



Organic Farm Buffer Zone

This factsheet is designed to help organic producers effectively meet the National Organic Program (NOP) buffer zone requirements and protect their crops from contamination.

Key Regulation: 7 CFR § 205.202(c)

Organic farms must establish distinct and defined buffer zones to prevent unintended contact with prohibited substances.

- Size requirements: While there are no set requirements, buffer zones can range from 25 to over 100 feet in width, depending on the level of contamination risk from adjoining land and farm-specific conditions.

GUIDANCE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

When buffers are required

- Risk-based need: Buffers are necessary if there is a risk of contamination, such as pesticide drift or runoff from adjacent conventional farms. It is important for organic farmers to protect their crops from these contamination risks, and buffers are an important tool to do this.
- Exceptions: Buffers are not required if the adjacent land is organic and/or if a neighbor signs an Adjoining Land Use Declaration verifying no contamination risk. Be sure to have an Adjoining Land Use Declaration form on file from every neighbor where adjoining land exists without a buffer.

CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to protecting your organic crops, buffers can support conservation efforts including:

- Enhancing biological diversity: Buffers can add biodiversity to a farm, making them more resilient to environmental stressors. A properly maintained buffer can combat runoff and pest outbreaks. Consider any past issues your farm has faced when thinking about buffer design.
- Supporting pollinators and beneficial insects: Attracting bees, butterflies, and other insects leads to improved pollination and an increase in crop yields and quality. Consider using pollinator habitat for buffers on your farm.

- Replacing crop rotation in perennial systems: Buffer zones in perennial systems enhance soil health, biodiversity, water quality, and carbon sequestration while providing long-term conservation benefits with minimal disturbance compared to traditional crop rotation.

HOW TO USE BUFFER ZONES

Options for buffer zones include:

- Growing non-organic crops
- Leaving the area fallow
- Planting hedgerows, windbreaks, meadows, or beetle banks

HARVESTING FROM BUFFER ZONES

Best practices

- Harvest crops from buffer zones separately from organic crops.
- Maintain thorough documentation to distinguish buffer zone crops from organic crops.
- Non-organic buffer zone crops cannot be fed to organic livestock.
- Non-organic buffer zone crops should be stored separately and clearly labeled.

Equipment Use

Use separate harvesting and storage equipment for buffer zone crops.

If using the same equipment, follow documented cleanout procedures before handling organic crops.

CERTIFYING AGENCY ROLE

At time of inspection, your organic inspector will view buffers on your farm and note the size, configuration and use of the buffers. They will also note any risks posed by the adjoining land. The certification agency staff will review the inspector's

findings, assess contamination risks, determine the necessity of buffer zones, and approve buffer designs.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FROM NRCS

The National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) can assist with:

- Integrating conservation objectives, such as erosion control and water quality protection.
- Designing multifunctional buffer zones. (Learn more: https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2022-09/Riparian_Forest_Buffer_391_CPS_10_2020.pdf)

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR EQUIPMENT AND HARVESTING

Equipment cleaning and separation

- Clean all equipment after harvesting buffer zone crops to prevent cross-contamination.
- Keep buffer harvests separate from organic harvests.

Specific practices by crop type

- Hay: Store in a separate barn or a clearly labeled area.
- Silage: Mark buffer silage using plastic tags or write directly on the plastic wrap.

- Grain: Use distinct and labeled storage bins.

RECORD KEEPING AND REPORTING

Required documentation

- Land management agreement: Include details on buffer zone implementation and neighboring land use agreements.
- Buffer harvest records: Maintain separate records for all harvested buffer zone products.
- Farm maps: Clearly include buffer zone size(s) and location(s), neighboring land uses, and processing areas and building locations. These may be hand-drawn or digital.

RESOURCES

- Iowa Organic Association Buffer Area Management video: Learn how to establish effective buffer zones. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwxjMNLQpbM>
- Reach out to your organic certifying agency or local NRCS office for assistance. <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/contact/find-a-service-center>
- Call the Marbleseed Organic Answer Line at 888-906-6737 ext. 1 or email specialist@marbleseed.org

By following these guidelines and utilizing available resources, organic producers can ensure compliance with NOP standards and maintain the integrity of their organic crops.

THE TRANSITION TO ORGANIC PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM CAN HELP!

Through the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP), you can apply for a mentorship program to learn through the guidance of an experienced organic producer. The TOPP mentorship program will help you set goals, navigate the transition and certification process, get expert advice and guidance on organic best practices and certification, and receive support to write an OSP. If a mentorship pairing isn't the right fit, you can also sign up for technical assistance to work 1:1 with a service provider to develop your OSP, learn how to create and maintain a successful recordkeeping system, receive help with preparing for your first inspection, and understand how your operation can meet the organic regulations. Learn more about offerings through TOPP at www.organictransition.org.

CONTACT US OR VISIT OUR WEBSITE!

If you have more questions about certification or organic rules, call the Marbleseed Organic Answer Line at 888-906-6737 ext. 1 or email specialist@marbleseed.org. You can also find many resources on our Marbleseed website and request free copies of select publications online at marbleseed.org/resources/organic-resource-directory.

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