



Selecting the Right Certifier for You

Learn how to choose the right organic certifier for your operation with this practical guide covering certifier roles, responsibilities, and key differences among certification bodies. Explore the organic certification timeline, how to build a productive client–certifier relationship, and what to expect when switching certifiers.

What You'll Learn

- The role an organic certifier plays in the certification process and how your operation will work with them through initial certification and ongoing compliance
- Key ways organic certifiers differ from one another including services, fees, and areas of expertise
- How to identify potential certifiers and evaluate and select the best fit for your organization
- An overview of the organic certification timeline, from application through approval
- Practical mindset and communication tips for building a productive, collaborative relationship with your certifier
- What to know about switching certifiers: the process, timing considerations, and potential costs

When you pick up a certified organic finished product, you will see the phrase “Certified organic by” printed under the manufacturer’s contact information. The organization named in that statement is the organic certifier, the accredited agency responsible for verifying that the final handler (operation that last handled the product) complies with organic regulations and standards.

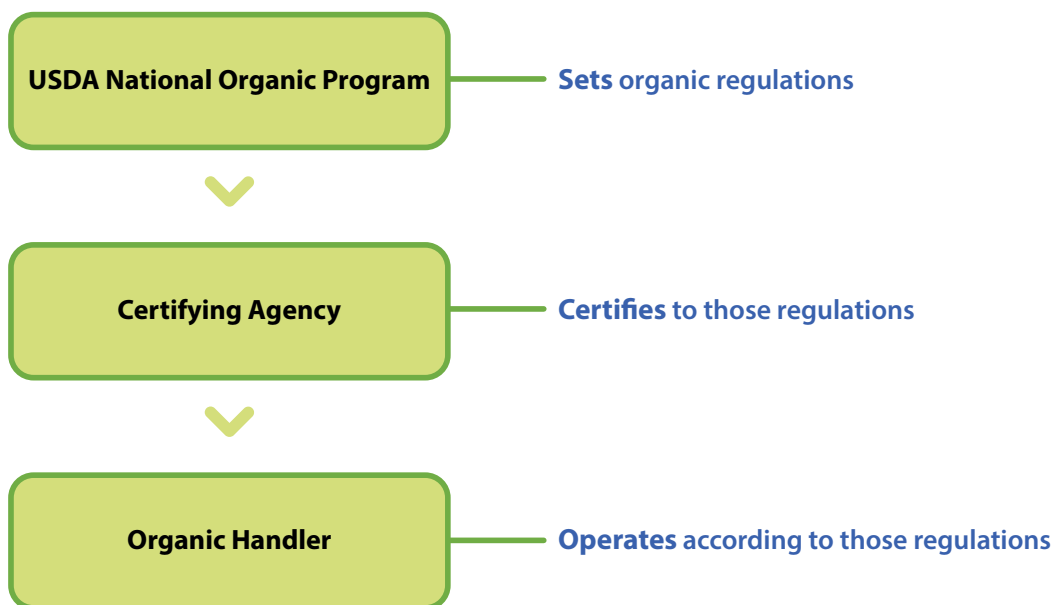
In the United States, there are many organic certifying agencies, each offering different strengths, services, fee structures, and approaches to client support. So what exactly does an organic certifier do, what role do they play in the certification process, and how do you determine which certifier is the best fit for your organization?



THE ROLE OF AN ORGANIC CERTIFIER

An organic certifier is an organization accredited by the USDA to issue organic certificates and review an operation's processes to determine whether they comply with organic standards. They do not set organic standards, but they do evaluate your operation against those standards to determine your initial and ongoing eligibility for certification.

Organic Certification Hierarchy



Organic certifiers work in concert with organic inspectors. Some certifiers employ inspectors directly, while others contract the inspectors that conduct initial and annual inspections. An inspector observes your operation, reviews records, verifies practices, and conducts audits of your processes and documentation. The inspector then submits their findings to the certifier who reviews the inspection report and determines whether your operation complies with organic standards and can receive or maintain certification. The certifier also determines whether any corrective actions are needed before organic certification is issued. In short, the inspector collects information about compliance and the certifier makes decisions about compliance.

Just as certifiers audit your operation, the USDA-NOP regularly audits certifiers. A certifying agency goes through a thorough accreditation process every five years.^{1,2} This level of oversight means that certifiers have a personal stake in making sure that you're compliant because it's not just your certification on the line, it's their accreditation as well.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CERTIFIER

A certifier's main responsibilities are to evaluate an operation for compliance with the USDA organic standards, oversee the certification process, and provide information about the organic standards.

An individual operation communicates with their certifier through an Organic System Plan (OSP). Just as a food safety plan lays out how an operation plans to keep food free from physical, biological, and chemical contamination while in their control, the OSP lays out exactly how an operation will maintain organic integrity and avoid contamination from nonorganic ingredients and materials while in their control. Every certified organic operation maintains an OSP.

Your organic certifier will review your OSP and all related components, such as pest control materials, products, procedures, and product labels, when you first apply for certification, any time you make a change that could affect certification status, and during your annual renewal process.

Any change that can affect your organic certification must be submitted to your certifier for review before it is implemented. Some of these changes may be relatively minor from an operations standpoint, such as updating existing product labels, switching to a new sanitizer for food contact surfaces, or sourcing an ingredient from a different supplier. Others may be more significant, including launching a new organic product, installing new equipment, adding a co-packer, or expanding operations to a new facility.³

After review, certifiers issue certification decisions that could include certification, requests for more information, or Notices of Noncompliance or Adverse Actions.

Certifiers also oversee other requirements of certification such as unannounced inspections,^{4,5} residue testing,⁶ investigating complaints,⁷ and resolving self-reported instances of contamination and commingling.³ With such a wide range of responsibilities, your certifier plays a significant role in your operational agility and overall certification experience.



DEFINITION

Contamination is the presence of a prohibited substance or contact with nonorganic materials that could compromise the integrity of an organic product or operation.

Commingling is the physical mixing of organic and nonorganic products in a way that compromises their identity or integrity. Examples include organic grain stored in a bin that previously housed nonorganic grain without proper cleanout, or organic and nonorganic products running on a packaging line without clear separation.

Certifiers also act as a source of information about organic standards. In fact, they are required by the regulations to “provide sufficient information”⁸ so that operations getting certified and maintaining certification can comply with the regulations. Like this guide, they can break down the regulatory language so it is easier for operations to understand. This can happen one-on-one or through educational resources like webinars, guidebooks, and other handouts. However, they *cannot* provide direct consulting on exactly how your specific operation should comply with organic standards.⁹ That level of decision making falls on the operation itself.

For example, if you are designing new labels, **your certifier can:**

- provide educational resources about organic labeling
- explain the standards to you
- talk through requirements
- help you navigate the process for label review
- share general information, including examples of how they have seen others comply with labelling requirements

They cannot:

- tell you exactly how your label should look to be compliant
- help design your label



LEARN MORE

To learn more about the annual renewal process see [Certification Timeline for Handling Operations](#).



LEARN MORE

To learn more about adverse actions see the article [Noncompliance and Adverse Actions](#).

A certifier provides information on the *who, what, where, and when* of certification requirements. The certified operation is responsible for figuring out *how* they will comply.

KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ORGANIC CERTIFIERS

While all certifiers certify to the same organic standards and perform the same core certification responsibilities, they differ in ways that influence how well they align with your operation's needs.

Category	Considerations
Experience areas	• Handler scope • Product type • Sector • Business model
Additional services offered	• Other certifications (Animal Welfare, Regenerative Organic, etc.) • Technical assistance or education arm
Communication and workflow	• Required forms • Language accessibility • Submission process (digital platform, email, mail) • Client relations personnel
Location	• Experience in your geography • Existing clients in your area
Fee structure	• Flat fee • Percentage of sales • Pass through inspection charges • Additional service fees
Certification timelines and current capacity	• Target turnaround times • Inspection scheduling cadence • Client-to-staff ratio • Email and phone responsiveness

Certification Focus

One important difference is that some certifiers specialize in working with specific types of operations. Not all organic certifiers work with handlers and processors. Among those that do, some will have more experience working with operations like yours. When a certifier has deep, relevant experience in your specific operations, it can bring greater clarity, consistency, and efficiency to their guidance and decision-making. When evaluating certifiers, ask about their experience working with organic handlers and, more specifically, how many clients they serve within your niche or product type.

Other Services Offered

Some certifiers not only handle organic certification, but also offer other certification services. If you hold multiple certifications or verifications, it might prove useful to work with one organization across different audits.

There are also some certifiers who partner with affiliated education or technical assistance arms. These are separate entities that can provide more tailored training, consultation, and technical assistance services to operations certified through the certification agency. In some cases, these education partners may also help certified operations access different grant opportunities or funding resources.

Communication & Workflow

Finding the right certifier is a lot like finding the right bank or internet provider. It's not just about what they offer, but how they deliver it. Consider both the services themselves and the day-to-day experience of working with a certifier to determine whether the relationship will integrate smoothly into your operations.

Most organic certifiers help operators develop a complete OSP by providing a set of forms that collectively make up the plan. When you work with that certifier their forms aren't optional, they are the forms you will fill out to create an OSP. Some certifiers offer forms that can be completed either by hand or digitally, while others rely entirely on online webforms that must be completed electronically. The format and organization of these forms, and the flexibility in how they can be completed, can make a real difference in how easy it is to keep up with your certification paperwork.

Assessing a Certifier's Communication & Workflow

Some questions to consider when evaluating how a certifier communicates, delivers services, and supports clients.

- ☐ How will you submit updates to your OSP? Will it be over email, through a portal, in-person?
- ☐ What do their forms look like? Are they easy for you to understand? Can you fill them out with a pen if you want to?
- ☐ Are forms and service agents available in your native language if it is not English?
- ☐ If you will be expected to work through a portal, what does it look like? Is it easy for you to navigate?
- ☐ Will you have a specific contact for your account? What types of communication flow through this contact and what gets handled through other ways?
- ☐ Does the certifier have an office you can walk into and talk to someone?
- ☐ Is the certifier reachable by phone? If so, what are their business hours?
- ☐ What is their target email turnaround time?
- ☐ What are their expected turnaround times for reviewing updates outside of the annual inspection cycle?
- ☐ What are the main pain points and easeful aspects of working with them according to other handlers who have worked with them?

Location

Depending on your operation and how you prefer to work, location of your certifier may be an important consideration. Some operations value having a local certifier for easier communication and regional familiarity, while others are comfortable working remotely. At a minimum, you should consider whether inspectors are readily available in your area, as that can affect scheduling and timelines.

Fee Structure

Each certifier is free to determine how they charge for certification. Some certifiers operate based on a flat fee while others charge based on a percentage of organic sales. Some certifiers charge a flat rate on annual inspections while others charge by the hour. Some certifiers charge separately for reviewing changes outside of the annual review cycle, while others don't. Look for a fee structure that fits the size of your operation and takes into account how you plan to grow (or not) in the foreseeable future. While cost is a factor to consider, remember that it is only one of many factors to take into account when choosing the best-fit certifier for your needs. You may choose a certifier that costs a little more than others because they are able to respond quickly to emails and phone calls.



HANDLER TIP

Different handlers prioritize different aspects of a certifier. Here are two real-life examples of handling operations that chose their certifier based on what mattered most to them.

"Selecting a certifier is a very important thing. It usually considers a number of factors. The first one for me, it's the reputation of your certifier. The other things that are important to consider are also the cost. Take a look at the additional services they offer because there are some certifiers that charge you for additional support needs when others have a flat rate for fees. Also it is important to check the inspector availability because even if you save on fees, maybe you will have a big expense bringing an inspector from a very far region. So, it's important to consider all those factors."

Humberto Maldonado

Director of Safety and Compliance
Organically Grown Company

"When it comes to choosing your organic certifier, my recommendation would be to go with somebody that is local. Somebody that you can meet, someone that you can walk in the door and converse with. I think that's very beneficial. It's helped out a lot based on my own personal experience."

Abel Sánchez

Product Innovation Manager
Tradin Organic

CHOOSING A CERTIFIER

When deciding which certifier to use, start by identifying what matters most to you in the ways certifiers can differ. Once you are clear what you are looking for in a certifier, create a list of candidates to consider. There are several resources available to help you narrow the pool of certifiers down to a focused shortlist of ones to more thoroughly evaluate. You can use the [Organic Integrity Database Certifier Locator](#)¹⁰ to narrow your search by country or state and learn more about a certifier's office location and whether they certify handlers. The Community Alliance with Family Farms also offers a small [searchable comparison tool](#) of organic certifiers that includes other details such as fee structure, other certifications offered, and communication platforms used.

You can also use the [Organic Integrity Database](#) to identify certifiers who work with operations similar to your own. This can be done by searching for a specific operation you already know or by using the "Certified Products" search feature to find businesses producing comparable products. Once you open an operation's listing, you'll be able to see their certifier listed both on the webpage and on their downloadable organic certificate.

Keep in mind that different businesses within the same supply chain may be certified by different certifiers. For example, if you are a sunflower processor, searching for “sunflower seeds” in the Organic Integrity Database will return listings for growers, distributors, and other supply chain participants, as well as other processors. So if you are looking to identify operations like your own, use their websites to make sure they fulfill the same role in the supply chain.

Better yet, if you already know of similar operations, it can also be helpful to reach out directly and ask which certifier they use and what their experience has been like working with them.

Once you’ve identified a shortlist of certifiers to consider, the next step is to gather more detailed information to determine which one best aligns with your needs. A certifier’s website can often provide useful insight into what their forms look like, available educational resources, certifications they offer, and other materials that may factor into your decision.

To better understand communication processes and workflow tools, it’s often necessary to speak directly with prospective certifiers. Ask about their experience working with operations like yours and explore any specific questions that help you assess fit. Be sure to ask them about their current timelines and ensure they’re based on real averages, and make sure those timelines meet your current production goals. These conversations can also give you a sense of their responsiveness, communication style, and follow-through. Use email for follow-up questions or to request specific forms, documents, or additional information after your initial conversation.

“I asked people, ‘Who are you certified with?’ I wanted to make sure I knew who I was going with and other people who had worked with them. And that [certifier I chose] was the organization that most people recommended that I use. And also one of the most reputable in the industry...”

Michelle Pusateri

Founder

Nana Joes Granola

Process for Choosing an Organic Certifier

1

CLARIFY PRIORITIES

Figure out what aspects of a certifier would most align with your operation’s needs.

2

IDENTIFY PROSPECTS

Use public research tools and conversations with other operations to identify 2-5 potential certifiers to look more closely at.

3

RESEARCH

Review each certifier’s website to verify that they meet your operational needs.

4

INTERVIEW

Contact shortlisted certifiers to answer remaining questions and assess communication style and responsiveness.

5

SELECT

Choose the certifier that best aligns with your needs and begin the certification process.

CERTIFICATION TIMELINE

While each certifier follows its own timeline for initial certification, you can generally expect the process to take at least three to six months.¹¹ Some certifiers may also offer expedited services that allow for a faster certification process, often for an additional fee. It's important to ask prospective certifiers about their typical lead times so you can understand how the certification timeline may impact your operations. Remember that your certification timeline doesn't start at the time you first email them with questions, it starts at the point you've submitted a full application that is accepted by the certifier.

Ultimately, how long it takes to get certified will also depend on how prepared your operation is for certification and your responsiveness to the certifier. You can speed up the process by being fully prepared for your initial inspection and quickly replying to any requests for additional information. Lapses in communication and missed deadlines on your part can lead to adverse actions that will need to be resolved before you can get certified.



See [Certification Timeline for Handling Operations](#) for more details about the timeline for certification steps.

MAKING THE MOST OF THE CLIENT/CERTIFIER RELATIONSHIP

When getting started with a certifier, it's helpful to frame the work you will undertake together as a relationship. This relationship is one that might last several years and will have an impact on your business' daily operations and risk management.

Your certifier's role is to thoroughly understand the organic regulations and identify any gaps in compliance that could expose your operation to risk, and with it, your ability to sell products as organic. Your role is to understand your OSP in depth and design systems and processes that maintain compliance in a way that supports, rather than burdens, your day-to-day operations.

Certified operations often note that approaching the relationship with a mindset of reflection rather than defensiveness can lead to a more productive partnership with their certifier. It's important to remember that certifiers do not create organic regulations. They simply apply and verify them. With that in mind, a collaborative approach can include asking questions about requirements that seem unclear or overly burdensome and discussing potential solutions you've developed to ensure they meet certification requirements.

In this way, a certifier can function as a valuable partner in organic compliance, offering feedback that helps you balance maintaining organic integrity with keeping your systems practical and operationally efficient. Remember, your certifier wants you to succeed by remaining compliant.

"They're our partners. We look at them as an extension, like another employee within the company. Whenever we do have any thoughts or questions about regulations and anything that is confusing, we can reach out to them. We have their phone number, we have their email address, and we can ask. They are accessible to us. So definitely reach out to them. Definitely have a good relationship with them, because they can help you maintain that organic certification."

Abel Sánchez

Product Innovation Manager
Tradin Organic

CHANGING CERTIFIERS

If a certifier turns out not to be the right fit for your operation, you can switch to a different certifier at any time.

To switch certifiers you will need to apply for certification with a new certifier. To maintain your organic status and continue selling organic products during the transition, you must remain certified with your original certifier until your new certification is issued. You must maintain open communication with your original certifier throughout the transition and continue to meet their deadlines and respond to their requests for information. If you fail to do so, this can

lead to issues of noncompliance that will need to be reported to your new certifier and/or resolved before your new certification can be granted.

For this reason, it's best to inform your current certifier of plans to switch to a new certifier and your intended timeline. Switching certifiers is not a way to avoid compliance issues, nor to avoid paying renewal fees.

Once your new certification is approved and active, you can then surrender your certificate from your previous certifier.

Switching certifiers may involve short-term costs. In some cases, you may need to pay fees to two certification agencies during the transition period, since you must maintain your current certification until your new one is fully in place. Depending on timing, this may also include the possibility of paying for two inspections within a single 12-month period.

Additionally, you may incur costs related to unused packaging or labeling materials when switching certifiers, particularly if existing materials reference your previous certifier. If your certifier is listed in "Certified Organic By" statements on product packaging or labelling, these will need to be updated to your new certifier once you surrender your current certification. If you voluntarily switch certifiers you cannot use up labels that have your former certifier listed on them.¹²

Current certifier you are switching from



New certifier you are switching to



CONCLUSION

The choice of certifier is a big decision which will shape your day-to-day experience with organic certification. Take time to define what will make a certifier a good fit for your operation and evaluate potential certifiers against those priorities. Switching certifiers is always an option and, ideally, you would do so with a clearer understanding of what works best for you. Once you've made a choice, build a collaborative relationship with your certifier that supports your business goals. Keep in mind that all certifiers operate under the same USDA NOP. They aren't setting the rules; they ensure your compliance.

ACTION ITEMS

- Use the section of this article on potential certifier differences to clarify what you are looking for in an organic certifier.
- Talk to other organic processors. Ask them who their certifier is and what they have found helpful and challenging about working with them.
- Through these conversations and other research, identify 3-5 certifiers you want to consider working with.
- Use certifier websites and additional conversations with organic processors to vet your list of candidates. Remove any that no longer fit your priorities.
- Contact the certifiers on your shortlist to better understand their communication processes, turnaround times, and responsiveness.
- Choose a certifier and begin their application process.

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United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program

