



REVERENCE FOR THE LAND®

• Organic Farming - Meeting the Standards •

Organic Farming - The NOP Rules and Organic Certification

In the earliest years of organic farming in the U.S., most of what was produced was consumed locally. In those years, it was common for the consumer to either have direct contact with the grower, or have confidence in a retailer who purchased directly from the grower. However, as the organic market began to expand in the 1970s, the supply chain lengthened. There was a greater likelihood that organic products would pass through many hands and travel many miles between the farmer and the consumer. Under such circumstances, the end buyer needed some means to confirm that the purchased product was truly organic. Likewise, the farmer needed a way of proving to the consumers that he or she used organic methods. The organic industry addressed these needs through a process called third-party certification.

In essence, organic certification is a simple concept. A third party—an organic certifying agent evaluates producers, processors, and handlers to determine whether they conform to an established set of operating guidelines called organic standards. Those who conform are certified by the agent and allowed to use a logo, product statement, or certificate to document their product as certified organic. In other words, the certifier vouches for the producer and assures buyers of the organic product's integrity.

By the late 1980s, there were a number of private and state-run certifying bodies operating in the United States. Standards varied among these entities, causing problems in commerce. Certifiers often refused to recognize products certified by another agent as organic, which was a particular problem for organic livestock producers seeking feed, and for processors trying to source ingredients. In addition, a number of well-publicized incidents of fraud began to undermine the credibility of the organic industry. In an effort to curb these problems, the organic community pursued federal legislation. The result was the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, which mandated the creation of the National Organic Program (NOP) and the passage of uniform organic standards. These standards are now incorporated in the National Organic Program Regulations, which can be found on the NOP Website - www.ams.usda.gov/nop. Implementation of the Regulations began on April 21, 2001; with all organic certifiers, producers, processors, and handlers being fully compliant on October 21, 2002.

The principal means by which the NOP is implementing the Regulations is through certifying agencies that it accredits. Through accreditation, the NOP assures that the certifier understands and is using the National Standard; accreditation also confirms that the certifier can conduct the business of certification properly.

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