



Transitioning to Organic Beef Production

Consumers are leading a growing demand for organic beef products, especially since the National Organic Program included meat in 2002. The rules for raising organic meat differ slightly from those for organic dairy. The general guidelines for organic meat production are outlined below.

Organic Beef Marketing Strategies

There are several options for selling organic beef products, allowing variation in the kind of organic operation you set up. To succeed you must first identify your market or buyer. The buyer or market may lead you to preferred or required breed types, weights, slaughter distances and finishing requirements (grain or grass). Several organic beef marketing strategies include:

- Organic cow/calf operation, selling weaned calves or yearlings.
- Purchase of organic feeders, selling finished slaughter animals.
- Direct marketing of organic meat by the farmer, with use of a certified organic slaughterhouse necessary to sell packaged organic meat.
- Feeding grain for the last few months before slaughter (approximately 3 months of temporary confinement allowed for this grain finishing).
- Raising and finishing entirely on grass.

Origin of Livestock

Organic beef must be managed organically from the last third of gestation. You may buy bred cows from any source if all health care, feed and living conditions of the brood cow and subsequent calf must meet organic regulations for at least 3 months previous to the birth of the organic calf.

- Brood cows can be transitioned to become mothers of organic calves, but once they have birthed an organic calf, they must remain under organic management to continue birthing organic calves in the future. If a brood cow is given a prohibited product while she is lactating, her suckling calf is no longer organic. Transitioned organic brood cows cannot be sold as organic slaughter animals.
- Orphan calves must be given organic milk. Currently, no approved milk replacers are



available. Organic nurse cows may be used to raise organic calves.

- Bulls don't need to be managed organically; artificial insemination is allowed, but breeding hormones are not.

Recordkeeping

Each animal in the herd (cows, calves, feeders, bulls) must be individually identified (ear tags, tattoos, etc.), with clear documentation maintained detailing dam and sire, sex, birth dates, important life events (e.g. weaning), health events (e.g. vaccinations), and specific health products (e.g. Aspirin) for each animal. Documentation for the feeds and pastures provided can be tracked by the herd.

Feeds and Feed Supplements

- Pasture is mandated for all ruminants. They must be allowed to graze certified organic land that offers feed value when seasonally appropriate. Feeding green chop hay in a dry lot does not meet the pasture mandate.
- Organic pasture and crop land has not had any prohibited substances applied for 36 months prior to the harvest or grazing of the crop.
- If you plan to raise your own organic feed and have spring calves, your cropland must be certified organic the year before the calves are born. Certification agencies cannot retroactively certify your land from the previous crop year. If you calve in the fall, or you purchase organic yearlings in the spring, you should submit your organic certification application early in that spring. Organic inspections must occur when the crop is growing in order for the inspector to assess compliance to the regulation. For example, one may choose send in the

paperwork in February, bring organic feeders to the farm in May and have an inspection in July of the same crop year.

- If bulk feed is purchased, it must come from a certified organic source, such as a farmer a feed mill or a broker. Bagged organic feed should state the certification agency on the bag.
- All aspects of organic crop growing requirements must be followed, including a buffer zone on all borders of every pasture where there may be a risk of contamination from prohibited sprays or chemical fertilizers over a fence or along a road. The buffer zone only needs to be in place for the year any prohibited product is used. A neighbor (or road crew or utility) can also sign a statement verifying they did not use any prohibited products each year.
- Feed supplements such as salt, vitamins and minerals cannot contain any prohibited ingredients. Artificial colorings and artificial flavorings are not allowed. Salt containing a synthetic flowing agent, such as Yellow Prussiate of Soda (YPS), or mineral oil (petroleum product) used as a dust suppressant, are not allowed. You can buy salt or mineral from any store, as long as the ingredients are acceptable. Read the ingredient listing of your feed supplement carefully and submit it to your certification agency for approval before feeding. Save all feed supplement tags to include with your certification application or to show to your organic inspector. Obtain a label or product ingredient sheet from the seller for any salt or mineral blocks used.
- All agricultural ingredients in feed supplements (e.g. wheat middlings, molasses, soy oil) must be certified organic.
- Feed storage areas cannot be made from treated wood. They cannot have had fumigants or herbicides used in or around them. Plastic silage bags, bale wraps or twine are not to be burned; they can be land filled.

Health Management and Living Conditions

Maintaining health on an organic beef operation is based in management including healthy living

conditions, a balanced high forage ration and the use of natural or approved synthetic health inputs. Approved synthetic health products are on the National List of approved substances found on the National Organic Program website <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop> or through your certification agency. Examples of synthetic approved materials include aspirin, glucose and iodine as a disinfectant. Natural items such as herbal products or Aloe Vera without preservatives are allowed. Vaccines are allowed. Living conditions must provide freedom of movement, fresh air and access to the outdoors when seasonally appropriate. Pasture must be provided during the grazing season.

- Parasiticides, hormones or antibiotics are not allowed to be used for animals that will be sold as organic slaughter. Fly tape is allowed; cattle rubs using petroleum or other synthetics are not allowed.
- Withholding of prohibited health products in order to maintain organic status is not permitted if it results in excessive suffering or death. The life of the animal must be saved and the animal sold as nonorganic if a prohibited product is needed. Maintain documentation of what was used, when and why.
- Dehorning, castration or other physical modifications are allowed but must be done in a manner to minimize stress to the animal.
- Bedding must be certified organic if the animal typically would consume it, such as hay, straw or cornstalks. Sawdust must be from raw, untreated wood with no glues, paints etc.
- Treated wood of any type cannot be used on an organic farm where the animals could consume grass or crops surrounding the treated wood, or where they could rub or contact the treated wood, such as in a loafing shed. If the treated wood is in place before your first organic inspection, it may remain.

Additional Resources

The Keys to Herd Health DVD by Jerry Brunetti

Natural Cattle Care by Pat Coleby

Grass-fed Cattle: How to Produce and Market Natural Beef by Julius Ruechel

Cure Your Own Cattle by Newman Turner

Information developed by the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES)