

What are the Basic Requirements for Organic Certification?

The Organic Ecology website now features a comprehensive summary of the USDA National Organic Program Final Rule, written by Jim Riddle, UMN, and Miles McEvoy, Washington State Department of Agriculture. The summary was updated by Jim Riddle on December 20, 2006.

In simplified terms, the NOP regulations require:

For crop farms –

- 3 years with no application of prohibited materials (no synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, or GMOs) prior to harvest of the first certified organic crop;
- Implementation of an Organic System Plan, with proactive fertility systems; conservation measures; environmentally sound manure, weed, disease, and pest management practices; and soil building crop rotation systems;
- Use of natural inputs and/or approved synthetic substances on the National List;
- No use of prohibited substances while certified;
- No use of genetically engineered organisms, (GMOs) defined in the rule as "excluded methods";
- No sewage sludge or irradiation;
- Use of organic seeds, when commercially available;
- Use of organic seedlings for annual crops;
- Restrictions on use of raw manure and compost;
- Maintenance of buffer zones, depending on risk of contamination; and
- No residues of prohibited substances exceeding 5% of the EPA tolerance.

For livestock operations –

- Implementation of an Organic Livestock Plan;
- Mandatory outdoor access, when seasonally appropriate;
- Access to pasture for ruminants;
- No antibiotics, growth hormones, slaughter byproducts, or GMOs;
- 100% organic feed and approved feed supplements;
- Sound animal husbandry and preventative health care;
- Organic management from last third of gestation or 2nd day after hatching; and
- No rotating animals between organic and non-organic management.

For processing operations –

- No commingling or contamination of organic products during processing;
- Implementation of an Organic Handling Plan;
- No use of GMOs or irradiation;
- Proactive sanitation and facility pest management practices;
- Use of organic agricultural ingredients in "organic" products, when commercially available; and

- Use of approved label claims for “100% organic”, “organic” (at least 95% organic ingredients), “Made with organic ingredients” (at least 70% organic ingredients), and proper use of the word “organic” in ingredient list (less than 70% organic ingredients).