

Importing Organic Products

Narrator (00:21):

Sourcing ingredients globally is a reality for many organic handling and processing operations. But when an agricultural product crosses an international border, the risk to its organic integrity increases substantially. Because of these increased risks, the USDA organic regulations include protocols to reduce the prevalence of fraud in the import market, including mandatory USDA certification for certain operations involved in imports.

Humberto Maldonado (00:50):

When you are working with agricultural products, it is very difficult to source only from domestic suppliers. The U.S. does not have the capability to provide a year-round supply, so you will likely work with foreign suppliers. It is important to understand your supply chain and how it works. It is important to understand that in order to avoid fraud, understand not only your suppliers, but also the product that you are getting from them, and understand the differences between how those are produced domestically and how they are produced in other countries.

Abel Sanchez-Valencia (01:32):

When you do start sourcing from other countries, it does become a little bit more challenging for those countries that we do source from that don't have that equivalency. We do have extra steps. A lot of it is testing the product itself, verifying that there aren't any pesticide residues. And then when needed, we sometimes do site visits as well.

Narrator (01:52):

Today, we'll walk through the exact requirements your operation must follow to legally import organic products into the U.S., including who needs to be certified and how the mandatory NOP Import Certificate guarantees traceability from farm to your facility.

Narrator (02:17):

Before a product even reaches a U.S. port of entry, we have to look at the people moving it. Under the USDA organic regulations, both the organic exporter and the organic importer must be certified. The organic exporter is the final certified exporter of the organic agricultural product, the operation that facilitates the trade of, consigns, or arranges for the shipping of the product from a foreign country to the United States. The organic importer is the operation responsible for accepting imported organic agricultural products within the United States and ensuring NOP Import Certificate data are entered into the U.S. Customs and Border Protection import system of record. There is one key exemption to the certification requirement in the import process. A licensed customs broker who only files the customs paperwork but never takes ownership or physical possession of the organic product is exempt from needing organic certification.



Narrator (03:29):

The cornerstone of importing organic goods is the NOP Import Certificate. It acts as a kind of mandatory electronic passport for all organic agricultural products entering the United States. Under the USDA organic regulations, every single shipment of organic agricultural products imported into the United States must be associated with a valid NOP Import Certificate and be declared as organic to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Though in some cases, a certifier may issue an NOP Import Certificate that covers multiple shipments of the same product within a defined timeframe or volume ceiling. Only certifiers accredited by the USDA or foreign certifying agents authorized under an organic trade agreement may issue an NOP Import Certificate. This document exists to protect the global supply chain. It provides the National Organic Program with the critical data necessary to monitor market trends, track exact import volumes, and detect fraud before unverified products can enter the domestic market. To effectively track these shipments, the NOP Import Certificate contains highly specific data: the origin and destination of the shipment, the name of the certifying agent issuing the certificate, the exporter's 10-digit identifier in the Organic Integrity Database (OID), and the organic standard to which the product was certified. It also carries a unique numerical identifier for the certificate itself.

Genevieve Albers (05:07):

Before it leaves the country, the farm that grew the material will ask their certifier to produce an import certificate, and you send that with your material to the next stop. And when we get it, we have to have the paperwork on file so that during an inspection we can refer back to, you know, this product was made with this lot of material that was grown here, and here's the organic certificate, and here's the import certificate, and the lot numbers and traceability are all connected.

Narrator (05:37):

It also details the product's common name, the total volume, the 10-digit Harmonized Tariff Schedule or HTS code, and specific shipping identifiers like vessel names or container numbers to link the digital file to the physical shipment. The most critical rule regarding the NOP Import Certificate is its timing. The regulation requires that the exporter request the NOP Import Certificate from their certifier prior to export, and the certificate data must be available to the importer or customs broker before CBP filing requirements are met. In practice, this means operations must plan well ahead of any shipment departure.

Laura Anne Sweitzer (06:23):

I am sometimes still very surprised at the time sensitivity of filing paperwork in organic supply chains. So if you have a container of organic certified cocoa and it departs on a shipping vessel prior to filing for certain documentation, that product will lose its organic status. Regardless of if it has multiple clean pesticide tests, regardless of the fact that every member of that supply chain is organic certified, but it's the organic import certificate, it needs to be filed for before your shipping vessel departs, because you can imagine the financial loss or the supply chain planning loss that would come from having all the steps be followed and then missing some paperwork and having a loss of organic status.

Narrator (07:16):

There are no retroactive certificates granted. If a ship departs before the certificate is generated, that product permanently loses its organic status, even if every operation in the supply chain is certified organic. Once the NOP Import Certificate is generated electronically, the certificate data is transmitted from the exporter to the U.S. importer. A physical copy of the certificate does not need to accompany the shipment. Electronic transfer of the data is standard and fully compliant.

Narrator (07:58):

So how is the certificate generated? The process relies on the USDA's Organic Integrity Database and the U.S. Customs and Border Protection system. It happens in a few specific steps. First, the certified exporter sends their export shipment data to their certifier and requests an import certificate. The certifier verifies that the shipment complies with organic standards. Second, the certifier logs into the Organic Integrity Database and generates the electronic NOP Import Certificate. They then return a copy of this approved certificate to the exporter. Third, the exporter transmits the import certificate data to the U.S. importer or their customs broker. Finally, the importer's customs broker enters the NOP Import Certificate data into the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Automated Commercial Environment, known as ACE. The National Organic Program can use the data from ACE to verify organic integrity and detect potential fraud of high-risk shipments by cross-referencing OID to other data.

Narrator (09:17):

Once the product arrives at your facility, your job as the organic importer isn't over. You must have a documented organic control system to verify the shipment. First, you must ensure the import is accompanied by valid NOP Import Certificate data. If a shipment arrives without an NOP Import Certificate, it must not be sold or used as organic.

Humberto Maldonado (09:42):

Sometimes being the importer of the record also means that you will be the foreign supplier verification programs importer. That's from a food safety perspective. From an organic perspective, you need to make sure that you check all the boxes, including the NOP Import Certificate and your obligations as an importer.

Narrator (10:06):

Second, you must verify that the organic products are clearly identified and marked as organic on all import documents, including invoices, packing lists, and bills of lading. Finally, you must verify that the shipment has not been compromised during transit. A major risk at international borders is mandatory pest treatments. The organic regulations strictly prohibit the use of prohibited pest control substances and packaging materials or containers that contain synthetic fumigants or preservatives. You must verify that the shipment has had no contact with prohibited substances or exposure to ionizing radiation since export. It's common practice at the border for shipments to be treated with pest control measures. Phytosanitary certificates or similar documentation from port authorities can serve

as evidence to support your verification that no prohibited fumigation or irradiation occurred since export.

Jessica Jones (11:03):

If you are the first organic entity and you're directly importing it from a supplier, you need to talk to your organic certifier to establish the proper audit trail to guarantee that you have maintained the organic integrity of that product coming to your business.

Narrator (11:31):

Importing organic products allows you to source incredible ingredients from all over the world, but it requires meticulous documentation.

Abel Sanchez-Valencia (11:42):

Because we are experts in importing product, we are considered the importers of record. So we have a lot of experience with the requirements of what is needed to get product release from a customs hold. We have a whole team who is experts on what that regulation is and what the latest is so that we can bring products into the U.S. and that our customers and our retailers don't have to worry about complying with those requirements.

Narrator (12:09):

Both the organic exporter and the organic importer are required to retain NOP Import Certificate records and make them available for review during their annual inspections. Your certifier will audit these records to verify that the volumes you accepted match what was certified and imported. By ensuring your international suppliers are certified, obtaining NOP Import Certificates for every load, and strictly verifying your receiving documents, you guarantee that the organic promise remains unbroken no matter how many borders it crosses.



United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program

