

Organic Certification FAQ

Plain answers to the questions farms and food businesses ask most about USDA organic certification.

Certification basics

What is the USDA National Organic Program (NOP)?

It is the federal program that sets the rules for anything sold as organic in the United States.

Why get certified organic?

Certification lets you use the USDA organic seal, opens new markets, and often brings a better price. It also shows buyers you farm in a way that protects soil and water.

What is an Organic System Plan (OSP)?

Your OSP is a written plan that explains how your farm or business follows the organic rules. Your certifier reviews it, and your inspector checks that you follow it.

What does exempt mean?

If you sell \$5,000 or less of organic products a year, you can be exempt from certification. You still have to follow the organic rules, but you cannot use the USDA organic seal.

Are GMOs allowed in organic?

No. Genetic engineering is not allowed in organic production.

What happens if someone breaks the organic rules?

Penalties can include suspension or loss of certification and civil fines. If you suspect fraud, you can report it to the NOP with who, what, where, and when.

What is the Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) rule?

SOE took full effect in 2024. It adds oversight to fight fraud, requires more businesses in the supply chain to be certified, and asks every certified operation to have a fraud prevention plan.

Transitioning to organic

Is my land eligible?

For crops, no prohibited substances can have been used on the land for 36 months before harvest.

How do I document the transition?

Your certifier will ask for a land history (often a signed affidavit), a field map, and records of what has been used on the land.

Do I need to test my soil or crops to start?

Testing is usually not required to apply, but your certifier can take samples at any time.

Does my whole operation need to be certified?

No. You can certify part of your operation, as long as you keep organic and non organic separate and documented.

What if my land was fallow or newly cleared?

It may qualify, but you need proof. Work with your certifier on what documents they will accept.

What is a buffer zone?

A strip of land that keeps drift and runoff from non organic land away from your organic crops. There is no set size. Many farms use 30 to 50 feet, but your certifier decides what is enough.

Can I sell crops from my buffer zone?

Yes, but not as organic.

What does transitional mean?

It describes crops grown with organic practices on land that has not finished its 36 months. They cannot be sold or labeled as organic.

What can be certified

What kinds of products can be certified?

Crops, processed and handled products, and wild crops, among others. Each is called a scope.

Can hydroponics or aquaponics be certified?

Many certifiers do certify them. Ask your certifier first, since their policies differ.

Can hemp be certified?

Yes. Hemp follows the same crop rules, including seed sources and prohibited substances.

Can honey be certified?

It can be, but it is hard. Bees forage widely, so the land around your hives matters. Talk to your certifier early.

Can wild harvested plants be certified?

Yes, under the wild crop scope, with a plan that shows the harvest is sustainable and the area is free of prohibited substances.

Certifiers, timing, and cost

Who certifies organic farms?

USDA accredited certifying agencies. You choose one and pay them directly.

How do I choose a certifier?

Compare fees, how fast they work, which scopes they cover, which markets they serve, and how easy they are to reach.

How long does certification take?

Often about 3 to 4 months from a complete application. Many certifiers offer faster review for an extra fee.

How often do I renew?

Every year. You update your OSP, pay your fees, and have an inspection.

What does it cost?

It depends on your certifier and the size of your operation. Expect an application fee, a yearly fee, inspection costs, and sometimes a fee based on sales.

Cost share

What is organic cost share?

A USDA program that can pay back up to 75 percent of your certification costs, up to \$750 per scope, each year.

Do I need to be certified to get it?

Yes. It is for certified organic operations.

What costs count?

Application fees, inspection costs, user fees, sales assessments, and inspector travel. Equipment, supplies, late fees, and transitional certification do not count.

How do I apply?

Through your local USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) office, or a participating state agency. You usually need a short form, proof of certification, and your itemized certification invoice.

Inspection

Who is my inspector?

A trained inspector working for your certifier. Inspectors check your operation against your OSP. They cannot make the certification decision or give you advice.

What does the inspector look for?

Whether what you do matches your OSP, whether your records back it up, and any risk of contamination. They may take samples.

What should I have ready?

Your OSP, your map, and all your records: inputs, seeds, harvest, sales, cleaning, and anything your certifier asked for.

Can my certifier inspect without notice?

Yes. Certifiers do some unannounced inspections and residue tests each year.

Practices on the farm

Is soil building required?

Yes. You must use practices that keep or improve your soil.

Is soil testing required?

Not always. It is needed to show a deficiency if you use certain products, like some micronutrients. Regular testing is still a good idea.

Can I use plastic mulch?

Yes, if it is removed at the end of the season and not left in the soil or burned.

Can I use cardboard as mulch?

Often yes, if it is plain and free of prohibited coatings. Confirm with your certifier.

Is treated wood allowed?

Not where it can touch soil or crops. Existing treated wood may need to be removed or blocked off.

Can I burn crop residue?

Only to suppress disease or help seeds sprout. Burning is not allowed as a way to get rid of waste.

Can I use raw manure?

Yes, if it goes into the soil at least 120 days before harvest for crops that touch the soil, or 90 days for other food crops.

What are the rules for compost?

Compost with manure must reach 131°F to 170°F for set periods, depending on the method, and you need records to prove it.

What if my government requires a pest treatment?

The rules allow for government mandated treatments. Tell your certifier right away and keep records. The treated area may lose organic status for a time.

Records, labels, and handling

How long do I keep records?

At least five years.

What records do I need?

Seeds and planting stock, inputs, field activities, harvest, sales, storage, cleaning, and anything else your OSP describes.

Can I use the organic label during transition?

No. Only certified products can be sold or labeled as organic.

Do labels need approval?

Yes. Send every label to your certifier before you print it.

What cleaners can I use on equipment?

Follow food safety rules, and make sure cleaners are rinsed off or are allowed on organic food contact surfaces. Write down how you clean.

Can I reuse bags or bins?

Only if they are clean and were not in contact with prohibited substances.

Free from Kona Organic, an organic certification consulting company working with farms and food businesses anywhere in the world. Want help with any of this? **[Book a free 15 minute call](#)**. This guide is general information, not legal advice. Your certifier makes all certification decisions.