



Transitioning to Certified Organic in Michigan – Where to Start?

By Vicki Morrone, Michigan State University Center for Regional Food System Outreach specialist for organic production

Who Can Benefit From This Information?

- Farmers seeking to transition to organic practices.
- New farmers deciding whether to farm organically.
- Agricultural educators who want to have a better understanding of organic farming.
- Farmers who want to include “USDA organic” or “organic” on the label of their grains, produce and livestock.

Facts to Consider

- Food labeled as organic must be USDA-certified.
- Certification can be done only by a USDA-approved certifying agency.
- Farms that gross less than \$5,000 per year are exempt from organic certification but still follow the guidelines of the National Organic Program (NOP).
- Growers wishing to export organic produce from the United States must meet the certification requirements of the importing country.

Should You Certify Your Farm?

- Do you have the knowledge or means to obtain the knowledge to farm using the organic practices required for certification?
- Will you gain value if the farm is certified, through either price premium, additional customers or personal satisfaction?
- Does this method of farming fit with your short- and long-term production and marketing goals?

Possible Benefits from Certification

- To gain a price premium on your agricultural products.
- To ensure your customers that you follow organic practices.
- To enter into a market growing at a rate of 20 percent per year (USDA/ARS).

Why You May Not Wish to Certify Your Farm

- You already have a reliable customer base.
- You do not or are not able to follow NOP guidelines.
- You do not have a market that offers a premium for organic products.

What is Needed for Certification?

- Land that has not received any NOP-prohibited inputs for 3 years or more (see page 4, #8).
- A farm plan that explains how the land was managed and will be managed for the next 3 years (see page 5, # 5).
- Records of your inputs and harvests for the past 3 years.
- Annual inspection of the farm by a certifying agency.



Steps to Transition to Organic

1. Select and contact a USDA-accredited organic certifying agency registered in Michigan.

- Review the available agencies (see list of current certifying agencies on page 5).
- Ask questions (see below) to determine if they offer the expertise and resources you expect.
- Request an application.

Some Questions to Ask When Selecting a Certifying Agency

- Does the agency certify and have experience with your farm or business type?
- What personal service does the agency offer? Will someone respond to your questions promptly?
- Does the agency have enough inspectors so you will receive a quality inspection in a timely manner?
- Does the agency have deadlines for certification each year, or can you apply anytime?
- What is the cost of certification? Can you afford this?
- If you have international markets, does the agency offer the needed certification?
- What do you get for your money beyond certification?

2. Prepare a farm plan.

This plan provides the history of how the land was managed for the past 3 years and what the plans are for the next 3 years. ATTRA (<https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=359>) offers a farm plan template. This information is useful when deciding crop rotations, how certain varieties or breeds perform on your farm, and which farm practices work well and which do not. The information contained in the farm plan needs to be maintained and supported by receipts and invoices for the land to become organically certified. Having these records will help you to improve your farm business as it grows and allow you to evaluate your farming system.

3. Complete and submit the application and certification forms.

Complete the general information portion of the application and the sections in the application that are applicable to your operation (grower, handler, processor, trader, broker, private label, livestock or retailer). The certification application will include a farm plan with 3 years of previous and intended crops, animals and management. This information can serve as a guide as you develop your organic operation. Following submission, the agency has up to 6 months to complete an inspection of your farm or operation. Make a copy of your documents for future use before submitting the forms. For more information, including a list of resources and certifying organizations, visit www.michiganorganic.msu.edu and click on the “Organic Certification” link.

4. Arrange for an inspection with an organic certification agency.

Your application will be reviewed by the certification agency to assure that you have followed the NOP guidelines. A trained inspector will be assigned to your farm and then perform an on-site inspection with you. It is important that you allow time in your schedule to participate in the inspection and have your records available for review by the inspector. You should allow 2 to 6 hours for the inspection, depending on the size and various aspects of your operation.

5. Receive certification status notification.

Upon completion of the review process, you will receive a letter from your certification agency. Some common reasons that you may not receive certification include the use of treated seed, use of a prohibited substance such as fertilizers and pesticides not approved by the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) or natural ingredients containing non-approved additives, or livestock or poultry that was not organically managed.

Frequently Asked Questions

How long does it take before I can certify my farm operation?

The National Organic Program (NOP) standards indicate that a crop can be sold as organic after 36 months since the last input of prohibited substances or non-organic practices. If the grower can provide assurance that this time has effectively passed, the land may be certified in the first year, but this depends on available records, related information and requirements of the inspection agency.

How do I know which pesticides and soil amendments are allowed?

The NOP has a searchable database (www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/nop) of inputs that are permitted for organic production. This list describes the use of each input and its standing within the USDA program. The three classifications of inputs are Allowed, Regulated and Prohibited. This classification system is determined largely by the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) (www.omri.org). OMRI has a searchable database of products it has reviewed (www.omri.org/Omri-lists). This database contains items listed in generic terms and by trade names. This list is not legally binding but is a good reference for organic farmers on what pesticides, soil amendments, foliar applications and animal treatments can be used in an organic system. **You should always ask your certifying agency before initial use of any input on the farm.**

Who will inspect my farm?

Organic inspectors are hired by the certifying agency. The inspectors receive training and accreditation by the inspection agency, enabling them to perform inspections on all types of operations from orchards and gardens to complex processing plants. The inspectors are committed to organic farming practices and are expected to exercise the highest level of integrity, confidentiality and professionalism.

How much will it cost?

The costs vary among the certifying bodies. Some fees are all-inclusive; some are broken down between certification, administration and inspection. Certification is an annual process, so you are charged annually. Some certifying agencies charge a percentage of what you sell in addition to the certification fee. A fee of 1 percent of what you sell is not uncommon. Each certifying agency has its own fee structure, so it is important that you inquire before submitting your completed application.

What records do I keep?

You will need to create a farm plan that includes 3 years' prior history and a plan for the next 3 years to demonstrate crop rotations, soil building and farm biodiversity. You should design a record system and stick with it. What system you use depends on your preference. You can maintain records on a computer database or in a notebook with handwritten notes and tables. The bottom line is **KEEP records** of all farm-related activities. **Keep receipts and labels** to show the products used, the vendor, the ingredients, and dates of purchase and application. Keep records of each management step, including dates and rates used. All of this information will not only support your farm business to be certified organically but will also serve as a guide for planning to maximize your returns on inputs and production. The receipts will be useful for tax preparation as well.

What record systems are accepted?

You can maintain records either as hard copy or electronically, but the records must be complete and accurate. MSU offers a farm accounting software — Telfarm (<http://telfarm.canr.msu.edu>). A comparison of agricultural book-keeping software can be found at www.msu.edu/~thomasc/articles/bus_fin/accounting_software_comparisons.pdf. If you would like to use a template or see examples of what a spreadsheet should contain for organic farms, you can visit www.ces.ncsu.edu/chatham/ag/SustAg/orgrecords.html, produced by North Carolina Cooperative Extension.

Items to include in your records:

1. Receipts of sales and production
2. Package labels
3. Order forms and invoice sheets
4. Crop/Animal care and treatments
5. Sanitation and cleaning records of equipment
6. Product labels/MSDS
7. Source of organic seed or attempt to source
8. Soil inputs and management activities
9. Soil and water analyses results
10. Field maps
11. Correspondence and records from certifying agency
12. Repair and maintenance records
13. Transportation of goods documentation
14. Proof of non-GMO seed/stock

Need Additional Information?

If you have additional questions about organic production in Michigan, you are invited to visit www.michiganorganic.msu.edu or contact the Michigan State University organic outreach specialist at 517-353-3542 or sorrone@msu.edu. Also, the

website www.michiganorganic.msu.edu contains additional information on certification and organic production. Please note that Michigan State University does not endorse any certifying agency or product.

Additional Information Sources for Organic Certification

1. The National Organic Program list, www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/nop, indicates what is allowed by NOP and gives the complete USDA guidelines for certified organic products.
2. The Michigan Organic Food and Farming Alliance, www.MOFFA.org, is a Michigan-based organization of farmers and consumers to promote organic and local food and build connections among healthy people, communities and the environment.
3. MOSES, www.mosesorganic.org, is an upper Midwest organic non-profit organization that offers technical resources and a calendar of events pertaining to organic agriculture.
4. The MSU Organic Farming Exchange, www.michiganorganic.msu.edu, is a site hosted by the Organic Outreach Specialist in the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems where you will find fact sheets about all aspects of organic vegetable and field crop production and organic certification. The site also offers a calendar of upcoming educational programs in and around Michigan and information on organic production in Michigan.
5. National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, ATTRA, www.ATTRA.org, is a USDA site that offers fact sheets, including a sample farm plan, on all aspects and types of organic farming and marketing relevant in the United States.
6. New Ag Network, www.new-ag.msu.edu, is a production newsletter for and by organic and sustainable vegetable and crop farmers and Extension educators in the Great Lakes region.
7. New Farm, www.rodaleinstitute.org/new_farm, is an online magazine produced by the Rodale Institute offering farm-related information that can help you identify organic farm practices and provides ideas on how to grow quality organic produce, crops and animals. This site also offers comparison of the various organic certifying agencies (see right-hand side of the Web page).
8. The Organic Material Review Institute, www.OMRI.org, has a searchable site of products allowed in organic production, such as sprays and soil amendments. Always get the approval from your certifying agency before using any new product, even when it is listed by OMRI.
9. The U.S. Department of Agriculture National Organic Program (NOP), www.ams.usda.gov/nop. Regulations for U.S. organic farms and businesses.

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USDA-NOP Accredited Organic Certification Agencies

GLOBAL ORGANIC ALLIANCE, INC.

3185 Township RD 179
P.O. Box 530
Bellefontaine, OH 43311
937-593-1232
goaorg@centurylink.com
www.goa-online.org

INDIANA CERTIFIED ORGANIC

70 East Main St., Suite B
Greenwood, IN 46143
317-865-9700
info@indianacertifiedorganic.com
www.indianacertifiedorganic.com

OCIA-WISCONSIN

5381 Norway Dr.
Pulaski, WI 54162
920-822-2629
Mnmsgang@netnet.net
www.ocia.org

OREGON TILTH CERTIFIED ORGANIC

260 SW Madison Ave., Suite 106
Corvallis, OR 97333
503-378-0690
organic@tilth.org
www.tilth.org

INTERNATIONAL CERTIFICATION SERVICES, INC.

301 5th Ave. SE
SE Medina, ND 58467
701-486-3578
info@ics-intl.com
www.ics-intl.com

ORGANIC CROP IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION (OCIA)

1340 North Cotner Boulevard
Lincoln, NE 68505
402-477-2323
info@ocia.org
www.ocia.org

STELLAR CERTIFICATION SERVICES, INC.

P.O. Box 1390
Philomath, OR 97370
541-929-7148
sally@demeter-USA.org
www.demeter-usa.org

QUALITY ASSURANCE INTERNATIONAL (QAI)

9191 Towne Centre Drive, Suite 200
San Diego, CA 92122
858-792-3531
jlackie@qai-inc.com
www.qai-inc.com/

OHIO ECOLOGICAL FOOD AND FARM ASSOCIATION (OEFFA)

41 Croswell Rd.
Columbus, OH 43214
614-421-2022
offa@offa.org
<http://www.oeffa.org/>

MIDWEST ORGANIC SERVICES ASSOCIATION, INC. (MOSA)

122 W. Jefferson St.
P.O. Box 821
Viroqua, WI 54665
608-637-2526
mosa@mosaorganic.org
www.mosaorganic.org

For further information contact Vicki Morrone - Organic Production Specialist at Michigan State University, 517-353-3542 or sorrone@msu.edu. Visit www.michiganorganic.msu.edu for information about certifying in Michigan. Note that this fact sheet provides a list of agencies who certify organic farms in Michigan. This is not an endorsement of the agencies.

This list is not intended as an endorsement of agencies but is a list of those that currently certify farms in Michigan (12/08). Each organic certifying agency must register with the MDARD annually. The application can be found at www.michigan.gov/mdard. Type in "organic" in the "search" box and select "MDA Organic Registration."

Visit the MDARD website, www.michigan.gov/mdard/0,4610,7-125-1569_25516---,00.html, for information on registering your farm.

For further information about certifying your farm or producing organic vegetables or grain, you can contact the organic production specialist at www.michiganorganic.msu.edu or call 517-353-3542.

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Tillage is the most common way to manage weeds on organic farms. Freshly tilled soil that has been amended with incorporated cover crops and an animal-based compost is shown here.



Oil-seed radish (*Raphanus sativus*) is over-seeded into corn following the last cultivation. Cover crops provide organic matter, nitrogen and offer competition with weeds. Mustards, like shown here, can also work as a bio-fumigant against soil-borne pathogens.



Free-range poultry is moved daily to allow adequate grazing material while protected from predators. The dollie is used to lift the house and move to fresh grass.



Versatile equipment is an economical means to get the job done with less labor. A sprayer for vegetable production allows liquid nutrient solutions such as fish emulsion or compost tea to be evenly applied to a field. Sprayers are also useful to apply OMRI approved pesticides. Note the versatility of this sprayer with a hand boom, which can be used to spray fruit trees or brambles.

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