

The Organic Certification Process

ORGANIC FACT SHEET

FS 602

All organically labeled agricultural products sold in the United States must meet USDA regulations for organic production. Organic certification is based on the development of an organic system plan. Understanding the basics of organic production for your particular crop is important in completing your organic plan and certification application. It also is important to know where you will market your product, since your buyer may require a specific certification agency be used. All organic land must be treated organically for three years before harvest of the organic crop before it can become certified as organic. You can choose to contact a certification agency at the beginning of the three-year transition, or you can wait until early in the third year to do so (before March). Resources on organic production requirements and practices can be obtained from the National Organic Program website (www.ams.usda.gov/nop), from MOSES (www.mosesorganic.org or 715-772-3153), and from ATTRA (www.attra.ncat.org or 800-346-9140). See the MOSES fact sheet on "How to Choose an Organic Certification Agency" to aid you in finding the right agency for your operation.



All organic land must be treated organically for three years before it can become certified.

A. Refer to the MOSES *Upper Midwest Organic Resource Directory* to determine which certification agencies are active in your area and contact them for information. If there are other certified farmers nearby, ask them who provides them good service. It is valuable to stay with the same agency from year to year, since the farmer becomes familiar with the agency's specific paperwork, personnel and services provided, and information is tracked easily from year to year.

B. The chosen agency sends a packet containing standards, forms and an application for certification for that crop year. A \$50-60 fee is common for this packet.

C. The producer completes the farm plan questionnaire application for certification. This includes field maps showing the sizes, borders and names of each field, corresponding 4-year field histories, strategies for controlling weeds and insects, soil fertility, inputs (fertilizers, insecticides, seeds) harvest and storage plans. The questionnaire will take between 2 and 8 hours to complete the first year. The subsequent annual renewal questionnaires request information about changes and will take less time to complete. For new applications, the last date prohibited materials were used on the land requested for certification is needed.

D. The questionnaire is mailed to the certification agency within the time frame requested. Late applications are typically charged a late fee, or may not be processed at all.

E. The certification agency reviews the questionnaire and attached documentation, making sure all items of importance are included (clear maps, water tests if livestock or crop washing is done etc.) Seeds and other inputs used will be updated during the inspection.

F. Usually, inspectors are assigned a group of inspections to perform in a particular geographic region, splitting costs of travel expenses between these farms. Working with the inspector's schedule can help to keep inspection costs down. Organic inspectors will explain organic standards, but are not allowed to make recommendations about specific production issues.

G. The producer pays the cost of the inspection, which includes the on-site inspection, the written inspection report, mileage, lodging, and meals. The certification agency's fee also includes the review of the application and the report.

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H. The inspector receives your complete farm file from the certifier and arranges an inspection schedule. Files include the application, maps, the previous year's inspector report and the certification agency's comments from last year and/or concerns for this year. If you have changed your certification agency, the regulation mandates that the previous information be given to the subsequent certifier. The inspector contacts the producer, either by phone or mail, to set up the inspection time, get directions to the farm, and discuss any confusing items on the application.

I. The inspector performs the inspection. Depending on the size and complexity of the farm, this generally takes 2-4 hours. Farms with livestock or on-farm processing (i.e. seed cleaning) may take longer. Fields, equipment, crop storage and documentation will be reviewed, including field borders where non-organic crops adjoin organic crops in order to verify there are sufficient buffer zones to avoid drift of non-approved materials.

J. An on-site affidavit may be completed and signed by the producer during the inspection, with a copy given to the producer. The inspector will summarize any issues of concern or additional information needed at the end of the inspection.

K. The inspector writes a report and sends it to the certification agency along with the producer's complete file, documents collected during the inspection (fertilizer tags, etc.), and the inspection invoice.

L. The certification agency reviews the report and file. The farmer will receive the report and will have the opportunity to make comments if there is incorrect information. **THE AGENCY AND THE INSPECTOR KEEP ALL INFORMATION CONFIDENTIAL.**

M. The certification agency will then decide to issue organic certification, to issue organic certification with some conditions (i.e. improve documentation to track harvest yields), or to deny organic certification.

N. The producer is notified of their certification status. If certified, they receive an annual organic certificate. Agencies have clear appeal policies if the certification decision is contested.

O. If certified, the producer may now sell certified organic products. Organic standards need to be followed throughout the year. Documentation of all crop production activities and inputs, storage and sales need to be maintained for review by next year's inspector.

P. A renewal questionnaire must be submitted each year. Organic inspections also must occur 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 do not submit your annual renewal, then the agency will revoke your certification. This revocation will be part of your permanent file and will make subsequent organic certification more complicated.

Q. Each certification agency is required by the USDA to perform a specific number of surprise (unannounced) inspections of certified organic operations. These surprise visits are chosen randomly. Your farm may be subject to a surprise inspection at any time.

R. While all organic products must follow the regulations, there is an exemption which allows farmers, who gross under \$5000 per year of unprocessed fresh organic products, to market their products as organic without being certified.

The inspection generally takes two to four hours

