Getting Started with Organic Certification

Background

Organic agriculture has come a long way since Lord Northbourne, in his book, *Look to the Land,* published in 1940, coined the term and described a holistic, ecologically-balanced approach to farming. Now organic agriculture is a rapidly-growing market niche that is regulated by the federal government. Farmers and food handlers can no longer call their products "organic" without meeting specific standards and receiving official certification.

What Is Organic?

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), organic agriculture is defined as "an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain, or enhance ecological harmony." [1] The primary goal of organic agriculture is to optimize the health and productivity of interdependent communities of soil life, plants, animals and people.[2] The term "organic" is defined by law, as opposed to the labels "natural" and "eco-friendly," which may imply that some organic methods were used in the production of products, but do not guarantee complete adherence to organic practices as defined by law.

Who Should Be Certified?

Any operation that uses the word organic to describe a product that they produce or handle must have appropriate organic certification(s) through one of the numerous accredited certifying agents that verify compliance with USDA National Organic Program (NOP) organic certification requirements.

The NOP standards require all operations that produce or handle agricultural products sold, labeled, or represented as organic to be certified. However, operations that annually gross $5,000 or less are exempt from certification, but must comply with all applicable organic production and handling standards. The products from such non-certified operations cannot be used as organic ingredients in processed products produced by another operation; such non-certified products are also precluded from displaying the USDA organic seal.[3]

California Department of Food and Agriculture Organic Registration

Any operation engaged in the production and handling of agricultural products represented as organic must also register with the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) Organic Program. Initial registration is done at the home county Agricultural Commissioner's office. Any operation engaged in the processing or handling of processed products, including pet food and cosmetics, must register with the CDFA Department of Public Health. Information is available on the California Organic Program website at *www.cdfa.ca.gov/is/i_&_c/ organic.html.*

Types of Organic Certification

<u>Handler/Processor</u>. Anyone who processes food products sold as organic must obtain an organic handler's certification. The NOP defines processing as "cooking, baking, curing, heating, drying, mixing, grinding, churning, separating, extracting, slaughtering, cutting, fermenting, distilling, eviscerating, preserving, dehydrating, freezing, chilling, or otherwise manufacturing and includes the packaging, canning, jarring, or otherwise enclosing food in a container."

<u>Crops</u>. Crops include any plant marketed as an agricultural product or fed to livestock, including pasture.

<u>Livestock</u>. This includes any livestock and poultry used for production of food, fiber or feed.

Obtaining Your Organic Certification

As of this writing, there are 55 domestic accredited certifying agents, 13 of which do business in California. Several are County Agricultural Commissioners who serve only local producers and handlers, such as Marin, Monterey and Yolo Counties. A list of certifiers is available on the NOP website at *http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/ams. fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateJ&navID=NationalOrganicProgram&leftNav=NationalOrganicProgram &page=NOPACAs&description=USDA Accredited Certifying Agents&acct=nopgeninfo*. Organic certification is applied for directly from one of the accredited certifying agents, which should be contacted directly. Information that will help you prepare for a certification application is available at *http://www.attra.org/organic.html - overview*.

Other Resources

1. National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service (ATTRA). This organization has a web page with publications on numerous aspects of organic farming, including accredited certifying agents, labeling, the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances, forms, policies and regulations at *http://attra.ncat.org/organic.html*.

2. USDA Agricultural Marketing Service National Organic Program (NOP). This web site includes information on all aspects of USDA organic standards and related topics: *http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateA&navID=NationalOrganicProgram&leftNav=NationalOrganicProgram&page =NOPNationalOrganicProgramHome&acct=AMSPW*

3. Marin County Agricultural Commissioner's Office/Marin County Certified Agriculture (MOCA). This county department is one of the few public agencies that provides organic certification services. For more information call (415) 499-6700.

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[1]USDA National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) definition, April 1995

[2]National Organic Standards Board, 1997

[3]National Center for Appropriate Technology, 2004. Organic Livestock Workbook: A Guide to Sustainable and Allowed Practices.

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All information pertinent to Marin County Community Development Agency (MCCDA) regulations has been reviewed and approved by the MCCDA.

More information about diversifying your operation is available at the Grown in Marin website under Resources for Farmers at http:growninmarin.org or by calling the UCCE Farm Advisor's office at 415/499-4204.