrity/Certifiers/CertifiersLocationsSearchPage.aspx>. Once the certifier is chosen, and transition is near complete, the farmer will submit their application and an inspection will be scheduled.

It is important to note that not all fields need to be transitioned at the same time – it may actually be valuable to adopt a gradual approach to transition. A gradual transition allows a farmer time to develop skills, acquire equipment, and identify markets.

What is the “transition of skills and mindset”?

Organic production requires a different suite of skills and approaches than conventional agriculture. While not necessarily dissimilar to an integrated pest management approach, proactive elements of organic management must be emphasized to be successful, including ecological and biological practices. Further, organic farmers must be committed to the “long game” because successful organic production requires practices where results tend to become more evident over time. For example, the fertility, pest, and weed management benefits of extended rotations, including phases in the rotation where the value may not be sale of the crop, often emerge over the course of years, and not a single season. Farmers must be willing to assess whole-farm profitability across years, rather than focus on profitability during a single year or crop phase without a more holistic accounting.

Farmers may need to gain agronomic skill in new crops, including cereal grains and pulses. These crops also may require the acquisition of new equipment and the identification of new markets. Further, specific skills related to cultivation and weed management will be required, similarly requiring the acquisition of new equipment.

As in ecological and biological management systems, organic management systems may vary significantly from year to year. Production decisions are often not driven by the calendar, or by a specific recipe, but instead by specific environmental and field conditions. This lack of specific production recommendations for a given crop may seem frustrating, but success in organic productions comes from a willingness to embrace the challenge.

Finally, organic production, particularly during the transition period and subsequent early years of certification, requires a commitment to learning, education, and mentorship. Reaching out to establish connections and find new communities of farming peers helps new organic producers share information and receive guidance. Many great opportunities exist for continued education.

Take-home message:

The organic market continues to expand, offering a significant opportunity for organic grain farmers. Regulations and the associated inspection and certification processes are intended to ensure compliance to a set of standards, and this provides consumers with confidence in the products they are purchasing. Organic certification is a commitment of time and learning, and education and support opportunities enable farmers to find success when embarking on this challenge

References and Further Resources:

USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. Making the transition to organic production and handling. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/Transition%20to%20Organic%20Factsheet.pdf>

USDA National Organic Program. Is Organic an Option for Me? <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/organic-certification/is-it-an-option>

USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. Sound and Sensible Initiative. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/resources/nop/sound-sensible>



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