



CERTIFICATION

MOSES ORGANIC FACT SHEET

How to Choose a Certification Agency & the Organic Certification Process

There are many USDA-accredited certification agencies that can certify your farm or enterprise as organic. So how do you find the right agency to work with you? Here are some questions you should ask the agencies and some things to ask neighboring farmers.

Ask the agency:

Do you certify other farms or operations of my type?

The agency should be familiar with your type of production—dairy, vegetables, sheep, grapes, nut trees, maple syrup, food processing—so your certification goes smoothly.

Do you certify other farms in my region?

The cost of certification typically is shared between many producers in a region. It makes sense to share expenses for the inspector's mileage, food, and lodging with other area farmers, rather than having to carry the financial burden of these costs on your own.

How do you charge for organic certification services?

Some agencies charge a flat fee plus a surcharge based on the dollar value of your yearly organic sales. Others have a sliding scale dependant on your anticipated organic sales, or on the amount of acreage of various commodities. In addition, some charge a fee to review each purchased crop or animal production input (fertilizers, animal health materials, feed supplements, pest control products, etc.). There may be an extra "membership" fee or "administrative" fee. Make sure you have a clear picture of all costs before you apply.

How quickly can you inspect and certify my farm once I have submitted my application?

If you are scheduled to sell organic milk by a certain date, wish to sell your corn crop out of the field, or have early spinach to sell, make sure the agency can complete the process in your time frame, so you are legally able to sell your product as organic when it is ready.

Ask other farmers in your region:

- Are you happy with the service you received?
- Does someone answer the phone or return calls promptly?
- Does the agency help you with the certification process?
- Does it provide blank on-farm audit trail template documents for farmers to use?

- Does it have a newsletter about new production methods or changes in the marketplace or government regulations?
- Does the agency offer educational activities or field days?
- Are policies and materials easy to understand and use?
- How long did you wait for the inspection to occur, the file to be reviewed, and the certificate to be issued?

Talk to buyers of organic commodities, especially the projected buyer for your crop.

If your buyer has a certification agency preference, make sure you are certified by that agency to save the cost of being certified by a different agency when you try to sell your crop or product. If the buyer wants your organic product to be approved for sale to foreign countries, there may be special inspection requirements.

The Organic Certification Process

All organically labeled agricultural products sold in the U.S. must meet USDA regulations for organic production. Farmers who follow all of the USDA regulations but sell less than \$5,000 per year of unprocessed, fresh, direct-to-consumer, organically labeled products are exempt from the certification requirement. All feeds for organic livestock must be certified organic. You can choose to certify only a portion of your production, such as one of your fields or some of your livestock, as long as the non-organic is separated from the organic. For detailed requirements on specific crops or livestock, see other MOSES Organic Fact Sheets or the *Guidebook for Organic Certification*.

Organic certification requires an application, inspection and review process with an organic certification agency. All applicants provide an organic system plan application to a certification agency, which details all aspects of production. All organic land must be treated organically for 36 months before harvesting a crop certified as organic. You do not need to be certified until the year you are eligible to sell an organic crop. Contact the agency before March of your third transition year in order to have an early season inspection. You cannot sell your crop/livestock as organic until you receive the official certificate at the end of certification process. You can learn more on the National Organic Program website (www.ams.usda.gov/nop), from your certification agency, or from MOSES (see box below).

Steps to Certification

A. Refer to the MOSES Upper Midwest Organic Resource Directory to find certification agencies that serve your area. The agency you choose will send you an initial certification packet of standards, forms and an organic system plan application for certification for that crop year. A fee may be charged for this packet.

B. You must complete the organic system plan application for certification and create field maps showing the sizes, borders and names of each field, corresponding 4-year histories, strategies for controlling weeds and insects, soil fertility, inputs (fertilizers, insecticides, seeds) harvest, storage and sales plans. The application has a multiple-choice list to help describe your farm's activities. The first-year application can take between two and eight hours to complete. Subsequent annual renewals will take less time. For new applications, each field requested for organic certification must have a clear date that the last prohibited materials were used. Where applicable, an affidavit stating no materials were used for the past three years could be provided from the landowners or most recent operators of the land.

C. Mail the farm plan application to the certification agency within the time frame requested. Late applications are typically charged a late fee, or not be processed at all. The certification agency reviews your application and attached documentation, making sure all items are included (maps, water tests if certifying livestock or a washed crop for human consumption, etc.) Information on seeds and other inputs used can be updated during the inspection if you don't have it when you submit your application.

E. The inspector receives your complete farm file from the agency and arranges an inspection. If you change agencies, the first agency must forward your information to the new certifier. The inspector will contact you, either by phone or mail, to set up the inspection time, get directions to the farm, and discuss any confusing items on the application.

F. The inspection can take 2-5 hours, depending on the size and complexity of the farm. Farms with livestock or on-farm processing (i.e. seed cleaning) may take longer. Fields, equipment, crop storage and documentation will be reviewed, including field borders where non-organic crops adjoin organic crops, in order to verify sufficient buffer zones to avoid drift of non-approved materials.

G. Organic inspectors can explain organic standards, but are not allowed to make recommendations about specific production issues or inputs. Rely on MOSES or your certification agency for this information.

H. The inspector writes a report and sends it to the certification agency along with your complete file, documents collected during the inspection (seed used, fertilizer tags,

etc.), and the inspection invoice.

I. The certification agency reviews the report and file. You will receive the report and will have the opportunity to make comments if there is incorrect information. The agency and the inspector keep all information confidential.

J. The certification agency decides to issue organic certification, to issue organic certification with some conditions (i.e. improve documentation to track harvest yields), or to deny organic certification (i.e. prohibited materials used). You will be notified of your certification status. If certified, you receive an annual organic certificate. Agencies have clear appeal policies if the certification decision is contested.

K. If certified, you may now sell the organic products listed on your certificate. Documentation of all crop production activities and inputs, storage and sales must be maintained for review by next year's inspector. There is no specific mandate on how the records are maintained; a calendar, spiral notebook or file folder is acceptable, as long as they are complete and can be easily understood by the inspector.

L. A renewal questionnaire must be submitted each year. Organic inspections also must occur annually. If you decide to discontinue your organic certification, you should contact your agency and surrender your organic certificate. If you do not do this, and do not submit your annual renewal, then the agency will revoke your certification. This revocation will be part of your permanent file and will make subsequent organic certification more complicated.

M. Each certification agency is required by the USDA to perform a specific number of surprise (unannounced) inspections of certified organic operations. Your farm may be subject to a surprise inspection at any time.

N. Cost share is available to cover the cost of organic certification through your state department of agriculture. Your certification agency or MOSES can provide contact information. Three quarters of the certification cost, or up to \$750 (whichever is less) is available. If you have livestock in addition to crops, you can receive up to \$1,500.

MIDWEST ORGANIC
& Sustainable Education Service
MOSES

The Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) provides education and resources to farmers to encourage organic and sustainable farming practices. To learn more, please see:

www.mosesorganic.org