

Third-Party Certification and National Standards

Private organizations, mostly nonprofits, began developing certification standards in the early 1970s as a way to support organic farming, as well as to strengthen legitimate product claims. States began developing certification programs for similar reasons in the late 1980s, run mostly through State agriculture departments. The number of organizations offering certification services to growers has grown steadily over the last decade. Fifty-three organizations (14 State and 39 private) provided certification services to organic farmers in 2000 and 2001. Several of these private organizations—Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, and California Certified Organic Farmers—have been providing services for over three decades.

State and private certification initiatives resulted in a fairly robust system of third-party certification, which has operated under a patchwork of variable standards. Many certifiers have followed the national organic standards outlined by Congress in the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, even before the national standards became mandatory. All of the certifiers provided crop certification in 2001, and nearly half provided livestock certification as well (table 1). While crop and livestock standards used by State and private certifiers have overlapped in many aspects, the differences that remained in some areas were eliminated when USDA's Final Rule was fully implemented on October 21, 2002 (see box).

As of October 21, 2002, all organic certifiers are required to be accredited under USDA's national organic standards. While most of the organic programs that currently certify growers have sought accreditation by USDA under the new standards, at least seven of the private organizations that certified growers in 2000 and 2001 have suspended their certification programs. Few U.S. certifiers had previously sought accreditation by another entity, and some of the certifiers that quit preferred not to use additional staff resources to meet accreditation requirements. Others felt that conflict-of-interest requirements in the Federal rules, which place limits on when certifiers can give technical advice to growers, would make their educational outreach activities more difficult. Several of the organizations that discontinued certification services have retained their educational and outreach programs.

USDA's national standards do not restrict additional eco-labelling of organic products, and some organic certifiers are also developing standards on social aspects of agricultural production and food distribution—fair trade, local sourcing, and family farm characteristics, for example—that complement the organic standards and label. States and other community-based organizations are also investigating ways to facilitate production and marketing for locally grown organic food. For example, Sustain—a public interest group based in Chicago—has started a local organic initiative to begin building a regional organic food system in Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana (Slama).

National Standards Regulate Organic Production and Marketing

Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 (OFPA) to establish national standards for organically produced commodities in order to facilitate domestic marketing of organically produced fresh and processed food, and assure consumers that such products meet consistent, uniform standards. USDA's National Organic Program (NOP), authorized under OFPA, implements this legislation.

The Final Rule implementing this legislation was published in December 2000 and went into effect on October 21, 2002, requiring that organic farmers and processors must be certified by a State or private agency accredited under national standards. These regulations require that all organic growers and processors, except those selling less than \$5,000 a year in organic agricultural products, must be certified by a State or private agency accredited under the uniform standards developed by USDA. Retail food establishments that sell organically produced agricultural products but do not process them are exempt from certification.

The program establishes:

- National production and handling standards for organically produced products, including a national list of substances that can and cannot be used.
- A national-level accreditation program for State and private organizations, which must be accredited as certifying agents under the USDA national standards for organic certifiers.
- Requirements for labeling products as organic and containing organic ingredients.
- Rules for importation of organic agricultural products from foreign programs.
- Civil penalties for violations of these regulations.

For further information, visit USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service/National Organic Program (NOP) website at www.ams.usda.gov/nop.

Table 1—U.S. organic certification programs¹

Certifier	Headquarters	Certification services	
		Crops	Animals
State			
Colorado Dept. of Agriculture	Lakewood, CO	yes	no
Idaho Dept. of Agriculture	Boise, ID	yes	yes
Iowa Dept. of Agriculture and Land Stewardship	Des Moines, IA	yes	yes
Kentucky Dept. of Agriculture	Frankfort, KY	yes	no
Louisiana Dept. of Agriculture and Forestry	Baton Rouge, LA	yes	no
Maryland Dept. of Agriculture	Annapolis, MD	yes	yes
Nevada Dept. of Agriculture	Reno, NV	yes	no
New Hampshire Dept. of Agriculture	Concord, NH	yes	yes
New Mexico Organic Commodity Commission	Albuquerque, NM	yes	yes
Oklahoma Dept. of Agriculture	Oklahoma City, OK	yes	no
Rhode Island Dept. of Environmental Management	Providence, RI	yes	no
Texas Dept. of Agriculture	Austin, TX	yes	no
Virginia Dept. of Agriculture & Consumer Services	Richmond, VA	yes	no
Washington State Department of Agriculture	Olympia, WA	yes	yes
Private			
Alaska Organic Association	Palmer, AK	yes	no
American Organic Growers and Consumers, Inc.	Brandon, FL	yes	yes
Arkansas Certified Organic, Inc.	Mt. View, AR	yes	yes
California Certified Organic Farmers	Santa Cruz, CA	yes	yes
California Organic Farmers Association	North Modoc, CA	yes	no
Certified Organic Farms of Indiana	Atlanta, IN	yes	yes
Carolina Farm Stewardship Assn.	Pittsboro, NC	yes	no
Demeter Assn.	Aurora, NY	yes	yes
International Certification Services (formerly Farm Verified Organic)	Medina, ND	yes	yes
Quality Certification Services (formerly Florida Certified Organic Growers and Consumers)	Gainesville, FL	yes	yes
Global Organic Alliance	Bellefontaine, OH	yes	yes
Hawaii Bio-Organic Growers Association	Honolulu, HI	yes	no
Hawaii Organic Farmers Association	Haiku, HI	yes	no
International Certified Organic	St. Joseph, MO	yes	no
Indiana Certified Organic	Clayton, IN	yes	no
Kauai Organic Growers Association	Koloa, HI	yes	no
Maine Organic Farmers & Gardeners Association	Unity, ME	yes	yes
Midwest Organic Farmers & Gardeners Association	Viroqua, WI	yes	yes
Mountain State Organic Growers & Buyers Assn.	Morgantown, WV	yes	yes
Northeast Organic Farmers Assn.-CT	Northford, CT	yes	yes
Northeast Organic Farmers Assn.-MA	West Hatfield, MA	yes	no
Northeast Organic Farmers Assn.-NJ	Pennington, NJ	yes	yes
Northeast Organic Farmers Assn.-NY	Binghamton, NY	yes	yes
Northeast Organic Farmers Assn.-VT	Richmond, VT	yes	yes
OCCP/Pro-Cert Canada Inc./Western Div.	Saskatoon, SK	yes	yes
OCCP/Pro-Cert Canada Inc./Eastern Div.	Lindsay, ON	yes	yes
Ohio Ecological Food & Farming Association	West Salem, OH	yes	yes
Oregon Tilth	Salem, OR	yes	yes
Organic Certifiers	Ventura, CA	yes	yes
Organic Crop Improvement Association	Lincoln, NE	yes	yes
Organic Forum International, Inc.	Paynesville, MN	yes	no
Organic Growers & Buyers Association	Brooklyn Park, MN	yes	yes
Organic Growers of Michigan	Grand Rapids, MI	yes	yes
Organic Verification Organization of North America	Hitterdale, MN	yes	no
Pennsylvania Certified Organic	Centre Hall, PA	yes	yes
Quality Assurance International	San Diego, CA	yes	yes
Nutriclean (formerly Scientific Certification Systems)	Oakland, CA	yes	no
Tennessee Land Stewardship Association	Knoxville, TN	yes	yes
Vermont Maple Sugarmaker's Association	Westford, VT	yes	no

¹ List includes only certifiers active in 2000 and/or 2001. Twelve other certifiers were contacted, but they were either not yet active, had become inactive, or did not certify producers. A current list of certifiers is maintained by USDA's National Organic Program (202-720-3252; www.ams.usda.gov/nop)