



## Fruit and Vegetable Organic Certification Basics

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### Introduction

Organic certification allows a farm to sell their products labeled with the USDA ORGANIC seal. It is a process where an independent third party, accredited by the USDA, certifies your produce was grown in accordance with the standards set by the National Organic Program (NOP). Certification is good for one year and then needs to be renewed. While organic certification is voluntary, it may be required by certain buyers.



Even if a farm is following organic principles, it cannot label produce as organic unless it is certified. Utah fruit and vegetable producers may decide to become certified organic in order to reach a specific customer base, to enter a new market, broaden marketing opportunities and/or increase prices charged for their produce. Certification costs vary depending on the certifying agent used and the size and complexity of the farm. The NOP states that certification costs range from a few hundred to several thousand dollars. This wide window may not be helpful for your decision making process.

For more exact estimates, contact different certifying agents and ask about costs. Expect to pay an application fee, annual renewal fee, assessment on annual production or sales, and inspection fees. Growers whose gross income from organic production is \$5,000 or less are exempt from certification. In this case, you do not need to be certified in order to sell or represent your products as organic. However, use of the USDA ORGANIC seal is prohibited. If you wish to use the USDA ORGANIC seal, you must be certified regardless of gross income.

Through the NOP, the [USDA offers an organic cost-share program](#) to provide assistance for certification related expenses. Payments cover up to 75% of your certification costs (up to \$750). Contact the [Utah Department of Ag and Food](#) for guidance in applying for the program.

### Steps to Certification

Once you decide to pursue organic certification, it takes a minimum of 3 years to transition from nonorganic production to certified organic production. Products grown during this transition period cannot be labeled as organic. This fact sheet identifies steps to becoming USDA ORGANIC certified, provides a list of resources to aid in the process, and briefly covers each section of the Organic System Plan (OSP).

The first step in the certification process is to choose an accredited certifying agent to work with. The National Organic Program's website provides a [certifier locator](#) for identifying certification

agencies in your area. Currently there is only one organic certifier with headquarters in Utah, but 12 others with operations in the state. Review your options by researching each certifying agent, compare application costs, and try to assess their strengths and weaknesses.

Once you have decided on the certifying agent, begin developing an Organic System Plan (OSP) for your farm or business and implement the practices in the areas you are seeking certification. In order to increase your chance of certification success, discuss your plan with the certifier to make sure your farm will be certifiable and your practices meet the NOP standards. The OSP plan outlines what you do on the farm, documents all farm practices and procedures, and then should be followed for each of the 3 transition years prior to applying for and becoming certified. Details of what needs to be included in an OSP are discussed later in this fact sheet.

After following your OSP for 3 years, submit the application packet to the certification agent and schedule an inspection of your farm. The certifying agent will review your application and verify compliance with organic regulations. On the scheduled day, the certifying agent will send an inspector to your farm and the inspector will conduct an on-site evaluation and issue a farm report. The certification agent will then review the application, assess the inspector's report, and either issue an organic certificate or deny the application. In the event certification is not granted, you will be notified of those areas that were not in compliance and if and what corrections are needed. Once certified, the certification lasts for 1 year and then re-certification is required. Therefore, the OSP is regularly evaluated and updated to maintain compliance with any changes that occur within the NOP standards.

### **Organic System Plan (OSP)**

An OSP describes how the farm has been and will be managed. It is a comprehensive and thorough record describing the practices and procedures used on the farm and how they meet the NOP standards for organic production. In addition to being a requirement for certification, the OSP can be a useful practice for any farm. Compiling the plan forces the grower to think about operations on their farm, practices used, and helps producers keep

better records. It is important to discuss any planned changes in practices and procedures (especially inputs) with your certifying agent to verify that they are compliant with the NOP standards. The OSP is a legally binding document and should be taken very seriously. It may seem daunting to write and update and requires some time to compile, but by taking one section at a time and maintaining open communication with your certifying agent, successful certification will occur.

All plans must include the following six sections:

1. Identify the practices and procedures performed.
2. List all materials that will be applied (to land or within the handling facility), including information on the composition, source, and location where the substance is used. If a material is restricted, the plan must address those restrictions.
3. Describe the monitoring practices used to evaluate the effectiveness of the organic plan.
4. Describe the recordkeeping system used.
5. Outline how the operation prevents commingling or contamination of organic products.
6. Certifying agents may require additional items be included in the plan to determine if an operation meets the NOP requirements.

The OSP is a working document and provides a guideline for crop production. However, things do not always go exactly to plan and changes to your OSP may be needed during the year. In the event you need to make a change, be sure to check with your certification agent before making that change. This ensures that you will still be in compliance with the NOP standards and will not jeopardize your certification status. The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) provides a [free template for an OSP](#). A brief description of each of the six sections to an OSP follows.



**Section 1: Identify practices and procedures performed.**

Submitting an in-depth and complete plan will save time later. As you compile the plan, remember that the certifier has never been to your farm and can only get an idea of what you do from what you include in your OSP. Providing a clear picture of all management practices used and documenting practices that prevent problems not just react to them, helps ensure the operation complies with NOP regulations. Be sure to discuss monitoring pests, using cover crops and crop rotation schedules, as well as a myriad of other good agricultural practices.

**Section 2: The materials list**

The OSP should contain a list of the different products and materials that are or may be used on your farm. Consider composts, fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides and any other materials that may be used on the farm. Ideally, these materials (inputs) should be part of the [National List of allowed or prohibited substances](#). In the event you need to apply something that was not included on your materials list, be sure to contact your certifier, receive approval, and add it to the OSP. If you inadvertently apply a prohibited material, you risk losing your certification and the land will need to go through the 3-year transition period again.

**Section 3: Monitoring practices**

Describe your plan for monitoring the practices and following the procedures described in Section 1 and the materials list in Section 2. Some ideas for monitoring practices include recording plant tissue test results and corresponding fertilizer applications, tracking planting dates and harvest details, describing your system for monitoring common crop diseases and prevention strategies, and the turning schedule and temperature records of on-site compost production.

**Section 4: Recordkeeping system**

A clear recordkeeping system ensures you document what happens on the farm. This will improve your ease of use and keep the certifiers inspection simple. The records should demonstrate how things are labeled, records all activities on the farm, describes when, where, and why things occurred, and provides a physical record (such as seed or chemical labels) of inputs or practices.

**Section 5: Contamination prevention**

If your operation produces both organic and non-organic foods, it is critical that you document in the OSP how you intend to keep the products separated. Illustrate with maps the different growing areas, clearly label seeds/seedlings so things do not get commingled, and be sure input practices are applied separately for each area. Show what steps you will take to prevent contamination during harvest and describe containers you will use. Discuss storage and transportation of the organic and conventionally grown produce. Also specify and label on your farm map buffer zones. Even if your entire operation is certified organic, you need to demonstrate how you will keep contamination from surrounding properties from occurring.

**Section 6: Additional information requested by the certification agent**

While it is best to strive to include everything in the Farm Plan, at times the certifier may request or require extra information. It commonly goes in this section.



**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the National Organic Program (NOP) is part of USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service which has the responsibility to maintain organic standards, accredit organic certifying agents, and enforce the NOP rules. The NOP has authority to take legal action to enforce the NOP standards if needed. For more details and to read the rule, visit the Agricultural Marketing Service National Organic Program homepage at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop>.

## **Additional resources for composing your Organic System Plan**

ATTRA Organic System Plan Template for Crop and/or Livestock Production:

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/report-publication/organic-system-plan-template>

ATTRA provided example farm's Organic System Plan:

<https://attra.ncat.org/attrapub/download.php?id=168>  
Detailed 64-page Guide for Organic Crop Producers provided by the NOP:

Coleman, P. 2012. Guide for Organic Crop Producers. USDA National Organic Program.

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/GuideForOrganicCropProducers.pdf>

Utah Department of Ag and Food Organic Farming Certification:

<http://ag.utah.gov/plants-pests/organic-certifications.html>

AMS Organic Literacy Initiative with Training Videos:

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/organic-certification/is-it-an-option>

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