



Frequently Asked Questions About Organic Certification

Why should I produce organic products?

Organic food products are increasing in the marketplace at a rate of about 20% per year. Environmental concerns have caused consumers to appreciate sustainable and organic agriculture. Consumers and growers are considering their health and the health of their families and workers. Soil is every farmer's most important asset, and there is no doubt that crops grow better in well-cared-for organic soil.

Do I need to be certified?

The USDA regulates the use of such terms as "organic" or "organically produced." In order to market your product as organic, USDA regulations require certification by an accredited certification agency.

How do I qualify for certification?

All farmland must be free of prohibited materials for at least three years prior to harvest of an organic crop. Prohibited materials include, but are not limited to: chemical herbicides, pesticides, fungicides, fertilizers, sewage sludge and genetically modified organisms. Growers develop a specific organic system plan for approval by the certification agency. Adequate buffer areas must separate organic land from land being farmed conventionally. Animals must have outdoor access and be raised on organic feed under humane, sanitary conditions without the routine use of antibiotics or other harmful drugs. Each certified operation is inspected annually by an independent organic inspector. The inspector visits the farm or handling facility and reviews the operation's records, such as field histories, inputs into the system, livestock care and sales records.

What if my whole operation doesn't qualify yet?

You can place a portion of your farm or handling operation under organic management (with an approved organic system plan) and certify other areas as they become eligible. If you intend to manage part of your operation non-organically, proper separation must be maintained between organic and non-organic production.

I just started farming this land. Must I wait 3 years?

You might qualify sooner if you are able to obtain evidence from the prior owner or farmer that no prohibited materials were applied.

Is there a lot of paperwork?

USDA requires that producers submit an "organic system plan". PCO has drafted an application to help meet those requirements. Recordkeeping is required and varies according to the type of operation.

406 S. Pennsylvania Avenue
Centre Hall, PA 16828
814-364-1344
pco@paorganic.org
www.paorganic.org

What if I need help?

If you are farming conventionally now, you may want to become a member of PCO and /or obtain a PCO certification packet so you'll know what you need to do to qualify as an organic producer well in advance of your first organic harvest. This packet of information contains all documents needed for applying for certification, including organic system plan forms, PCO Certification Manual and Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) generic and brand names lists. When you first apply for certification, if minor noncompliances are found, you will be given a reasonable time to correct them without having to reapply. Certified producers and members are invited to attend PCO's workshops, meetings, and forums on organic production topics. Producers interested in transitioning to organic production are also encouraged to take advantage of PCO's Organic Transition Team, a group of Certification Specialists who work with new and transitioning organic farmers to answer questions and provide an orientation to the certification process.

How much does it cost?

The cost of annual certification begins at \$550 and is based on the type of operation and gross income from organic sales. In addition to the certification fee, applicants must pay the cost of the annual inspection and any additional assessments, such as livestock or on-farm processing. The Agricultural Management Assistance Program offers a cost-share program that can reduce your costs significantly.

How long does it take?

New applicants should apply at least 6 months prior to the first planned organic production. The application and certification process usually takes 2 to 4 months, but depends on the time of year, complexity of the operation, potential non-compliances and other factors.

Still have more questions about Organic Certification?

One of our Certification Specialists would be happy to speak with you. Contact the PCO Office Monday through Friday 8:30-4:30.

406 S. Pennsylvania Avenue
Centre Hall, PA 16828
814-364-1344
pco@paorganic.org
www.paorganic.org