

Organic 101 for Extension Agents & TSPs: Basics of Organic Certification & Standards

This factsheet is meant to provide extension agents and technical service providers with an overview of organic standards and regulations, and increases knowledge of organic systems to effectively support organic and transitioning-to-organic farmers.

For more organic resources, check out www.ofrf.org/resources.

What is Organic?

Organic farming is a whole systems approach. It mimics natural ecological and biological processes, protects animal welfare, and focuses on management that results in healthy soils, plants, people, and the environment. The USDA Certified Organic label is a verifiable legal standard, and indicates that products have been produced and handled in accordance with the standards of the National Organic Program (NOP).

Certification & Recordkeeping Basics

➔ Recommended reading:

- [USDA Certified Organic: Understanding the Basics](#)
- [OFRF: Organic is Regenerative](#)

There are certain requirements for a producer to attain certification, and a number of recordkeeping tasks that must be done each year.

Certification Steps:

- Before submitting an application to a certifying agency, the producer must develop an Organic Systems Plan and use organic practices for 36 months. No prohibited substances used.
- The application is reviewed, and an on-site inspection occurs.
- If the operation is in compliance, certification is issued.
- Producers keep detailed records for the operation, which are reviewed by the certifier annually to reissue certification.

Recordkeeping Requirements:

- Field history for each field
- Activity log
- Crop planting & harvesting record
- Manure and fertilizer applications, including source and application rate
- Seed sources and any seed inoculants applied
- Sales records
- If livestock are raised, a pasture plan and parasite prevention plan are also required.
- If split operation, an equipment cleaning log is also required.



Intro to National Organic Program (NOP) Regulations

Below is a brief overview of NOP regulations pertaining to land, soil, crops, livestock, and pasture. Further details can be found in the NOP statutes in the standards manual linked below.

Land, Soil, and Crops

- Defined boundaries/buffer zones indicating organic production to prevent unintended application of prohibited substances (§ 205.202).
- Use of tillage and cultivation that maintains or improves soil conditions/minimizes erosion (§ 205.203).
- Manage soil nutrients and fertility through diverse crop rotations, cover crops, plant- and animal-derived amendments (§ 205.203).
- Use of Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI)-approved materials.
- Organic-certified seeds, seedlings, and planting stock (§ 205.204).
 - *Exception:* Use of non-organic, untreated seed and stock when an organic equivalent is not commercially available.
- Implement a crop rotation including but not limited to cash crops, sod, cover crops, green manure crops, and catch crops (§ 205.205).
 - Rotation must provide the following functions: maintain or improve soil organic matter, help with pest management, provide erosion control, and manage deficient or excess nutrients.
- Weeds, insect pests, and diseases must be managed through a suite of practices rather than a "silver bullet" approach (§ 205.206).
 - Includes practices such as diverse crop rotations to break pest cycles, habitat for natural enemies of pests, selection of naturally resistant crop varieties, removal of disease vectors, mulching, and grazing, among others.



Recommended reading:

- [USDA: What are the steps to organic certification?](#)
- [Organic Recordkeeping: Guides, Templates and Other Resources](#)
- [Oregon Tilth: OSP Forms & Updates](#)



Livestock and Pasture

- Livestock sold or labeled as organic must be **under continuous organic management for varying lengths of time depending on production system** (§ 205.236).
 - Dairy animals: 12 months
 - Meat and fiber animals: from the last third of the mother's gestation
 - Poultry: from the second day of life
- Balanced diet of pasture, forage, feed, and any needed concentrates, all produced and handled organically (§ 205.237).
 - Ruminant animals shall graze no less than 120 days per calendar year, but this may not be continuous.
 - No less than 30% dry matter intake (DMI) from grazing.
- Preventive health practices should be used, including proper quality and quantity of food, proper housing for the type of animal, freedom of movement, and proper species selection for the region and goals of the operation (§ 205.238).
 - **Physical alterations can only be done for identification purposes.** Other alterations, such as tail docking, dehorning, and beak trimming, are prohibited.
- Livestock living conditions should meet the needs of the animal's health and natural behavior. This includes year-round access to the outdoors, shade, shelter, exercise areas, fresh air, and clean water for drinking (§ 205.239).
- **Continuous confinement is prohibited.** Temporary confinement is allowed only under these circumstances: inclement weather, health conditions, breeding, 4-H/FFA events, and shipping/sales
- Pastures must take soil fertility, erosion control, and protection of natural wetlands and riparian areas into consideration. Treated fencing materials are prohibited (§ 205.240).

➔ Recommended reading:

- [USDA AMS National Organic Program](#)
- [NOP Standards Manual](#)
- [The Organic Materials Review Institute](#)
- [\(OMRI\)](#)



Advice from Organic Farmers

Beth Hoiknaki

Goodfoot Farm, Philomath, OR

"You have to remember that we're not just farmers; we're also business people, so how do you support farmers in the sense of the organic practices but also that business component when it comes to certification, because that's a whole other mindset."



April Jones Thatcher

April Joy Farm, Ridgefield, WA

"We like to do a lot of dividing and putting farmers in different buckets. But at the end of the day, farmers are farmers. We care about our land, we care about our communities. Maybe the strategies and techniques that organic farmers are using may be different than farmers you've worked with in the past, but we're still farmers at heart. So coming from that place of 'what are the goals' and 'what are the farmers trying to achieve'."

Diane Green

Greentree Naturals, Sand Point, ID

"Find a connection with a local certified organic farmer and partner with them. Let them be your ally. They are the ones who know. I've always found that Extension is research-based, which is great information, but what happens in university research is going to be very different from what happens on the farm. So you really need to form those partnerships, starting with one certified organic farmer, and go from there."



Other Resources:

- [CCOF - Steps to Certification](#)
- [USDA - Financial Resources for Organic Farmers and Ranchers](#)
- [NCAT Podcast Episode - Organic Certification: One Step at a Time](#)
- [Transition to Organic Partnership Program](#)
- [OFRF Organic Research Hub](#)

This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under award number 2024-38640-42985 through the Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program under project number WPDP25-025. USDA is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. WSARE Office: 207 Linfield Hall, Montana State University, Bozeman MT 59717. (406) 994-4309

