

## ORGANIC CERTIFICATION FACT SHEET

An organic site is any field or farm parcel from which harvested crops are intended to be marketed as organic or transitional. USDA organic regulations require that farmers maintain the organic integrity of their land and crops by minimizing the risk of contamination by prohibited substances outside site boundaries.

Organic sites must have distinct, defined boundaries and buffer zones such as runoff diversions to prevent the unintended application of a prohibited substance to the crop or contact with a prohibited substance applied to adjoining land that is not under organic management. **7CFR §205.202**

### What is an organic buffer?

A buffer is an area located along organic sites to protect crops from activities on adjacent land that may pose a contamination risk. Producers must establish buffers around organic sites when applying to bring land into organic certification. Buffers must be updated if activities on adjacent land change and pose a new risk.

The size of a buffer will vary depending on the risk to organic crops. Buffers must be sufficient in size or include features (e.g., windbreaks or a diversion ditch) to prevent the possibility of contact with a prohibited substance or input on the organic crops. If adjacent land is certified organic or it can be verified that no prohibited substances are applied, a buffer may not be necessary.

### Are there different types of buffers?

There are two types of buffers based on how the buffer is managed.

1. **Passive buffer management** occurs when the distance between the organic site and the location where a prohibited substance is applied is sufficient in size or other features. Passive management plans include maintaining natural areas around an organic field or planting dense hedgerows between adjacent land.
2. **Active buffer management** is when the distance between the organic land and the location where a prohibited substance is applied is not sufficient. Additional action is needed to protect the integrity of organic land and crops. Active buffer management includes:
  - Diverting harvested crop from inside the site boundaries to the nonorganic market.
  - Destroying (disking or mowing) crop inside the site boundaries instead of harvesting it.
  - Leave cropland within the organic site unplanted or unharvested.

Factors influencing buffer management	Increases Risk	Decreases Risk
Prevailing wind moves towards organic site from nonorganic production	✓	
Prohibited materials applied to adjacent land with an air blast sprayer or aerial applicator	✓	
Adjacent nonorganic field is higher in elevation than the organic site	✓	
Adjacent land is unmanaged lawn, pasture, field, or natural land		✓
Records demonstrate only approved inputs were used on adjacent land		✓
Dense hedgerows are maintained along field borders		✓

## How are buffers evaluated at inspection?

As part of the on-site inspection, organic land is evaluated to confirm buffers are in place and management practices are adequate to prevent contact with prohibited substances. Inspectors will also confirm the boundaries and adjacent land information is accurately recorded in the organic system plan. Buffers can be updated as part of the inspection process if a new risk is identified.

Inspectors evaluate passive buffer management through observation. Active management plans must be documented and records must be available at an inspection to demonstrate the practices are effective. If the buffer management plan is to divert crops grown within the buffer to the nonorganic market, records need to be available to show this activity occurred. If a certified business has an agreement with a neighboring farm to not apply prohibited inputs to the adjoining land, the neighbor's application records must be available to show the agreement is in place.

## Are samples collected to test buffers?

The sampling of organic crops is one method used to test the effectiveness of buffer management plans. Samples are taken based on risk and at the discretion of the inspector. If a sample comes back positive at any level for a prohibited input, the source of contamination must be identified and the buffer management plan may need to be updated to address the contamination.

When residue testing detects a prohibited substance at a level greater than 5 percent of the Environmental Protection Agency's tolerance for that residue, the crop can not be sold, labeled, or represented as organic or transitional.

## Additional Resources

### What are Buffer Zones and Why Does My Farm Need Them?

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/6%20Buffer%20Zones%20FINAL%20RGK%20V2.pdf>

### NOP Guide for Organic Crop Producers

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/GuideForOrganicCropProducers.pdf>

WSDA Organic Program  
PO Box 42560 | Olympia WA 98504-2560  
(360) 902-1805 | [organic@agr.wa.gov](mailto:organic@agr.wa.gov)  
<http://agr.wa.gov/organic>