



# OEFFA Organic Certification Fact Sheet

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## Organic Labeling An Introduction for Farmers' Market Managers

**O**rganic certification is intended to give producers using sustainable agricultural practices support for the claims they make about their products, and consumers a uniform, verified standard they can trust. It is, at its root, a labeling and marketing program. Thus, as a market manager, it is important to know exactly what it means when a producer uses the word "organic" to describe their products, and also when it is appropriate for them to do so.



### Overview of the Certification Process

Any product labeled as certified organic must be produced on a farm that goes through an annual certification process to verify that their practices comply with the USDA's National Organic Program (NOP) standards. The USDA accredits certifying agencies to perform this verification. Farmers submit documentation yearly describing their practices and inputs and an independent inspector conducts an on-site visit to verify the accuracy of this information. The inspector completes a report for the certifier and then the certifier issues a certificate if the farm is in compliance.

Under the NOP, with one exception (see below), all products labeled as "organic" must go through this process. A producer cannot decide that if, for example, they don't spray synthetic pesticides they can market their product as organic. Mislabeling violations such as this can carry a fine of up to \$10,000 for each incident.

Vendors labeling their product as organic may gain an edge with regard to sales or pricing. For this reason, market managers should try to eliminate instances of false advertising so that those producers who go through the time and expense of certifying their organic products will be working in a fair market and so that consumers can be assured that they are purchasing the products they seek.

### Exemption

The one exception is that the NOP provides an exemption for producers who sell less than \$5,000 (gross) per year of organic product. Anyone who claims an exemption is still required to comply with the organic production and handling standards of the NOP and the specific labeling requirements for exempt producers. The difference is that exempt producers do not have to apply and pay for certification.

### What to Ask

Given all this, we think it's a good idea for farmers markets to ask two things of their vendors when it comes to organics:

- First, ask all of your certified organic vendors to display the certificate issued by their certifier.
- Second, suggest that any vendor who claims the exemption because they sell less than \$5,000 worth of product file a declaration of exemption with an accredited certifier.

The signed declaration varies from certifier to certifier, but generally will have the producer affirm that they have read and understand the NOP standards, that everything they sell or advertise as organic is produced and processed in accordance with the NOP rules, and that their gross income from sale of organic products totals \$5,000 or less annually. Producers who are exempt may only market their products as "organic" (not "certified organic") and may not use the organic seal.

Terms such as "pesticide free," "sustainably grown," "chemical free," naturally raised" can be used without violating NOP rules.



### Resources

USDA NOP website:  
<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/nop>  
OEFFA's website:  
<http://www.oeffa.org/certification.php>