



Welcome to Organic Handling

Interested in organic certification? Looking for easily digestible information to help you on your way? You are in the right place. This guide and accompanying resources provide a comprehensive introduction to organic handling geared toward folks just starting on their organic journey. Organic handlers, consultants, and other experts have generously shared their time and expertise to support you as you consider organic certification for your business. Our starting place is foundational: What is organic?



What You'll Learn

- What organic represents
- The role of an organic handler in the organic supply chain
- What being certified organic means for handlers

Welcome! This guide was assembled and curated to support businesses and organic professionals to learn more about organic handling and what it could mean for you. This guide is chock full of detailed articles, handler profiles, topical videos, and downloadable resources. You will find all of the information you need to get started on the path to organic certification right at your fingertips. And all of it is designed to be approachable and digestible.

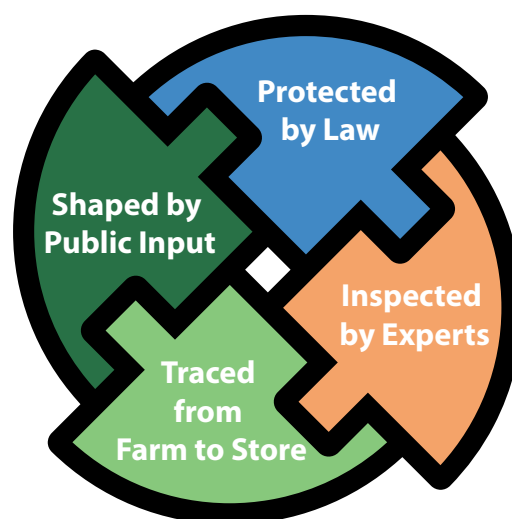
Let's start at the beginning – what does *organic* actually mean?

WHAT IS ORGANIC?

The [USDA National Organic Program](#) says it best: Organic is protected by law; inspected by experts; traced from farm to store; and shaped by public input.¹

Protected by Law:

Organic is a federally regulated term. Did you know “the USDA organic label is the only government-backed marketing claim for organic food sold in the United States?”¹ There are many labels out there that consumers see on the grocery store shelves, but they don't have the federal backing organic does. The USDA develops and enforces the organic regulations, including investigating complaints and taking action against bad actors.² In fact, the USDA Organic seal is a registered trademark and fraudulent use of the seal can result in criminal penalties.³



Inspected by Experts:

Not just anyone can verify if you are organic. Organic businesses are certified and inspected by certifiers who have been accredited by the USDA, and are audited regularly to make sure they are acting in line with the USDA organic regulations.^{1,4} Organic businesses are also inspected, at least annually,⁵ by specially trained inspectors who are qualified through training and professional experience in the scope that they are inspecting.⁶ Becoming certified organic means that you have cleared the bar after going through a rigorous process, verifying your practices comply with organic requirements.¹

Traced from Farm to Store:

Transparency is the name of the game in organic! Every certified organic business is required to implement record-keeping systems to track organic products. For farms this is from seed to sale and for handlers this is from purchase and receiving through to outbound shipment.⁷ “Certifiers audit these supply chains to detect and deter fraud before it reaches stores,”¹ so you can trust that the products labeled as organic at your local grocery store have been rigorously verified. What’s more, you can look up any certified business on the [Organic Integrity Database](#) website and verify their certification status in real-time.⁸

Shaped by Public Input:

Transparency extends to the crafting of the organic regulations. The development of the organic regulations is an inclusive process. Anyone can give public comments on proposed regulation updates at public NOSB meetings. Organic requirements have been developed with input, including from the [National Organic Standards Board \(NOSB\)](#), an appointed advisory board composed of volunteers from the organic community.⁹



To learn more about the NOP and NOSB, check out the [Organic Industry Overview](#).

THE ROLE OF ORGANIC HANDLERS

When you think of organic, you may imagine rolling green hills grazed by dairy cows or bunches of carrots at your local farmers market. Of course, farms are the foundation of the organic supply chain, but handlers have a critical role to play in the food system. Organic handlers supply those farms with organic seed and feed. They buy products from organic farms to add value and transform them into products you purchase at your local grocery store, running the gamut from fluid milk to organic gummy bears.

Organic handlers are a link in the chain of organic integrity from farm to store. Organic handler Harold Wilken of Janie’s Mill knows exactly where he is in the chain: “The person that puts a bit of bread in their mouth can call me up and go, Harold, can you tell me where this was raised? If I come down, can I walk on the farm that my bread came from?” For Harold, the answer is yes. This may not be the case for you, but every organic handler must maintain the traceability of the organic supply chain⁷ that results in trust in the organic label.

So what is the essential job of an organic handler? The task is to source organic, maintain organic integrity from receiving through to sales, and be able to prove it with records.⁷ It’s that simple! Organic handlers are the guardians against contamination by prohibited substances and commingling with nonorganic product.¹⁰ Don’t know what that is yet? Don’t worry, we’ve got you covered. You’ll learn all about it when you get to [Contamination, Commingling, and Organic Control Points](#).



CAN YOU DO IT?

Absolutely! It may seem daunting, but organic certification is absolutely achievable. Here's what the experts have to say about it.

"Don't let the concept of the work or other people's impression of what it takes to be a handler certified to the National Organic Program deter you from trying; start small, start with maybe one product and evaluate its impact," advises Johanna Phillips, Director of Business Development and Regulatory Affairs at Strengthening Organic Systems.

Lynne Haynor, Organic Conservation Specialist at the Organic Trade Association, adds: "As with anything, when you're new to it, it can feel daunting, it can seem confusing ... But usually the biggest hurdle is in the first year. And once you start to have systems in place ... it really isn't as big of a time commitment as you might think ... It's very doable to be certified as an organic processor."

Mike Dill, Director of Advocacy and Sustainability at Organically Grown Company, agrees: "It's totally worth it. If you believe in the movement, you believe in organic practices ... then don't let the little bit of additional recordkeeping hold you back."

GETTING STARTED

Whether you are just starting to think about organic certification, are working on an application, or are already a certified organic handler, we are glad you have found us! The resources on this site are the result of gleaning expertise from many [organic industry experts](#), including certified organic handlers from a wide variety of production types. There is something for you here that will enhance your understanding or widen your perspective as you continue your path of learning about organic handling.

ACTION ITEMS

- Check out the chapters of the [Guide](#). Read it from top to bottom or take in each chapter at your own pace and in your own time. This is a self-guided journey.
- Browse our [Resources](#) of topical videos, infographics, factsheets, and checklists.
- Watch [video profiles](#) of handlers from seven sectors to see organic handling in action.

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United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program

