



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Is Organic An Option For Me?

Information on Organic Agriculture
for Farmers, Ranchers,
and Businesses

April 2015

This brochure provides an overview of the USDA organic regulations and how USDA supports organic agriculture. It includes information on getting certified, funding opportunities, and educational resources.

For more information, visit www.ams.usda.gov/organicinfo or, if viewing this brochure online, use the  icons in each section.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer



What Is Organic?

Organic is a labeling term for food or other agricultural products that have been produced according to the USDA organic regulations. These standards require the use of cultural, biological, and mechanical practices which support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. This means that organic operations must maintain or enhance soil and water quality, while also conserving wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife.


USDA standards recognize four categories of organic production:

- + Crops. Plants grown to be harvested as food, livestock feed, or fiber or used to add nutrients to the field.
- + Livestock. Animals that can be used for food or in the production of food, fiber, or feed.
- + Processed/multi-ingredient products. Items that have been handled and packaged (e.g., chopped carrots) or combined, processed, and packaged (e.g., bread or soup).
- + Wild crops. Plants from a growing site that is not cultivated.

Is the organic industry a growing market?

Yes. Organic sales more than tripled between 2002-2010. From 2009 to 2010, U.S. organic food sales have shown double-digit growth during most years since the 1990s.


What does the USDA organic seal mean?

The USDA organic seal indicates that a product is certified organic. Processed products must contain at least 95 percent organic ingredients to use the seal. 


Can I use the USDA organic seal?

If your product is not certified organic by a USDA-accredited certifying agent, you may not use the USDA organic seal. If your product is certified organic, then your certifying agent will be able to tell you whether you can use the seal.

Are there USDA programs that would support me?

Yes. Organic operations are not excluded from any USDA programs, and several programs are specific to the needs of the organic sector. 

Who can help me with my organic business plan?

The USDA's New and Beginning Farmer website has many resources to help farmers manage their business. 



Certification

All operations with more than \$5,000 in annual organic sales must be certified. The certification process verifies that a farm or handling facility complies with organic regulations and allows products to be represented as organic.

To become certified, producers submit an application for organic certification to a USDA-accredited certifying agent. This application includes:

- + A detailed description of the operation to be certified;
- + A history of substances applied to land during the previous 3 years;
- + The organic products grown, raised, or processed; and
- + A written Organic System Plan describing the practices and substances to be used.

Organic Certification Process

The USDA accredits State departments of agriculture and private organizations around the world to serve as certifying agents. Certifying agents first review the written application in order to ensure that practices comply with organic regulations. An inspector then conducts an on-site inspection of the applicant's operation. Afterward, the certifying agent reviews the inspector's report. If the written application and the on-site inspection show that all practices comply with organic regulations, the agent grants certification to the operator.

To learn more about the certification process, visit the National Organic Program's website. [🔗](#)

