



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Is Organic An Option For Me?

Information on Organic Agriculture
for Farmers, Ranchers,
and Businesses

April 2015

This brochure provides an overview of the USDA organic regulations and how USDA supports organic agriculture. It includes information on getting certified, funding opportunities, and educational resources.

For more information, visit www.ams.usda.gov/organicinfo or, if viewing this brochure online, use the  icons in each section.

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What Is Organic?

Organic is a labeling term for food or other agricultural products that have been produced according to the USDA organic regulations. These standards require the use of cultural, biological, and mechanical practices which support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. This means that organic operations must maintain or enhance soil and water quality, while also conserving wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife.

USDA standards recognize four categories of organic production:

- + Crops. Plants grown to be harvested as food, livestock feed, or fiber or used to add nutrients to the field.
- + Livestock. Animals that can be used for food or in the production of food, fiber, or feed.
- + Processed/multi-ingredient products. Items that have been handled and packaged (e.g., chopped carrots) or combined, processed, and packaged (e.g., bread or soup).
- + Wild crops. Plants from a growing site that is not cultivated.

Is the organic industry a growing market?

Yes. Organic sales more than tripled between 2002-2010. From 2009 to 2010, U.S. organic food sales have shown double-digit growth during most years since the 1990s.

What does the USDA organic seal mean?

The USDA organic seal indicates that a product is certified organic. Processed products must contain at least 95 percent organic ingredients to use the seal. 

Can I use the USDA organic seal?

If your product is not certified organic by a USDA-accredited certifying agent, you may not use the USDA organic seal. If your product is certified organic, then your certifying agent will be able to tell you whether you can use the seal.

Are there USDA programs that would support me?

Yes. Organic operations are not excluded from any USDA programs, and several programs are specific to the needs of the organic sector. 

Who can help me with my organic business plan?

The USDA's New and Beginning Farmer website has many resources to help farmers manage their business. 



USDA's Role: Oversight and More

Regulations

The USDA organic regulations describe the different requirements for organic production, food handling, and processing. Producers and handlers must meet these standards to use the word “organic” or the USDA organic seal on food, feed, or fiber. Organic operations must show that they protect natural resources, conserve biodiversity, and use only approved substances for fertility inputs, healthcare, pest management, and processing aids. The USDA National Organic Program (NOP), part of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), administers these regulations, with substantial input from its citizen advisory board and the public.

How are the USDA organic regulations developed?

The USDA National Organic Program publishes the USDA organic regulations, with substantial input from the public and the National Organic Standards Board. This USDA-appointed citizen advisory board is designed by law to be “gatekeepers” for allowed and prohibited substances in organic agriculture. The public may submit comments on Board recommendations and any proposed changes to organic regulations. 🌱

What are the best crops to grow organically?

For region-specific information, contact your local Cooperative Extension office or land-grant institution.

What materials are allowed in organic production?

In general, synthetic substances are prohibited unless specifically allowed, and non-synthetic (natural) substances are allowed unless specifically prohibited. The National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances identifies substances that may or may not be used in organic crop and livestock production. 🌱

How do organic farmers control weeds and pests?

Organic farmers typically rely on practices such as crop rotation, green manure, cover crops, composting, intercropping, biological control, sanitation, tillage, and fire. Visit www.eOrganic.info for articles and webinars on these and other specific crop and livestock topics. 🌱

What about genetic engineering?

The use of genetic engineering is prohibited under the USDA organic regulations.



Compliance and Enforcement

Consumers choose to purchase organic products expecting that they are grown, processed, and handled according to the USDA organic regulations. A high-quality regulatory program benefits organic farmers and processors by taking action against those who violate the law and jeopardize consumer confidence in organic products. Punishments may include financial penalties up to \$11,000 per violation and/or suspension or revocation of an operation's organic certificate. The USDA may conduct unannounced inspections of organic operations at any time to investigate suspected violations of the organic regulations.

What happens to a non-certified operation that violates the USDA regulations?

The operation may be subject to fines and penalties.

Suspected violations of the organic regulations may be reported to the USDA. Send an email to NOPCompliance@ams.usda.gov or call the National Organic Program at 202-720-3252. All complaints are reviewed. 📞





“Our philosophy tends to be **feed the soil**;
it will feed your plants and then
it will feed us”



Certification

All operations with more than \$5,000 in annual organic sales must be certified. The certification process verifies that a farm or handling facility complies with organic regulations and allows products to be represented as organic.

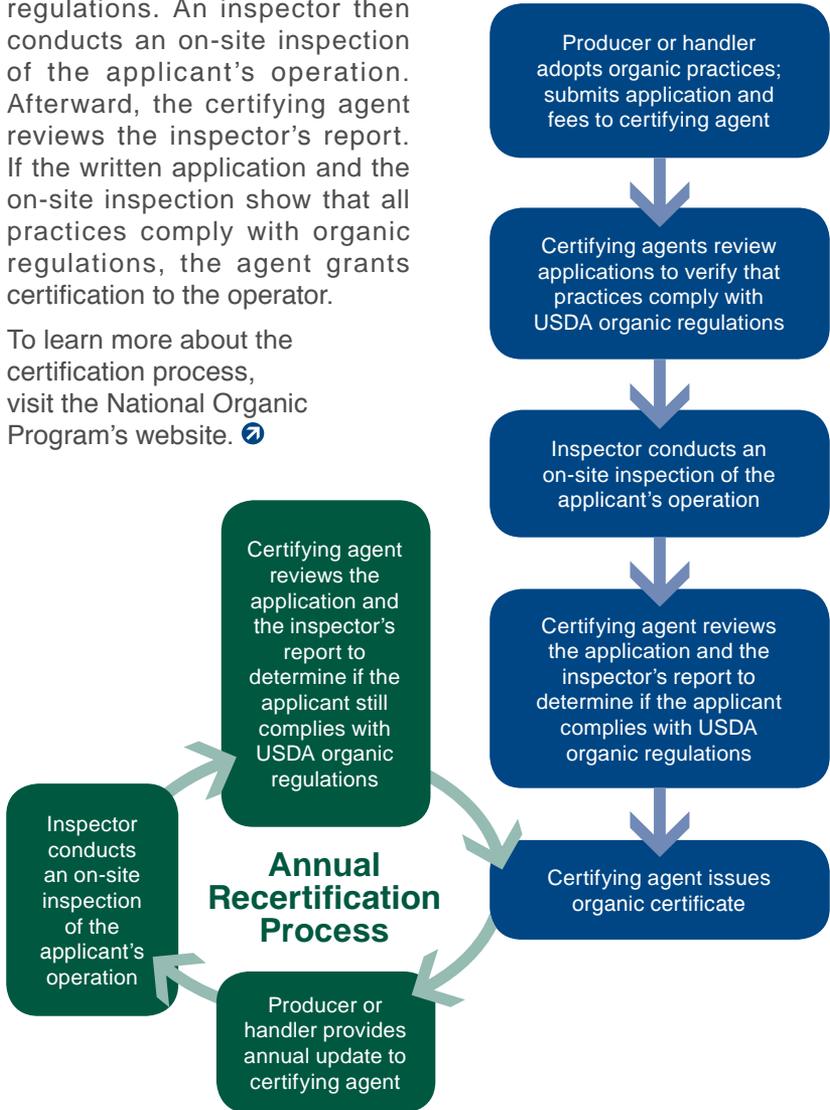
To become certified, producers submit an application for organic certification to a USDA-accredited certifying agent. This application includes:

- + A detailed description of the operation to be certified;
- + A history of substances applied to land during the previous 3 years;
- + The organic products grown, raised, or processed; and
- + A written Organic System Plan describing the practices and substances to be used.

Organic Certification Process

The USDA accredits State departments of agriculture and private organizations around the world to serve as certifying agents. Certifying agents first review the written application in order to ensure that practices comply with organic regulations. An inspector then conducts an on-site inspection of the applicant's operation. Afterward, the certifying agent reviews the inspector's report. If the written application and the on-site inspection show that all practices comply with organic regulations, the agent grants certification to the operator.

To learn more about the certification process, visit the National Organic Program's website. [🔗](#)



How do I farm organically?

How you implement organic practices will depend on what crops or livestock you raise, and whether you process products. You can find helpful webinars and articles for dozens of different crops on the eOrganic website. [↗](#)

How can I transition to organic production?

First, familiarize yourself with organic standards and practices, including allowed and prohibited substances. To prepare for the certification process, visit the NOP website. [↗](#)

Who must be certified?

All operations that sell, label, or represent their products as organic must be certified, except:

- + Those whose gross annual income from organic products is less than \$5,000.
- + Retail food establishments, such as grocery stores or restaurants.
- + Brokers, distributors, and traders who handle only pre-packaged items.
- + Those that only handle products containing less than 70 percent organic ingredients (excluding salt and water).

Can non-certified small farms still sell organic products?

Although producers and handling operations that sell \$5,000 or less organic products per year are not required to obtain organic certification, they must comply with

all organic production standards. They may label their products as organic, but may not use the USDA organic seal unless they are reselling pre-packaged certified organic products (e.g., a grocery store selling certified organic apples or granola bars).

How much does certification cost?

Fees charged for certification vary among certifying agents due to the size and complexity of the farm operation, the costs of inspection, and other factors. Certifiers provide information on their fee structures upon request. USDA Organic Certification Cost Share Programs reimburse certified organic operations for as much as 75 percent—up to a maximum of \$750 a year—of their certification costs. Contact your State’s department of agriculture to apply. 🌱

What is an Organic Systems Plan (OSP)?

The OSP is vital to the certification process. It describes practices and substances used in organic production, as well as record-keeping systems. The content of the OSP is tailored to the specific conditions of the farm or processing facility. The OSP must be updated at least once each year and each time an operation changes its practices.



“I know first-hand that most customers will accept the answer **‘we grow using organic methods,’** but I also know how much easier and fulfilling it is to be able to simply say **‘we are certified organic.’**”

Production Practices

Organic producers may build fertility and soil health through the use of:

- + Slow-release sources of crop nutrients such as manure, compost, and cover crops.
- + Crop rotations to manage nutrients and control erosion.

Organic producers may control pests through the use of:

- + Beneficial habitat plantings to harbor predators of crop pests.
- + Soil building techniques to protect crop roots from pathogens.
- + Diverse crop rotations to disrupt pest and disease cycles.
- + Cover crop plantings to suppress weeds.

Organic livestock producers raise animals:

- + Using only certified organic feed.
- + With year-round access to the outdoors.
- + Providing access to pasture for ruminants.
- + Without the use of antibiotics or growth hormones.

Organic producers may protect natural resources by:

- + Planting field borders with flowering plants to provide pollinator habitat.
- + Establishing buffer strips or tree rows to filter runoff water.

“Organic certification holds all farmers accountable to organic production standards and **levels the playing field.”**





USDA Resources for Organic Producers

Economics and Market Information

The USDA provides market information to the public in a variety of ways.

The USDA Economic Research Service provides economic research, analysis, and information about the production and marketing of organic products.

The USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service gathers detailed production and marketing information on certified organic farming in the United States through its Organic Production Surveys.

The AMS USDA Market News provides reports on prices, volume, quality, condition, and other market data on farm products in specific markets and marketing areas, both domestic and international.

How can I market my organic products to local or regional consumers?

USDA's Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food Initiative has information about marketing to local and regional food systems, USDA programs, and other tools. [↗](#)

USDA also publishes Local Food Directories to help consumers locate farmers markets, on-farm markets, CSAs, and food hubs. [↗](#)

Can I export USDA organic products to other countries?

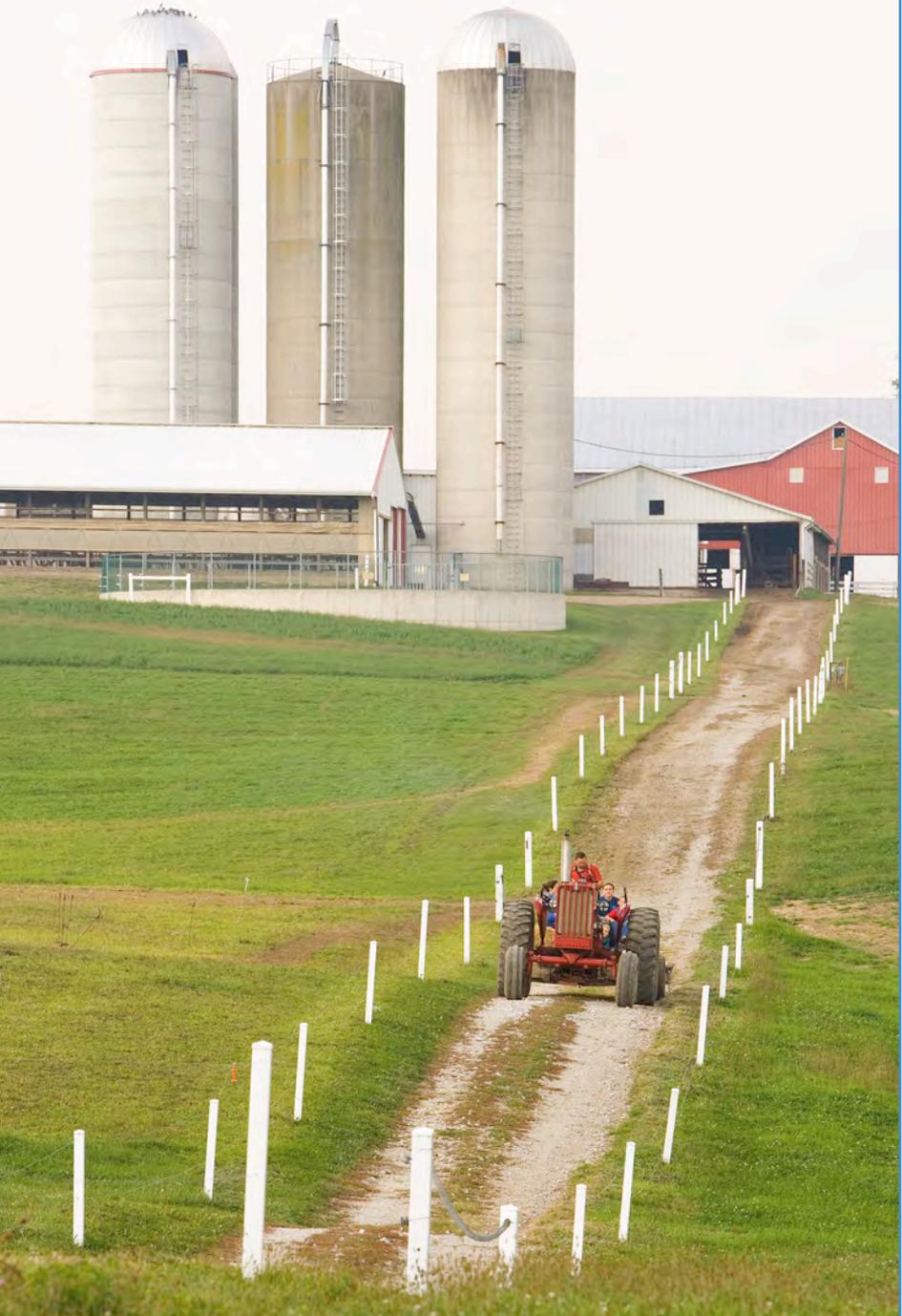
Yes. The USDA facilitates trade with many countries. [↗](#)

Where can I get approval for meat labels?

The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) ensures that the labeling of meat and poultry products is truthful and not misleading. FSIS evaluates labeling claims that meat and poultry products are organic or contain organic ingredients to ensure compliance with USDA organic regulations. [↗](#)



“You just have to be able to read
what nature is telling you.”



Funding

National Organic Certification Cost-Share Program

State departments of agriculture reimburse eligible operations for as much as 75 percent of their certification costs—up to a maximum of \$750 a year—through this USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) grant. [↗](#)

Environmental Quality Incentives Program Organic Initiative

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides financial and technical assistance to certified or transitioning organic producers who voluntarily implement conservation practices. Beginning farmers and ranchers may also qualify for higher financial assistance payments. [↗](#)

Agricultural Management Assistance Program

The USDA NRCS provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers who voluntarily address issues such as water management, water quality, and erosion control on their lands. [↗](#)

Crop and Livestock Insurance

The USDA Risk Management Agency (RMA) offers Federal crop and livestock insurance, supporting producers as part of the farm safety net. Risk management education and outreach partnerships ensure that producers get the information they need to effectively manage their risk through difficult periods and remain productive. [↗](#)

Value-Added Producer Grants

USDA Rural Business–Cooperative Service (RBS) offers grants to independent producers to process their raw products into processed products, such as making applesauce from apples. Grants may be used for planning activities and for working capital, as well as for farm-based renewable energy. [↗](#)

Specialty Crop Block Grant Program

Under the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP), USDA provides block grants to State departments of agriculture, which then administer a competitive grant program to fund projects that enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops. [↗](#)

Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Loans

The USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) provides direct and guaranteed loans to beginning farmers and ranchers who are unable to obtain financing from commercial credit sources. [↗](#)

Farmers Market Promotion Program

The USDA AMS provides funding to institutions to improve and expand domestic farmers' markets, roadside stands, community-supported agriculture programs, and other direct producer-to-consumer market opportunities. [↗](#)

Local Food Promotion Program

The Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) offers grant funds with a 25 percent match to support the development and expansion of local and regional food business enterprises to increase domestic consumption of, and access to, locally and regionally produced agricultural products, and to develop new market opportunities for farm and ranch operations serving local markets through planning and implementation grants. [↗](#)

Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program

The Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program (FSMIP) provides matching funds to State departments of agriculture and other appropriate State agencies, including State universities and colleges, on a competitive basis to explore new market opportunities for food and agricultural products, and to encourage research and innovation aimed at improving the efficiency and performance of the marketing system. [↗](#)

Extension

The USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) partners with State and local governments to fund extension education opportunities through more than 100 of the Nation's land-grant colleges and universities. This system brings land-grant expertise to addressing public needs at the local level through thousands of county and regional extension offices.

For organic producers, USDA supports the eOrganic Community of Practice, which provides research-based articles, webinars, videos, and an “Ask the Expert” section on its website. USDA also supports the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT), a non-profit organization that offers training and publications on organic and sustainable agriculture. [↗](#)

The USDA, Agricultural Research Service, National Agricultural Library’s Alternative Farming Systems Information Center (AFSIC) includes organic production resources and the “Organic Roots” digital collection, an archive of historic USDA publications related to organic agriculture. AFSIC librarians are available to quickly search and compile literature and information resources on all aspects of organic farming. [↗](#)

Contact: afsic@ars.usda.gov

Research

The Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) supports efforts to solve critical organic agriculture issues and problems through research, education, and extension activities. [↗](#)

The Organic Transitions Program (ORG) strives to improve the competitiveness of organic livestock and crop producers, as well as those who are adopting organic practices, through research, extension, and higher education. [↗](#)

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) provides grants and education to advance agricultural innovation that promotes profitability; stewardship of the land, air and water; and quality of life for farmers, ranchers, and their communities. [↗](#)



“we market [our annual vegetables]
directly to consumers at
farmers markets and to chefs”



Where can I learn about loans, grants, and other USDA resources?

The USDA has offices in all 50 States. Find an office near you!

For more information, contact your local USDA Service Center

USDA Organic Agriculture
+ www.usda.gov/organic

USDA National Organic Program
+ www.ams.usda.gov/NOP

USDA National Agricultural Library
+ <http://afsic.nal.usda.gov>

Other Organic Literacy Initiative Resources

USDA Organic Resource Guide and training modules
+ www.ams.usda.gov/OrganicInfo

NCAT-ATTRA Sustainable Agriculture Project
+ <http://attra.ncat.org/organic.html>





“We view our role here on the farm as **stewards of the land.**”

U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250