

DEPARTMENT OF AGRONOMY

Organic Certification

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Organic has become a popular word in recent years. We are exposed to news reports about pesticide abuse, misuse, and concerns about the safety of the food supply. The definition of organic is not well understood by many people. What is involved in an organic production system is also poorly understood. This publication describes what is meant by and involved in certification of organic production systems.

What Does Certification Mean?

For Farmers Farmers may choose to adopt organic production methods for philosophical reasons, such as wanting to use management and alternative methods in place of manufactured pesticides and fertilizers. Some choose organic production methods for personal, health or environmental concerns. Using management-intensive alternative pest control measures results in agricultural products that may or may not receive premium prices in the marketplace. However, many market sources may require some validation that products offered as organically-produced have been grown using alternative-production practices.

For Processors Processors of agricultural products can be assured that raw ingredients that are represented and purchased as organic are exactly that. Thus, they may truthfully produce and advertise their products as organic. To label their product as organic, processors must follow certain procedures, and avoid the use of certain substances and ingredients. However, this labeling often opens up new markets for them, and appeals to environmentally conscious consumers.

For Consumers Certified organic food items do not provide an assurance of quality or ensure that chemical residues are not contained (unless specific testing is done). It does let the consumer know how the food was grown. There is a high probability that little or no

residue of unwanted products is on the product since growers use few or no chemical materials. They also use specific precautions to limit contamination from drift from neighboring farms.

Basic Requirements for Certification

Growers of certified organic products follow practices that utilize renewable resources for soil fertility and energy. Biological control of pests is encouraged when

practical and possible. Biodiversity of the agricultural system is emphasized. A diversity of production on the farm is encouraged, and crop rotations with a soil building program is required.

Split production systems are allowed for a period of time (usually 5 years) as a producer makes the transition to a fully organic production system. During this time, however, separation of products is required, and a rigid record system must be implemented to make sure that organic and non-organic products do not mix at the farm level.

Synthetic pest control materials are not allowed to be used on certified organic crops. In addition, no salt-based or highly soluble fertilizer materials can be used. Fertilizer from natural sources such as nitrogen-fixing crops, compost or manures, and some mined or naturally occurring minerals required by plants for growth are allowed. However, no processing or tempering of these natural nutrient sources is allowed. Genetically altered plants, animals or microbes are usually not permitted. Vaccinations are allowed in animal production, but growth regulating stimulants and antibiotics are not allowed. If a sick animal requires treatment with a non-allowed drug (antibiotics), it may be sold on the conventional market, but it must be tagged as non-organic, and careful records must be kept.

A waiting period of 3 years is required from the last use of any non-allowed products before food items from the farm may be certified as organic. During this 3-year period, the farm is expected to meet all organic certification requirements. Some certification systems allow the term “transitional” to be labeled on products produced during the 3-year transition to full organic production.

Who Provides the Certification?

Depending on the location, there may be several ways to become a certified organic producer. The most common method of becoming certified is to follow procedures adopted by one of several certifying organizations that have a detailed description of organic production requirements. These organizations ensure compliance to requirements by on-farm and processing plant inspections, a detailed record keeping system, and independent oversight by unbiased or non-producer associates. They are supported by membership fees, inspector reimbursement, and royalties paid from the sale of certified organic products. Many offer reduced costs for part-time or small-volume producers, but full compliance with all requirements by all members is required.

After all requirements for certification are met, a producer is allowed to market products with a certification code number that is verifiable by the certification agency. Many of the certifying agencies have internationally recognized standards, allowing products to move through interstate commerce and international commerce. A demand for certified organic products in international markets is often greater than in the U.S. domestic markets.

Certification is offered for a limited time period, usually 1 year. Continuation of the certification requires yearly application and inspection. Certification may be revoked at any time if evidence of noncompliance to the organic certification standards is present.

Currently, there are no requirements stating that products sold or labeled as organic be produced following certified organic procedures. Many small, local market growers may choose to follow organic production procedures and sell their products as organic, without becoming a certified organic grower. However, products that are sold in wholesale markets, or for processing, usually will require some proof of certification by the producer. Also, the 1990 Farm Bill appointed a National Organic Standards Board (NOSB). They have been holding public meetings, drafting language for national standards, and formu-

lating an accreditation process for certifying organizations or agencies. Once these national standards are implemented, organic growers, processors, handlers, and retailers may not use the word “organic” on any label unless the product meets the national certification standards.

The Basic Procedure for Certification

First, determine organizations or agencies in your area that provide certification. These organizations can be found by contacting your local K-State Research and Extension office, farm agency offices, neighbors that may be organic producers, or by consulting the list in this bulletin. In Kansas, the most popular certifying organization is the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA).

Once you have selected an organization, obtain a copy of the certification guidelines, a list of all fees and charges, and carefully analyze your ability to adhere to the certification requirements. Most chapters require application for certification in the spring, which is completed in the fall, and is good for the next year’s crop. Thus, at least 1-year’s lead time is needed. More time is needed if the farm is still in transition.

An initial application and membership fee is required. The application requires a detailed description of the farming operation; a field-by-field crop history for at least the last 3 years; a description of the organic production practices that will be followed, including a soil improvement plan and procedures for dealing with plant pests; a diagram or map of all crop fields; and a good farm record system to provide verification of production and purchased inputs.

After receiving an application, a certification committee reviews the application, provides feedback to the applicant, determines if all aspects of the application can meet certification requirements (or seeks additional information from the applicant if there are questions), and schedules an inspection visit. The inspector, (who is usually from out-of-state and has no personal knowledge or relationship with the applicant) visits the farm, views the production system, may review records or products, asks questions, and provides suggestions and information to the producer.

Following the inspector's visit, a recommendation is made to the certification committee. The producer will be classified as certified, certified conditionally (if certain specified questions are answered or information supplied) or not certified at this time. The certification

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Organizations that Offer Organic Certification Available in Kansas*

Demeter Association, Inc.

Britt Road
Aurora, NY 13026
Telephone: 315-364-5617
Fax: 315-364-5224

Contact: Anne Mendenhall, Director

Features: Has been certifying biodynamic farms and processors in the United States and Mexico for approximately 15 years. Certifies organic producers in transition to biodynamic practices. Certification guidelines are compatible with International Demeter Standards. Inquiries are welcome. (Note: Biodynamic agriculture has specific requirements and standards that go beyond most organic certification programs. The philosophy of biodynamic production traces its roots to Rudolph Steiner, and writings in the 1920s and 1930s. Some biodynamic products are marketed in the United States, but more producers are found in Europe. Contact the Demeter Association for more details on biodynamic methods).

Farm Verified Organic, Inc. (FVO)

Rural Route 1, Box 40A
Medina, ND 58467
Telephone: 701-486-3578
Fax: 701-486-3580

Contact: Anne Kirschenmann, Business Development Manager

Features: An international organic certification organization since 1979 offering a full range of certification services to growers, packers, processors, manufacturers and handlers, as well as grower collectives and cooperatives. Accredited through International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM).

NutriClean Organic Certification Program

Park Plaza Building, 1939
Harrison Street, Ste. 400
Oakland, Ca 94612
Telephone: 510-832-1415
Fax: 405-832-0359
e-mail: eengbeck@scs1.com

Contact: Eric Engbeck, Director

Features: An independent certification organization offering domestic and international services to producers, processors, manufacturers, and handlers. In addition to documenting organic growing and handling practices, requires that the product be laboratory tested and shown to contain no detected residues. Operates on a fee for service basis.

Oregon Tilth, Inc. (OTCO)

11535 SW Durham Road
Ste. C-1
Tilgard, OR 97224
Telephone: 503-620-2829
Fax: 503-624-1386

Contact: Yvonne Frost, Certification Director

Features: Provides independent third-party certification services for growers, processors, co-packers, handlers, and retailers throughout the United States and internationally (since 1974).

Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA)

International Office:
OCIA World Headquarters
1001 Y Street, Suite B
Lincoln, NE 68508-1172
Telephone: 402-477-2323
Fax: 402-477-4325
e-mail: ociaintl@bright.net

Contact: Make contact with local chapters in Kansas.

Southwest Kansas:

Keith Carter
P.O. Box 6
Granada, CO 81041
Telephone: 719-734-5320

Central and Northeast Kansas:

Diane Dysart
PO Box 133
Whiting, KS 66552
Telephone: 785-873-3431
Fax: 785-873-3432
e-mail: ksralctr@aol.com

Northwest Kansas:

Rosalia Stephens
HC1 Box 19
Jennings, KS 67643
Telephone: 785-678-2474

Features: A farmer-owned professional association with more than 7,000 members in North, Central and South America, and the Pacific Rim. Members belong to one of more than 60 chapters in 20 states in the United States. Provides third-party inspection and organic certification.

Organic Growers and Buyers Association (OGBA)

7362 University Avenue
Northeast, Ste. 208
Fridley, MN 55432-3102
Telephone: 612-572-1967, 800-677-6422
Fax: 612-572-2527
e-mail: ogba@sprynet.com

Contact: Sue Cristan, Executive Director or
Kate Klingberg, Certification Manager

Features: Provides annual certification services to producers, processors, warehouses, and food handlers within the organic food industry. An international third-party certification program that certifies clients in Japan, Europe, Canada, the United States, and the Caribbean.

Organic Verification Organization of North America/U.S. (OVONA/US)

PO Box 146
Hitterdal, MN 56552
Telephone: 218-962-3264
Fax: 218-962-3264
e-mail: info@organicfood.com
www.organicfood.com

Contact: Matthew Moe

Features: An international organic certification agency for growers, processors, brokers, distributors, manufacturers, and handlers. Inspected and supervised by the European Economic Community (EEC) control body, and complies with EEC requirements.

Quality Assurance International (QAI)

12526 High Bluff Drive, Ste. 300
San Diego, CA 92130
Telephone: 619-792-3531
Fax: 619-792-8665

Contact: Griffith W. McLellan, Director

Features: Independent service organization to certify the authenticity of organically grown, processed and handled foods and fibers, founded in 1989. Offers services worldwide.

United States Assurance Laboratories (USAL)

4150 Colfax Avenue North
Minneapolis, MN 55412
Telephone: 612-522-8224
Fax: 612-228-9937

Contact: Luddene Perry, Managing Director

Features: Offers third-party certification service accredited by the State of Minnesota. Offers on-site inspector and software designed specifically to track multi-ingredient products.

Acronyms

EEC -- European Economic Community

IFOAM -- International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements; has established international standards, adopted by many European certifying organizations, as well as some international and U.S. organizations. Has more than 500 member organizations in more than 100 countries, and has been in existence for more than 20 years.

International Federation
of Organic Agricultural Movements
204 First Avenue South, Ste. 1,
Jamestown, ND 58401.
Telephone: 701-52-4070,
fax: 701-252-54124.

***NOTES:** Information on these organizations found in the National Organic Directory, 1997, published by, Community Alliance with Family Farmers
PO Box 363, Davis
CA 95617
Telephone 916-756-8518
E-mail: nod@caff.org
Website: www.caff.org

Inquire for latest edition of directory. Many other organizations are listed in the directory, but are often state-specific, e.g. California Certified Organic Farmers, Florida Certified Organic Growers, etc., and are not included in this list for Kansas growers. Many of the above listed organizations provide information services to growers, including newsletters, conferences, and contacts. Inquire with specific organizations to learn more.

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committee reviews the inspectors report, the original application, and ensures that all conditional factors are dealt with prior to voting on each member certification. A recommendation for certification is passed to the national office for issuance of a certification certificate. It is good for a 1-year period. Continued membership, application, inspection, and compliance is required in future years. Certification of field crops, fruits and vegetables, eggs, honey, livestock, or other edible farm products are all covered in the guidelines. Separate processor certification guidelines are available for the use of certified organic raw agricultural products which are developed into processed products.

A complete audit trail of records of purchases and sales is required. On-farm storage of products must be accounted for and any chance of contamination with non-certified agricultural products must be eliminated. Fees, which equal a percentage of gross sales, may be charged to support certification organizations for larger producers. Small volume producers usually have a minimal or flat fee in addition to an annual membership fee and inspector visits costs.

The Future of Organic Certification

There has been a steady increase in the market share of organic products since the late 1980s. The demand for organic products is presently estimated at \$4.4 billion per year in the United States alone. The number is increasing about 20 percent per year. The food industry as a whole has a growth rate of only about 3 to 5 percent per year. Vegetable crops and grains have the most developed certification programs, but meats, medicinal herbs, and fiber crops are now widely marketed as organic, and have standards. Internationally, the European community is working to “harmonize,” or use common standards, when trading between countries. The International Federation of Organic Movements plays an important role in proposing international standards to promote trade among the United States, Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world. At present (1997), the United States National Organic Standards Board is ready to propose draft standards for public comment. Once comment is received, the standards will be implemented, providing assurance to both domestic and international consumers as to the methods used. Though these international markets are important, many organic growers also focus on their local communities. “Community Sup-

ported Agricultural” marketing co-ops are formed, and the idea of “food-sheds” is promoted. The multifaceted organic movement deals with more than just a list of “do and don’t” practices, it also looks at the whole farm system, and the community.

For More Information

Contact your county extension office for current information on organic certification in Kansas. A list of national and international certification organizations is included below, and is current as of 1997. For the latest information regarding the implementation of national standards, contact the National Organic Program (listed below).

Published Information and Contacts

Food, Agricultural, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990. Public Law 101-624. Generally known as “The 1990 Farm Bill,” this act explains how the National Organic Standards Board will be formed, and outlines their task.

National Organic Program. USDA/AMS/TMD, Room 4006, South Building, PO Box 94656, Washington, DC 20090-6456. Contact this office for more information about national standards. Proposed standards can be found at www.ams.usda.gov/NOP/.

Tracing the Evolution of Organic/Sustainable Agriculture-A Selected and Annotated Bibliography. 1988. USDA/Natl Agricultural Library No. 72. Compiled by the National Agricultural Library, these books and documents are related to the history of the organic agriculture movement in the United States.

Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming. 1980. USDA Study Team on Organic Farming. U.S. Gov. Printing Office. The first USDA report published on organic farming. The current status of organic farming, barriers, opportunities, research gaps, and recommendations for action are reviewed. Though published 17 years ago, most of the information is still current and accurate.

National Organic Directory. 1997. Community Alliance for Family Farmers, PO Box 363, Davis, CA 95617. 916-756-8518 E-Mail nod@caff.org or Website www.caff.org Excellent directory of growers, processors, research and support organizations, and certifying agencies.

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