



Transitioning to Organic Sheep or Goat Dairy Production



Those wishing to sell an organic goat or sheep dairy product must make that product from certified organic milk. A herd or flock will produce organic milk only if the rules outlined through the National Organic Program are followed.

Overview of Organic Dairy Farming

- All production animals (milking animals, youngstock, dry animals) must be fed organic feed for 12 months prior to selling organic milk. This feed may come from your own fields that are in their third year of organic transition. Any purchased feed must have a certificate of current certified organic status. Organic feed may not come from genetically modified crops.
- Because organic pasture is required (see below), it will generally take 36 months to begin producing organic milk. Land will not be eligible for certification until 36 months have passed since last application of non-approved materials.
- Parasite management is very important and a large challenge for organic sheep and goat dairies. Parasiticides are, in general, not allowed for regular use in organic production. Ivermectin may be used in emergency cases and only when the animal is not producing organic milk. Parasites can be controlled through pasture management, allowed herbal remedies and breeding for resistance.
- No prohibited health materials or feed supplements are to be fed or used in the 12 months previous to selling organic milk (no

antibiotics, non-approved parasiticides, no minerals or vitamins with prohibited additives such as mineral oil or artificial flavorings).

- Animals may not be brought in and out of organic production. Once an animal is certified organic, they must stay organic unless permanently removed.
- Individual replacement animals must be born or purchased from a certified organic operation. Groups or entire herds/flocks may be added, but must go through a one year transition period before producing organic milk.
- Rams or bucks need not be certified organic unless they will be sold as slaughter animals. Artificial insemination is allowed. Breeding hormones are not allowed.
- Any animals sold for organic slaughter must be raised under organic management from the last third of gestation.
- Anyone producing organic milk must be certified by a third-party certification agency. Your operation will be inspected annually. Cost-share reimbursement is available in many states to help with certification costs.
- Make sure you have secured a market for your fluid milk or dairy products before certifying to reduce your financial risk.
- Detailed record keeping, including tracking of individual animals, is required.

Pasture is mandated for all ruminants. Pasture is defined as offering feed value to the animals. Animals in all stages of production (including young stock and dry animals) must be out on pasture that offers feed value for a significant portion of the day, when seasonally appropriate. Green chop or dry hay fed to animals is not considered "pasture". Sheep or goats must be grazing the pasture themselves and a dry lot is not considered pasture, since there is no covering on the ground that offers feed value. Youngstock should be out on pasture once they have developed rumens and can digest grass. Browse in a paddock is acceptable for goats, as long as it offers significant feed value. Pasture must be certified organic. The transition to organic land is 36 months from the last application of non-approved materials.

Plan to feed a high forage diet consisting of high quality feeds to promote the health of your animals.

Preventative health support, breeding and a clean, low-stress living environment are an organic producer's best health tools. Vaccines are allowed.

Any milk replacer must be from non-rBGH treated animals. As of spring 2007, non-rBGH milk replacer is not available in the U.S. Organic lambs or kids may be raised on certified organic milk from cows, goats or sheep.

Animals must be individually identified by ear tags, neck tags or distinguishing photos or drawings for animals that can be uniquely identified. Corresponding individual animal health records must be maintained for each individual animal. Health records must include all health events including birth records. Even if an animal is only stripped clean to control mastitis, this should be noted in her individual health record in order to verify organic management. Record keeping aids farmers in understanding what products and activities are useful and which are not, as well as tracking genetic traits to aid with culling decisions.

No antibiotics or hormones are allowed in organic production. However, an organic farmer cannot withhold medical treatment to preserve the organic status of an animal. If antibiotics must be used as a last resort remedy, the animal should be treated and sold or tracked and managed as nonorganic. This includes youngstock that are born on the farm after your operation is certified organic. Once an animal that is part of your organic operation is given an antibiotic, this animal cannot ever be an organic dairy or slaughter animal. Animals that had been given antibiotics before you started your one year of conversion to organic milk production can be converted to organic.

Housing must allow for freedom of movement and ventilation to promote animal health. This includes all stages of the animal's life. Any bedding that the animals eat or chew on must be certified organic. Treated wood where there is contact with livestock or with soil growing organic crops cannot be used on any new construction once the operation is certified organic. If the treated wood is present before the operation is fully organic, it can remain. Sheep or goats can be confined during winter months, but should have a few hours of outside exercise when weather permits. Youngstock can be confined when young to prevent illness.

Verify with your certification agency that the vitamins and minerals you are feeding meet the organic standards and do not contain any prohibited synthetic or non-organic substances (such as artificial preservatives, colorings, flavorings, anticaking agents or dust suppressants).

Verify with your certification agency that all health products used are acceptable. Dehorning, castration and tail docking in sheep should be performed to provide the least amount of stress to the animal.

You must ensure that pastures and manure application do not cause soil erosion or pollute ground or surface water. Plastic silage or hay wraps cannot be burned.

Before you begin your organic transition, find a market for your organic milk and decide on your organic certification agency. Work with the organic certification agency and time your first inspection to occur no later than 4 months before your shipper can pick up your organic milk.

Additional Resources:

- Sheep: Sustainable and Organic Production, Predator Control for Sustainable & Organic Livestock Production, and other useful publications from ATTRA can be found at http://attra.ncat.org/attrapub/livestock/livestock.html#sheep_goat
- Storey's Guide to Raising Sheep, 4th Edition which can be purchased at: <http://www.storey.com>
- Maryland Small Ruminant Page: <http://www.sheepandgoat.com/organicfarming.html>

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