



Agricultural  
Entrepreneur  
Development  
Initiative



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
**EXTENSION**

College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences

## **“WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ORGANIC”**

The concept of “organic” just became clearer after the USDA recently finalized the adoption of standards for labeling and processing organic foods. The standards were 10 years in the making. Previously organic certification was administered by a patchwork of state and private certifying agencies. Now the USDA will accredit state and private organizations or individuals to become “certifying agents”. These certifying agents will certify that production and handling meet the national standards. The following are answers to some questions that you might have regarding organic standards.

### **Who should certify?**

Any producer or processor that grows, processes or repackages agricultural products that intend to be sold and labeled as “100 percent organic”, “organic” or “made with organic ingredients”.

### **How do you become certified?**

The interested producer or handler submits an application with specific information to an accredited certifying agent. Information would include:

Type of operation. Three-year history of all substances applied to land. Organic products that are to be grown or processed. The “organic plan” which includes the practices and substances used in production/processing; a description of the monitoring process that insures that the production/process plan is being followed; the record keeping system; and a description of the practices to insure organic and non-organic products are not commingled or do not come into contact with prohibited substances.

The applicant will need to keep post certification records for 5 years concerning the production, harvest and handling of organic products. These records should document that the producer/processor is in compliance with the standards and verify the information provided to the certifying agent. They must also be available for inspection by an authorized representative of the USDA and the certifying agent.

The certifying agent reviews the application. A qualified inspector conducts an on-site inspection of the operation. The inspection will occur during a time period so the inspector can observe the practices in action and talk to individuals knowledgeable about the operation.

The certifying agent then reviews the applicant’s information and the inspector’s report. If information shows that the applicant’s practices are compliant with the standards, the certifying agent will issue a certificate. The certification will remain in effect until terminated, either voluntarily or through enforcement of regulations.

### **How are standards enforced?**

The certification rules allow for unannounced inspections at any time. Residue tests can be performed to aid in enforcement of the regulations. The certifying agents and USDA will conduct

residue tests any time contamination is suspected. If residues of prohibited substances are present an investigation will be conducted to determine the source of the contamination.

### **How do you find a “Certifying Agent”?**

Illinois does not currently have a state organic certification program, however the Illinois contact regarding certification is: Kent McFarland, Illinois Department of Agriculture, P. O. Box 19281, Springfield, IL 62794-9281 • 217-782-6675. He can put you in contact with private certification organizations that are well represented in Illinois. Additional information for other states and private certifiers is available at the National Organic Program website – <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/>

### **What are the standards?**

**Crop standards** – land will have no prohibited substances applied to it three years prior to the harvest of the first organic crop. The use of genetic engineering, ionizing radiation and sewage sludge is prohibited. Fertility will be managed by tillage and cultivation practices, crop rotation, cover crops, or supplemented with animal and crop waste material and allowed synthetic materials. Use of organic seed and planting stock is preferred but not mandated. Crop pests, weeds and diseases are to be controlled using management practices including physical, mechanical and biological controls. If these practices are not sufficient a biological, botanical or synthetic substance approved for use can be applied. Records of all production information must be available for inspection.

**Livestock standards** – the livestock standards apply to animals used for meat, milk, eggs and all other animal products represented as organically produced. Animals for slaughter must be raised under organic management practices from the last third of gestation or the second day of life for poultry. Producers are required to feed agricultural feed products that are 100 percent organic and may also provide allowed vitamin and mineral supplements. Dairy producers may convert to organic by feeding 80 percent organically produced feed for nine months, followed by three months of feeding 100 percent organically produced feed. Organically raised animals may not receive hormones to promote growth or antibiotics for any reason. Preventive management practices including the use of vaccines will be used to keep animals healthy. Producers are prohibited from withholding treatment of sick or injured animals; however animals treated with prohibited medication cannot be sold as organic. All organically raised animals must have access to the outdoors including access to pasture for ruminants. Temporary confinement may only occur for reasons of health, safety, the animal’s stage of production, or to protect soil or water quality.

**Handling standards** – Handlers of organic products must prevent the commingling of organic and non-organic products and protect the organic products from contact with prohibited substances. All non-agricultural ingredients must be included on the National List of Allowed Synthetic and Non-Synthetic Substances. In the processed product labeled as “organic” all agricultural ingredients must have been organically produced, unless the ingredient is not commercially available in organic form.

For more information contact

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