



New Jersey Department of Agriculture
Organic, Sustainable, and Regenerative Agriculture Program

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ORGANIC CERTIFICATION FACT SHEET FOR FARMERS

What is Organic Agriculture? Organic agriculture is an agricultural system that uses cultural, biological, and mechanical methods to improve soil health and increase biodiversity. These techniques provide fertility, suppress disease, and manage insects and weed pests without relying solely on routine inputs of synthetic fertilizers and toxic pesticides which can degrade the system. An organic farmer uses management techniques such as soil building, crop rotation, cover cropping, and the promotion of beneficial insects and plants to control unwanted pest populations and disease pressures. When needed natural and approved materials are used for fertility and pest control. Organic livestock must be fed organic feed, allowed year-round access to the outdoors (*except under specific conditions*), and be raised per animal health and welfare standards. Livestock health care emphasizes prevention of disease and prohibits the use of antibiotics and hormones. Organic products must not be bio-engineered (*genetically modified*), subjected to irradiation, or produced with sewage sludge (*biosolids*).

Certified Organic farms are comprised of production areas (*i.e. fields, woodlots*) that have had no prohibited substances applied for 36 months prior to organic harvest. Production areas must be managed in accordance with the USDA's Organic Regulations (*referred to as "The Rule"*).

Who has to be Certified? §205.101 of the rule explains the exemptions and exclusions from certification for organic farmers (*producers*), organic food processors (*handlers*), retailers (*stores and markets*), and food establishments (*restaurants*). Operations whose gross agricultural income from organic sales is \$5,000 or less per year could be exempt from certification but must still comply with the production and handling requirements in the Rule, to include any applicable labeling and record keeping requirements. Even if "exempt" from certification all operations claiming organic must be familiar with and follow the USDA's regulations for production, handling, labeling, and record keeping.

Certification Process: When applying for certification farmers must document the organic management to be used as well as the prior three-year histories of each organic production area. You must have a good idea of exactly what you will be doing, and everything you will be using, to complete a proper application. Once you have a notion of what you will be doing the next step is to contact an "Accredited Certification Agent" to start your application process. The Rule requires applicants to submit an "organic system plan". This plan is created by completing the appropriate forms from the certifier. Once a complete application is received a trained organic inspector will contact you to schedule your onsite inspection to verify your information and witness site conditions and record keeping systems. Organic inspectors gather information but do not participate in the final decision-making process. The inspection report generated, and all application papers and attachments (*organic system plan*) are fully reviewed by the accredited agent for compliance with the Rule. All production, handling, and storage methods and materials will be scrutinized. Operations with noncompliance are given time to correct. Once compliant with ALL requirements an organic certificate is issued. The entire process can take a few months so be careful with your planning. Once earned, certification remains in effect until surrendered, suspended, or revoked. Operations must complete an annual update to their organic system plan and undergo an annual site inspection.

Help With Your Plan: The NJDA Organic, Sustainable, and Regenerative Agriculture (*OSRA*) Program can explain the Rule requirements and can help you with your organic system plan development. NJDA can also help you find an accredited agent who is a good fit for your operation. Contact the OSRA program for assistance.

Certification Regulations: All certified organic operations must be in compliance with the Rule. A copy of the regulatory text should be made available to every applicant by the agent. For a preliminary look you can access the Rule on the NOP website at www.ams.usda.gov/nop, or request a copy from the NJDA OSRA Program.

**Call the NJDA OSRA Program for more details at (609) 913-6505 or
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