



Organic Certification & Tips for Choosing a Certifier

Certification is the process that verifies the production practices of organic food and fiber. All organically labeled agricultural products sold in the U.S. must meet United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulations for organic production. You can choose to certify only a portion of your production, such as one of your fields or some of your livestock, as long as the non-organic production is separated from the organic. All feeds for organic livestock must be certified organic.

Farmers who sell less than \$5,000 per year of unprocessed, direct-to-consumer produce and follow organic standards are exempt from the certification requirement. If you meet these requirements, you may label your products “organic” but cannot use the USDA Organic Seal or claim to be certified organic.

Organic certification requires an application, inspection, and review process with an organic certification agency. You cannot sell your crop/livestock as certified organic until you receive your certificate at the end of the process.

STEPS TO CERTIFICATION

Document Your Land Use

To be eligible for organic production, land must be free from prohibited inputs for 36 months before your first organic harvest. You need to list the last date that prohibited materials were used in each field to be included in your organic certification. If you can document that no prohibited inputs were applied for the past three years, the land is ready for organic production. If you didn't manage the land in that period, ask the previous manager to provide dates of material applications or to sign an affidavit stating that no prohibited materials were used during that time.

Choose a Certifier

There are many pathways for finding and choosing a certifying agency. See the section “Tips for Choosing a Certifier” in this factsheet for instructions on finding certification listings on the Marbleseed website and examples of questions you can ask to narrow your search.

Once you choose a certifier, the agency will send you an initial packet with the National Organic Standards, blank copies of forms, and an Organic System Plan (OSP) application for certification for that crop year.

Apply for Certification

You must complete an application for certification in the year you plan to sell an organic crop. You need to fill out an OSP for each scope you want certified (e.g., crops, livestock, handling/processing, wild crop). Certifiers also require additional OSPs for greenhouse, maple syrup, and some other forms of production.

On the OSP form, describe your farm's activities, including your plans for soil fertility, crop rotation, controlling weeds and insects, inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, seed treatments, etc.), harvest, storage, and

sales. Each field needs a three-year history of input use, map, and plan for the current year's production.

Once you complete all the information, submit your application and the initial fee to the certification agency within the time frame requested. The first-year application takes more time both for you and for your certifier. Begin the process three to six months before you plan to harvest organic crops. That way you won't incur late fees or charges to expedite your application.

The agency reviews your application and contacts you if they need additional documentation. You can supply some information, such as seed-purchase records, at the time of your inspection.

Complete an Inspection

Your certification agency assigns an inspector to do an inspection of your farm. Before that date, get your records to shorten the time needed for the inspection and reduce your costs. The inspection takes two to five hours, depending on how organized you are and how complex your operation is. Farms with livestock or on-farm processing (e.g., seed cleaning) may take longer. Your inspector reviews your records and tours your fields, equipment, and crop storage areas.

Receive Determination on Organic Status

The inspector sends a report to the certification agency along with documents collected during the inspection. You receive the report too and can comment if anything is incorrect.

The agency sends you a determination letter to let you know if they intend to certify your operation. This letter may contain “conditions for continued certification.” These are areas the reviewer identified that should be improved. If your farm has more serious compliance issues, you may receive a notice of noncompliance. These issues can usually be resolved if you have not willfully violated the standards or lied about your operation.

Your organic certificate can accompany the determination letter or arrive separately. This certificate remains in effect until surrendered, suspended, or revoked. You may now sell the organic products listed on your certificate.

Keep Records for Annual Inspection

Maintain records documenting all crop production activities and inputs, storage, and sales for your next annual inspection. There is no specific mandate on the system you use—it can be in notebooks, paper files, or electronic. Your records need to be complete and clear enough to be understood even when you are not present.

You must submit a renewal application annually. If you decide to discontinue your organic certification, you should contact your agency and surrender your organic certificate. If you do not do this and you do not submit your annual renewal, the agency will begin the process to revoke your certification. This revocation will be part of your

permanent file and will complicate subsequent organic certification. Voluntarily surrendered certifications can be restarted at any time.

Apply for a Cost-Share Rebate

You may apply for reimbursement for certification-related expenses and receive a rebate up to 75 percent or \$750 per scope of certification. Funding for this popular program comes from the federal government through the USDA National Organic Program and, depending on where you live, is administered by either your state department of agriculture or your county Farm Service Agency (FSA) office. Contact your county FSA office or state ag department to request an application.

Prepare for Residue Tests & Unannounced Inspections

The USDA requires certifiers to perform residue tests and unannounced inspections on a portion of the operations they certify each year. Most of these are randomly assigned, but they can also be in response to a concern identified through the annual review process or a complaint received by the certifier. Your inspector may take a sample of harvested crops or directly from the field. The samples are then tested for a wide range of prohibited chemicals.

Know the Strengthening Organic Enforcement Rule

The Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) rule was published January 2023 with an implementation date of March 19, 2024. The SOE rule reduces fraud in the organic marketplace; strengthens oversight of organic producers, handlers, and certifiers; and improves USDA's enforcement mechanisms. The rule also protects organic integrity and bolsters farmer and consumer confidence in the USDA organic seal by supporting strong organic control systems, improving farm to market traceability, increasing import oversight authority, and providing robust enforcement of the organic regulations.

TIPS FOR CHOOSING A CERTIFIER

There are many USDA-accredited certification agencies. See example questions and considerations below to help you find a certifier that suits your operation and visit Marbleseed's website at marbleseed.org/resources/organic-resource-directory and search "certification agency" to review listings.

Talk to certifying agencies:

Do you certify operations of my type?

An agency familiar with your type of production is more likely to have practical interpretations of the standards to follow.

Do you certify other farms in my region?

Some agencies only certify operations in specific regions or states. Once you know that the agency certifies in your region, you should try to find one with inspectors in your area. One of the factors in the cost of certification is how far the inspector has to travel. Inspectors sometimes visit many farms on the same trip so that the cost is shared between producers, but you are more likely to keep the cost

down if your inspector lives relatively close. Since most inspectors contract with more than one certifier, you have options.

What are your fees for certification?

Make sure you have a clear picture of all the costs before you apply. Many certifiers list fee schedules. Certifiers may charge flat rates based on scope of certification or base fees on your gross organic sales. Inspection fees can vary from year to year, so you should ask how they are calculated. There may be an extra "membership" or "administrative" fee. Some charge a fee to review new inputs and others factor this into the overall cost of certification.

How quick is your certification process?

If you are scheduled to sell organic milk by a certain date, wish to sell your corn crop out of the field, or have early spinach to sell, make sure the agency can complete the process in your timeframe, so you are legally able to sell your product as organic when it is ready. They may have an additional fee for expedited service.

Do you have other certification services?

You may also need other services like Regenerative Organic Certification, GAP certification, or grass-fed verification. Check to see if the agency handles other third-party verifications that you may require.

Talk to farmers in your area:

- Are you happy with the service you received?
- Does someone answer the phone or return calls promptly?
- Does the agency help you with the certification process?
- Does it provide useful recordkeeping forms for farmers to use?
- Does it have a newsletter about new production methods or changes in the marketplace or government regulations?
- Does the agency offer educational activities or field days?
- Are policies and materials easy to understand and use?
- How long did you wait for the inspection to occur, the file to be reviewed, and the certificate to be issued?

Talk to your buyers:

Check with your buyers to see if they have preferred certification agencies. If a buyer wants your organic product to be approved for sale to foreign countries, there may be special inspection or production requirements.

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.

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 organictransition.org.



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