



A Voice for Organic Agriculture in NH

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Organic Certification in New Hampshire

Organic certification is done through the [New Hampshire Department of Agriculture Markets and Food](#). NOFA-NH has a great relationship with Commissioner Lorraine Merrill and Organic Inspector, Vickie Smith, and supports the NHDAMF's efforts to improve organic food production in our state.

Organic certification can feel out of reach for many small farmers and cottage industries just starting out. Vickie Smith, organic inspector at the NH Department of Agriculture, Markets and Food, helps us make sense of the lengthy rules and myriad of web links. It's easier than you think!

This is just a brief overview. See the application form, NOP website, and inquire with your certifier for details. If you intend to buy-in ingredients to make a multi-ingredient product and/or will process your products, you will need to also become an organic handler. Other regulations like having a homestead or commercial kitchen may apply and should be in place prior to organic certification.



Who needs to be certified?

Anyone who grows or makes and sells goods labeled as organic. There are two types of certification. Organic Producers grow crops to sell in relatively unprocessed forms. An Organic Processor and Handler may combine ingredients from various sources and process the ingredients by cooking, freezing, canning, grinding, etc. For example, a cottage industry devoted to making cookies, herbal remedies, body care products, roasted coffee, or jellies would be considered handlers.

Who's exempt?

- If you gross less than \$5,000 in sales (wholesale and/or retail) from organic products, you may sell products labeled as organic without being certified. You still need to abide by the organic regulations and be able to prove that you make less than \$5,000. Farms and business that try to skate by "under the radar" should know that USDA inspectors are scouting out products in area stores.

What does certification entail?

- Application, Fee & Inspection: Most applications are due on March 1. Once certified, you'll need to submit an organic system plan annually.
- Read the Regs: Take the time to get familiar with the National Organic Program (NOP) Rules. [Read the "Organic Regulations" and "Program Handbook."](#)
- Recordkeeping: Keep track of all receipts, list of ingredients for products, breeding of livestock, when you apply amendments, etc. Vickie offers sample record-keeping forms for free.
- Organic System Plan (OSP): You must create an OSP each year that shows crop rotation and other land plans.
- Use Only Approved Products.

Transitioning to organic?

Call the NHDAMF office to let them know and ask questions. For example, the three-year transition period for organic cropland may be waived if you can prove that no prohibited chemicals have been applied. The "Transition to Organic" form can help (but is not required).

Fuzzy on labels?

The USDA owns the term “organic” including “100% organic,” “organic” (95 percent or more), “made with organic ingredients” (70 percent or more of ingredients certified organic). The percentages exclude salt and water content, and all ingredients must be verifiable. “Made with organic ingredients” is the most often abused. An exempt (under \$5K) handler can’t use “organic” on the main label but could list specific ingredients as organic on the back. For processed products, labels and product profile sheets must be approved by the organic certifying agent. It doesn’t cost extra; just send them in with the application. Be sure to get approval if you make new labels or change formulas. Not sure? Just ask!

Why get certified?

Certification ensures for your customers that a third party has verified your practices as organic. You can also sell your products to other certified organic producers, handlers, and processors, and certified organic products are becoming more marketable in our community.

How much will it cost?

Fees will vary but start at \$100 for a producer and/or \$250 for a handler plus extra fees and inspection. See the fee table on the website for details. A processing inspection costs \$35 per hour plus mileage, and most inspections take one to three hours. NHDAMF is considering creating a joint producer/handler certification at a lower cost than the two separate certifications. Give them a shout if you support this idea.

Is there any way to cut costs?

Yes! The National Organic Certification Cost Share Program offers 75 percent of your certification costs back once you are certified and submit a cost share application. “Only about 60 percent of applicants take advantage of the cost-share program, which is too bad because it’s free federal money. We get a lot of money that people don’t take advantage of,” says Vickie. The cost-share program is confirmed through September 30, 2012. This is part of the Farm Bill and is in currently in danger of being removed or reduced in the next Farm Bill. Contact your congressional delegates to ask them to protect it!

Yes, inspectors can be your friends!

One of the nice things about having an organic certifier right here in New Hampshire is its accessibility. They are also less expensive than most other certifying agents. “We are regulatory in nature, we enforce regulations from the laws, but we are customer-service based, too. We like to help people out,” says Vickie, who has been in the job for more than 20 years. Although the NHDAMF office can’t recommend specific brands for organic sprays, etc, she is happy to provide samples of record-keeping forms, answer questions, and she frequently does workshops on certification topics like labeling. Certification looks scary at first, but a little research will prove it less cumbersome than you may think. “One of our farmers in Stewartstown just became certified. Now that she has made it through the process, she is baffled as to why everyone thinks it’s so hard,” says Suzanne Brown at the NH Institute of Agriculture and Forestry.

Adapted from 2011 Newsletter Article, by Maria Noel Groves

Farming

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Upcoming Events

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