



# Understanding Lot Numbering Systems

An important aspect of organic certification, and the

resulting consumer confidence in organic products, relates to the required tracking of organic products from seed to table. A lot numbering system links a crop back to the field where it was grown as well as the year of production. Each producer can develop their own lot numbering system tailored for ease of use, but it must result in a lot number that is unique, traceable, and easy to understand. Since organic farmers keep good field and storage records, the



documentation can track the exact seed planted, all inputs used and application dates, and all field and harvest activities for each crop. The organic regulation mandates the use of a lot number for all bulk organic products.

The lot number must contain specific, critical pieces of information. It should be unique enough so it cannot be easily confused with those of other producers. The processor and buyer may use each producer's lot number to track all incoming organic products. If every farmer assigned his or her crop the lot number of 01, the tracking of the crop at the processing plant would not be effective. Food processors receive shipments from many farms, and this unique lot number tracking back to each organic farmer is essential to maintain the integrity of the audit trail. Lot numbers should be used on Bills of Lading, invoices, weight tickets, clean truck affidavits, or any other document that accompanies the bulk sale and shipment of organic products from the farm. The essential information in a lot number includes the type of crop, the field or storage unit where it was last present, and the production year. In addition, farmers can choose to add their initials, and date of shipment (to differentiate a variety of shipments from each other). Below is an example of the use of a lot number in an organic audit trail system.

## Lot number example

- Organic soybeans were grown in fields 1, 2 and 4 in the crop year 2008. Organic corn was grown in field 3.
- The first sale: The beans from field 1 were sold directly out of the field on December 4, 2008.
- The second sale: The corn was sold from field 3 on December 20, 2008.
- The beans from fields 2 and 4 were stored in storage unit A.
- There were two shipments from storage unit A as follows:
  - The third sale: January 4, 2009.
  - The fourth sale: February 14, 2009.

The storage record for storage bin A would show the approximate incoming bushels from fields 2 and 4 and would show the dates, assigned lot numbers, amounts, and buyer for the two outgoing shipments.

### The lot number for the first sale: JS01S-1204-08

JS	01	S	1204	08
Producer's initials	Field 1	Soybeans	Dec 4 shipment	Year of Production

### The lot number for the second sale: JS03C-1220-08

JS	03	C	1220	08
Producer's initials	Field 3	Corn	Dec 12 shipment	Year of Production

**The lot number for the third sale: JSAS-0104-09**

JS	A	S	0104	09
Producer's initials	Storage bin	Soybeans	Jan 4 shipment	Year of Production

**The lot number for the fourth sale: JSAS-0214-09**

JS	A	S	0214	09
Producer's initials	Storage bin	Soybeans	Feb 14 shipment	Year of Production

For ease of tracking, it is best to keep the year of production as part of the lot number rather than the year of the shipment since this will track the product back to the field where it was grown. The storage unit number and date of the shipment in the lot number are enough information to track the sale.

The lot numbering system can be a protection for the farmer. For example, let's change the picture and make the product sold from the bin oats instead of beans. The processor wants a credit on lot number JSAS-0104-09 (O-Oats in the lot number) from the farmer because they said it arrived with an insect infestation. The processor tells the farmer this on February 20, 2009. The processor states they had no problem with lot number JSAS-0214-09. The farmer could then argue the credit, stating that the processor has had the first lot number in possession since January 4th and that the oats removed from the farmer's storage on February 14 were still in good condition. The record keeping and lot number tracking could help to prove that the infestation occurred when the processor had the product in their possession, and not on the farm, since the same oats from the same bin were clean when delivered on February 14th. The lot numbers illustrating the different dates of shipping help the farmer to track this important point.

**Fresh market vegetable growers**

The lot numbering system can be tied either to the date of shipment (therefore tying it to the date on an invoice) or to the harvest date. The date being used can be written on the outside of the case and/or on an invoice to track items back to the field and all of the crops inputs and growing methods. The case or invoice will have the name of the farm for the various retail bulk buyers, and the field log will have the harvest dates for those crops, completing the necessary tracking from seed to sale. Direct to consumer sales such as those at a farmer's market or roadside stands are not mandated to have lot numbers.

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