



OEFFA Organic Certification Fact Sheet

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The Path to Organic Certification

You've decided that certification is right for your operation – what's next?

Organic certification is a rigorous process by which an independent organic certifier verifies an operation's ability to comply with USDA National Organic Program (NOP) standards. OEFFA does not certify an individual farmer, piece of land, or facility, but instead verifies that the organic management of an operation as described in an Organic System Plan (OSP) is in compliance with the NOP standards. The path to organic certification is smoothest when the certifier and the operation seeking certification work in partnership.

OSP and Application Fees

The path to certification begins with the submission of an OSP. This is a written plan describing how you will manage your organic crops, livestock, and/or processing facility. The NOP standards [NOP § 205.201] require that an OSP contain the following information:

- (1) A description of all practices and procedures to be performed and maintained;
- (2) A list of all substances to be used as a production or handling input;
- (3) A description of the monitoring practices and procedures;
- (4) A description of the recordkeeping system implemented;
- (5) A description of management practices and barriers established to prevent commingling or organic and nonorganic products;
- (6) Other information the certifier needs to assess your operation.

Applicable fees are due at the time your OSP is submitted for review. This completes your application for certification.

Initial Review

Upon receipt, OEFFA staff conduct a thorough review of your OSP to ensure that all sections are complete, that the information you provide is consistent throughout the OSP, and that your inputs and practices are compliant with the organic standards. If more information is needed, OEFFA will contact you at this stage.

Five Steps to Organic Certification

1. Application for Certification
2. Initial Review of Organic System Plan
3. On-Site Inspection
4. Post-Inspection Review & Recommendation
5. Certification Decision

On-Site Inspection

Once the initial review is complete, OEFFA sends your file to an inspector who will contact you to schedule your inspection. The purpose of the inspection is to verify that the plan you submitted to OEFFA is being carried out on your operation and to observe the primary documents and records you keep to demonstrate compliance. The inspector will note all observations in a report that is sent back to OEFFA for review prior to making a final decision.



Post-Inspection Review

When OEFFA receives the inspector's report, a final review is conducted which includes reading the inspection report and reviewing the OSP once more. If this final review identifies any areas where the operation is not in compliance with NOP Standards, a notice of noncompliance letter may be sent and you will be given a deadline to respond. We generally request a plan for how your operation will address the issue and continue to comply in the future. Once you have provided all requested information, an OEFFA staff member makes a recommendation about whether or not to certify the operation.

Certification Decision

A different OEFFA staff person than has reviewed and/or inspected your operation makes the final certification decision. If any noncompliances were identified that are not correctable such as treated seed, the application of a prohibited substance, or the use of nonorganic livestock feed, OEFFA may deny certification of the affected portion(s) of the operation. If approved, a certificate is issued and you may begin to market your products as organic. Organic certificates remain valid unless surrendered, suspended, or revoked. All certified operations are required to renew certification annually which involves updating their OSP and an annual on-site inspection.



Helpful Tips for Timely Certification

- The timeline for certification of a new applicant is approximately 4 months from the date a complete OSP is received with full payment. Application materials are sent out in January with the first deadline in mid-March.
- Consider your timeline for certification and let OEFFA know what products you plan to certify. While all new operations are highest priority, if you have early crops to harvest, please let us know your timeline.
- Submit a completed OSP along with appropriate fees. Do not leave any blanks. If a question is not applicable to your operation, please select N/A. If there is no option to select N/A then the questions relate to your operation and should be answered as fully and completely as possible.
- Respond promptly: During the review process you may be asked to provide clarification or additional information to OEFFA. A prompt response to a request from your certifier expedites the review process.

OEFFA Certification carefully prioritizes work in an effort to ensure that all applicants are issued a certificate efficiently. This means that renewing operations who are not adding new land, crops, or products to their OSP may not be inspected until later in the year.

Order of Operations

- *New applicants* – It is crucial that first time applicants are inspected early in the growing season but not before production because the inspector must verify the operation's ability to comply with organic standards.
- *Adding new land or products* – If a certified operation is expanding or changing their operation, OEFFA needs to inspect these aspects of the operation before harvest or production. Please communicate your needs in advance so that we can plan accordingly.
- *Renewing operations* – Those who do not need additions made to the certificate will be reviewed, inspected, and renewed on an annual basis. OEFFA will decide the best time of year for these activities based on a number of factors. We balance expediency and good customer service with the need to carefully uphold organic integrity and keep the cost of certification reasonable for the operations we serve.

Certification Timeline for Producers

- ❖ **January:** Application and renewal forms are sent to all producers. *Electronic applicants – please be sure to set your spam filter to receive emails from organic@oeffa.org.*
- ❖ **March 15th:** Early-bird deadline. Save money by submitting your forms and fees early.
- ❖ **April 15th:** Final deadline for new producers and standard deadline for renewing producers. Renewing producers must have renewal paperwork and fees post-marked by this date to avoid late fees.
- ❖ **June 15th:** Final deadline for renewing producers. Renewal or surrender is required and any certified operations that have not contacted OEFFA by this date will be issued a noncompliance. All outstanding noncompliances must be resolved before an operation is eligible to apply for organic certification in the future.
- ❖ **May-November:** The majority of annual inspections take place.