

Steps to Organic Certification

STEP 1: Develop an organic system plan. The organic system plan is the foundation of the organic certification process. Created by the producer or handler seeking certification, it details how an operation will comply with the regulations based on its unique characteristics.

While plans differ based on operation type and needs, they address all practices of the farming or handling systems, such as tilling, grazing, harvesting, storing, and transporting. They also specify approved substances used during the growing or handling process, monitoring practices for organic systems, recordkeeping systems, and barriers that prevent commingling with nonorganic products or contact with prohibited substances.

STEP 2: Implement the organic system plan. Have it reviewed by a certifying agent. Organic operations are certified by private, foreign, or State entities that have been accredited by USDA. These entities are called agents and are located throughout the United States and around the world. Certifying agents are responsible for ensuring that organic products meet all organic standards.

STEP 3: Receive inspection. Every operation that applies for organic certification is first inspected on site by a certifying agent. These comprehensive top-to-bottom inspections differ in scope depending on the farm or facility. For example, for crops they include inspection of fields, soil conditions, crop health, approaches to management of weeds and other crop pests, water systems, storage areas and equipment. For livestock, they include inspection of feed production and purchase records, feed rations, animal living conditions, preventative health management practices (e.g., vaccinations), health records, and the number and condition of animals present on the farm. At a handling or processing facility, an inspector evaluates the receiving, processing, and storage areas used for organic ingredients and finished products.

STEP 4: Have a certifying agent review the inspection report. The inspector presents findings to the certifying agent following observation of practices on the farm or facility as they compare to the organic system plan. In addition to the inspection points mentioned above, the inspector also presents an assessment of the risk of contamination from prohibited materials and might even take soil, tissue or product samples as needed. The inspector also analyzes potential hazards and critical control points and makes sure procedures to prevent contamination are adequate. From there all findings are presented the certifying agent for review.

STEP 5: Receive a decision from the certifier. If an operation complies with the rules, the certifying agent issues an organic certificate listing products that can be sold as organic from that operation. The organic farm or facility continues to update its plan as it modifies its practices, and an inspection is done at least once a year to maintain certification. (See "[What is Organic Certification?](#)")