

Organic certification and standards

Extracted from COG's
Organic Field Crop Handbook

ORGANIC CERTIFICATION IS A SYSTEM OF REGULATION designed to ensure that organic producers comply with Canadian and international standards of organic production and processing.

The demand for organic certification arose from a need to accurately describe an environmentally sound production process and to assure consumers that organic producers and processors follow strict quality standards.

National standard for organic agriculture

Certification protects farmers by validating that they are following organic production practices. In some cases, the term 'organic' has been loosely used in the marketplace and there is potential for fraud. With certification, there is added confidence in the marketplace.

In Canada, the organic movement is struggling to create an infrastructure that facilitates organic trade, both between provinces and internationally.

Farmers, processors and concerned citizens have worked with the Canadian Organic Advisory Board (COAB) and the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) to create the National Standard for Organic Agriculture.

The National Standard was released in 1999, and is available from the Canadian General Standards Board. Many other certification bodies have their own standards, which are very similar to the national standards.

Often people assume that organic certification standards are simply lists of forbidden substances and practices. However, organic standards are more than that. To produce certified organic products, farmers must take many positive steps to follow the principles of organic production (outlined in Chapter 1 of the Organic Field Crop Handbook).

Buffer zones

Buffer zones are required between the organic fields and areas that might contaminate the crop with prohibited substances (such as conventionally farmed fields or highways). The size of the buffer zone varies depending on the crop and the certification body.

Often buffer zones are the width of several tractor passes, and can be used to grow a non-organic forage or feed crop. Crops that can be cross-pollinated with genetically-engineered crops (e.g. canola, corn), need very large buffer zones.

Transition period

A transition period is required for farmers who are converting from conventional to organic farming. There must be at least three full years between the last use of a prohibited substance and organic certification.

In addition, all the aspects of the certification standard (e.g. soil-building program, crop rotation) must be in place for at least two full years before the farm products can become certified organic.

Farmers can make the transition gradually, converting certain fields to organic production while still using conventional methods on other fields. However, many certification bodies require that the farmer submit and adhere to a plan to convert the entire farm over time. Switching fields in and out of organic production is not permitted.

Parallel production

Farms can continue to produce certain products non-organically without a conversion plan. For example, many farmers produce organic field crops but non-organic livestock. Farmers cannot however, produce the same product organically and non-organically unless the non-organic production is under a conversion plan.

Certification agencies

Currently, certification is conducted by numerous organizations, called certifying bodies, across the country. Most of these certifying bodies are non-profit organizations initially formed by farmers within local areas.

As well, the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA) has chapters across Canada. All of the certifying bodies use similar certification standards and procedures.

Certification process

The certification process starts with a producer choosing the specific certification agency based on:

- the market goal the producer has for the product (e.g. local or export market),
- the organic standards the agency uses, and
- the costs involved.

When producers believe their operation qualifies for organic certification, they fill in detailed application forms. The required information can include:

- three-year field histories,
- description of crop rotations,
- acreage maps,
- sources of off-farm inputs like seed, inoculant and soil amendments,
- composting methods,
- methods of fertility management with descriptions of applications of soil amendments,
- methods of pest, weed and disease management,
- record-keeping systems,
- type of storage system,
- types of equipment used, and
- products requested for certification.

There are different questionnaires for processors, greenhouse operations, livestock producers, brokers and others. Some agencies use shortened forms for re-certification.

Questionnaires are sent to the certification agency with required supporting documents (e.g. soil tests, water tests, affidavits, maps). Membership agreements are completed. Dues and certification fees are paid.

Certification costs vary between agencies. Some certification bodies charge flat rates for all farms. Other certification bodies have a series of rates with low flat rates for small market gardens and the highest rates for processing or large mixed livestock operations. Still other agencies charge user fees that are a percentage of the farm's gross income.

The Certification Coordinator of the agency reviews the paperwork to ensure that it is clear and complete. An inspector or verification agent is contracted to do the inspection.

The inspector receives a file including the questionnaire, field histories, maps and supporting documents. Usually a letter from the certification committee is included describing any concerns, along with the last year's inspection report.

The inspector conducts the inspection with a farm tour and an interview, usually taking half a day to complete paperwork, order documents and conduct a sample audit review.

After the inspection, the inspector writes a thorough but concise inspection report giving an overall picture of the operation as well as specific details. The report is balanced, giving both the strengths and weaknesses of the operation.

The report summarizes potential noncompliance issues, and is submitted to the certification body with all the necessary documentation. Some certification agencies send a copy of the inspector's report to producers along with the certification committee report; other agencies only give producers a copy of the certification committee report.

The certification committee of the agency reviews the entire file and issues a certification decision. These decisions can include approval, approval with specific

conditions, denial with reasons clearly stated, or more information may be needed to make the decision.

The producer is notified about the certification committee's decision. If there are any conditions that need to be met, the client may sign a contract with a time line.

Needed changes may be verified by a follow-up inspection or they may be reviewed during the next annual inspection. If certification is denied, there is an appeal process.

Once the organic certificate is received, the producer can finalize sales of the certified organic products.

This text was extracted from COG's Organic Field Crop Handbook. For the full text, and **tons** of other practical tips for organic farmers, you can buy this book at the COG website (www.cog.ca).