NOP’s Is Organic an Option for Me webpage (www.ams.usda.gov/organicinfo) contains a wealth of resources on making the transition to organic production and handling, including:

- **Guide to Organic Certification** — Provides an overview of the organic certification process and additional resources for prospective organic farms and businesses.
- **Guide for Organic Crop Producers** — Provides more in-depth information for those interested in transitioning to organic crop production.
- **Guide for Organic Processors** — Provides information on organic regulations and certification for processors and handlers.
- **Is Organic and Option for Me? Brochure** — Provides an introduction to organic standards and certification, including frequently asked questions and available USDA resources.
- **USDA Organic Resource Guide** — Provides information on relevant USDA programs, organized into four sections: Direct Organic Producer Support; Organic Research, Data, and Technical Information; Marketing and Infrastructure; and USDA General Services.

Through the Sound and Sensible Initiative, NOP and organizations in the organic community have implemented a series of projects to help make the organic certification process more affordable, accessible, and attainable. Information on this series of projects to help make the organic certification process more affordable, accessible, and attainable.

In addition, NOP has developed a series of factsheets covering a variety of topics related to organic production and certification, including:

- About the National Organic Program
- Introduction to Organic Practices
- Labeling Organic Products
- Organic Labeling at Farmers Markets
- USDA Oversight of Organic Products
- How to File a Complaint about Violations of the Organic Standards
- What is Organic Certification?
- Do I Need To Be Certified Organic?
- The Organic Certification Cost Share Program
- The National Organic Standards Board
- Organic Processing and Handling Standards

These factsheets along with many others from the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service are available at www.ams.usda.gov/publications/Fact_Sheets. For more information on any of these resources, or organic practices and certification, please visit USDA’s Organic Agriculture page at www.ams.usda.gov/organic or the USDA AMS NOP homepage at www.ams.usda.gov/NOP.

You may also write or call us at:

United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 2642, Stop 0268
Washington, DC 20250-0268
Phone: (202) 720-3252

Making the Transition to Organic Production and Handling

Adopting organic conservation practices can help producers and handlers access new customers and markets as well as comply with regulatory policy. However, making the transition to organic production and handling takes both time and planning. Implementing an organic system requires a tactful approach to successfully carry out common agricultural activities, such as managing pests, building soil health, and improving livestock and herd health. Organic producers and handlers must also take additional care to prevent mixing organic with non-organic products and contact with certain substances.

Organic agriculture uses cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. Conservation practices are typically bundled into a conservation system to maintain or enhance soil and water quality as well as conserve wetlands, grasslands, forests, and wildlife habitat. Avoiding the use of synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irrigation, and genetic engineering are paramount to organic farming. To learn more about organic practices, see the “Introduction to Organic Practices” factsheet at www.ams.usda.gov/publications/.

### Transition Overview

Before producers can use land to raise organic products, they must ensure that no prohibited fertilizers or pesticides have been applied to the land during a three-year transition period. Some lands, such as fallow or pasture lands, may be immediately certified if three years have already passed.

Producers interested in participating in United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs should ensure they follow policies for highly erodible land and wetland conservation. View information at 1.usa.gov/1j4gFt6.

The USDA National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances (National List) identifies substances that are prohibited in organic production. To evaluate whether land needs to undergo a three-year transition, view information at 1.usa.gov/1uOTSHD.

After completing the transition, producers and processors must get certified. This requires preparing an Organic System Plan (OSP), submitting it to a USDA-accredited certifier, and having an onsite inspection. Initial certification can take three to six months. Maintaining certification status through annual inspections is a key part of the organic regulations.

To support the progress of organic system planning, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides financial and technical assistance for the development of a “Conservation Plan Supporting Organic Transition.” This conservation activity plan documents decisions by producers/growers who agree to implement a system of conservation practices which assist the producer to transition from conventional farming or ranching systems to organic production systems. Once certified, organic producers and processors can label their products as organic as long as they continue to follow the organic regulations.

### Assistance for Transitioning Producers

Additional support offered by USDA NRCS to producers who are either in transition or already certified is listed below:

- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)**
  - Organic Initiative provides financial and technical assistance to certified or transitioning organic producers who are interested in conservation planning and who voluntarily implement conservation practices. View information at 1.usa.gov/1rXFWL.

- **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)**
  - Provides financial assistance to producers that have demonstrated a benchmark for ecological conditions on their farm and are voluntarily enhancing their stewardship activities through advanced level conservation activities. Typically, producers will be guided to CSP after they have successfully completed EQIP conservation practices. View information at 1.usa.gov/1NBrzdh.

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Organic certification costs vary and are often on a sliding scale, based on the size of the operation. Before starting the certification process, producers and handlers should review a certifier's fee structure and billing cycle. Total fees range from a few hundred to several thousand dollars for larger operations. Producers and handlers must pay these fees in order to get certified.

USDA Organic Certification Cost-Share Programs reimburse producers and handlers for up to 75 percent of organic certification costs once certification is complete, with a maximum of $750 per category (crops, wild crops, livestock, and processed products).

For additional information on the organic certification process and financial assistance, please visit www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/ocscp.

The entire certification process typically takes 3 to 6 months and must be completed before products can be sold as organic.

Split Operations

Many transitioning producers choose to convert only a portion of their land to organic production, while continuing to use conventional practices on other plots. This is known as a "split operation" and allows producers to begin raising organic products gradually. Producers may choose to transition to a fully organic operation over time or maintain split operations indefinitely.

When completing an OSP, it is particularly important for split operations to document any way that organic products might mix or come in contact with non-organic products or prohibited substances. Split operations may need to provide information on both conventional and organic activities so that certifiers and inspectors can make sure the products are separated.