



CERTIFICATION

MOSES ORGANIC FACT SHEET

How to Choose an Organic Certification Agency

Start by asking other organic farmers and the certification agencies in your area these questions:

A. What agency or agencies do the farmers use? Ask the agencies if they certify farmers in your particular area. The cost of bringing an inspector to the area will be less for all farmers in the same region if there are more farmers to spread the cost. If the inspector is hired by an agency to inspect your farm alone, then the cost of travel expenses will have to be borne by you alone.

Are the farmers happy with the service they have received? Does the agency you are considering provide the services you want? Is there someone to answer the phone? Does the agency return phone messages promptly? Are agency staff there to help you through the certification process? Do they provide blank on-farm audit trail template documents for the farmer to use?

Does the certification agency answer the farmer's certification process questions quickly and clearly?

Can you call someone at the agency to verify the acceptability of a fertilizer or other material and get an answer quickly? Are the agency standards and materials lists easy to understand and utilize?

Does the certification agency complete the certification process in a timely manner? How long does the farmer wait for the inspection to occur, the file to be reviewed, and the certificate to be issued? Is the process completed in time for the farmer to sell their crop?

How much does the organic certification cost? Are the agency fees based on a flat amount, on the projected sales of organic product, on the actual sales of organic product, or on the amount of acres of organic land to be certified? What is the inspec-

tion and review fee? Is there a membership fee? Does the agency sponsor any educational activities and/or field days? Does the farmer have the opportunity to learn from other producers, view a variety of crop production methods, and gain experience from hands-on workshops?



Does the farmer have the opportunity to learn from other producers?

Does the producer gain any other benefits from being a member of this organization? Being a member of a certification agency can give the producer access to other organic farmers in their area. Some farmers share equipment, or work with the same buyers to pool production and save trucking costs. Does the agency have a newsletter, keeping their members informed of interesting production methods, changes in the marketplace or in the governmental regulatory arena?

B. Talk to the buyers of organic commodities, especially the projected buyer of your particular organic crop:

By which agency or agencies does the buyer prefer your crop be certified organic? Some buyers prefer one or two agencies over the others. Make sure you are certified by the agency they prefer, to save yourself the cost of being certified again by a different agency when you try to sell your crop.

WHAT THE ORGANIC INSPECTOR WILL WANT TO LOOK AT....AND WHY.

The organic inspector plays a key role in assuring organic integrity. It is the organic inspector's job to give an overview of organic operations based on an on-site visit and supporting documentation they have seen. The inspector writes a report for the certification agency so the agency can compare the actualities of the system (as viewed by the inspector) with the plans and statements of the farmer and can make a certification decision.

What: The inspector will want to verify the statements made in the certification application. Inputs, crop rotations, field histories, etc. will be reviewed.

Why: Many times there are changes from the time the application was sent in the spring to the actual on-farm visit in mid-summer. The information supplied to the agency needs to be correct, so they can issue organic certification certificates that reflect the actual production.

What: The inspector will want to see all of the fields that are growing organic crops, and review the borders.

Why: Borders need to be reviewed to assess any possible contamination from adjoining conventional fields. It is encouraged that organic farmers leave 25-30 feet of grass or brush around organic fields where they adjoin conventional land to avoid run-off and aerial drift. Review of crops while they are growing helps the inspector assess if organic methods are in use.

What: The inspector will want to assess the efficacy of weed control, pest control and soil fertility strategies. There could be a discussion of plans to deal with possible pests, improving weed control with timing/machinery/rotations, and long-term soil building plans (green manures, rotations). Documentation of field activities and crop observations should be present.

Why: The commitment and documented activities of the producer to organic production methods is reviewed and reported on by the inspector. A field diary, short notes written on a calendar, in a spiral notebook, field diary, etc. must be maintained in order to meet the USDA organic standards. Tillage, planting (including seed types), cultivation, pest and disease control methods, fertilizer locations, rates and dates, harvest dates and yields as well as running inventory storage records and

sales records should be present. Successful organic operations are built on the development of long-term soil health, and advance planning is the best method for preventing problems.

What: The inspector will ask the farmer to judge the possible yields (both in bushels and dollars) from their organic crops or conventional crops of the same type.

Why: The inspector will verify if the original organic crop yield projections are within range based on their on-site inspection at the time. If the same crop is grown organically and transitionally/conventionally, the agency will want to keep track of all sales, to verify that conventionally produced crops have not been sold in the organic marketplace. Many agencies base their fees on organic sales and thus must verify reported sales and production numbers.

What: The inspector will ask to see the equipment and buildings on the farm.

Why: The certification agency wants to evaluate if the producer actually has the tools to do the job of managing the farm and store products using organic methods. The inspector will report what they see.

What: The inspector will want to review the field histories, including small daily/weekly notebooks, calendars, etc. Storage records, input records, and sales records are all part of an organic audit trail.

Why: The documentation of the field activities, storage and sales records is a necessary part of organic certification. This tracking protects the farmer, and assures the certification agency and the consumer that organic management methods are being followed. The farmer can view part of the organic premium being paid as supporting the time needed to create this paper trail.

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Visit www.mosesorganic.org for more resources and tools, including our Organic Resource Directory and the Organic Broadcaster Newspaper. Plan to attend our annual Organic Farming Conference in February. To find upcoming events including MOSES trainings and field days visit our web calendar at: www.mosesorganic.org/events.html