



USDA OVERSIGHT OF ORGANIC PRODUCTS



Organic is a labeling term for food or other agricultural products that have been produced according to the USDA organic regulations. USDA standards recognize four categories of organic production:

- **Crops:** Plants that are grown to be harvested as food, livestock feed, 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.

Organic standards cover the product's lifecycle from production to processing and handling, including:

- Natural resource and biodiversity conservation.
- Animal health and welfare.
- Allowed and prohibited substances.
- Pesticide and other residue testing.
- Certification and labeling requirements.
- Annual on-site compliance inspections.

USDA ORGANIC REGULATIONS

The USDA organic regulations describe the specific standards required for organic agricultural products. Producers and handlers must meet these standards to use the word "organic" or the USDA organic seal on food, feed, or fiber. Organic operations must show that they protect natural resources, conserve biodiversity,

and use only approved substances.

The USDA National Organic Program (NOP) administers these regulations, with substantial input from its citizen advisory board and the public.

ALLOWED + PROHIBITED SUBSTANCES

The organic standards are designed to allow natural substances in organic farming while prohibiting most synthetic substances. A portion of the USDA organic regulations list the exceptions to this basic rule. For example, sewage sludge, irradiation, genetic engineering, and most synthetic fertilizers and pesticides may not be used. In organic processed products, any non-organic ingredients must be specifically allowed (e.g., baking soda).

CERTIFICATION PROCESS

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.
- A written Organic System Plan describing the practices and substances to be used.

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 to ensure that practices comply



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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 for one year. Certification renewals follow the same process. <http://1.usa.gov/organic-certification>

CAN I USE THE USDA ORGANIC SEAL?

All raw certified organic products may be labeled with the USDA organic seal. To learn more about organic labeling, including which processed or multi-ingredient products may use the USDA organic seal, visit www.ams.usda.gov/NOPOrganicLabeling.

COMPLIANCE + ENFORCEMENT

If a farm or business violates the USDA organic regulations, punishments may include financial penalties up to \$11,000 per violation and/or suspension or revocation of an operation's organic certificate. Certifying agents are also subject to compliance and enforcement actions.

Suspected violations of the organic regulations may be reported to the USDA. Send an email to NOPCompliance@ams.usda.gov or call the National Organic Program at 202-720-3252.

ORGANIC TRADE PARTNERSHIPS

The USDA organic regulations allow foreign organic products to be sold as organic in the United States. This is possible through three channels, each of which is regularly audited to ensure compliance:

- An NOP-accredited certifying agent certifies the foreign farm or business to the USDA organic regulations.
- NOP authorizes a foreign government to accredit certifying agents within that country to the USDA organic regulations.
- The United States and a foreign country recognize each other's organic standards as equivalent. This designation allows organic products certified in one country to be sold as organic in the other.

HISTORY + REGULATORY AUTHORITY

When Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA, Title XXI of the 1990 Farm Bill), it set the foundation for national standards covering the production and handling of "organic" products. OFPA authorized USDA to establish the NOP to administer these standards and the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) to advise the NOP. The USDA organic regulations do not address food safety or nutrition.

The NOSB is designed by law to advise the NOP on which substances should be allowed or prohibited. Made up of dedicated public volunteers appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture, board members include organic growers, handlers, retailers, environmentalists, scientists, USDA-accredited certifying agents, and consumer advocates.

LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION?

The NOP provides additional resources on each of these topics on its website: www.ams.usda.gov/nop.

If you are considering organic certification or serve organic customers, visit USDA's Organic Literacy Initiative at www.ams.usda.gov/organicinfo.