

The “Why” Behind the Rules

Narrator (00:20):

Welcome to your role in organic certification. When you look around this facility, you see stainless steel, conveyor belts, and clipboards. But what you are actually looking at is a vital link in a chain of trust. The organic sector is built on a promise to the public. Consumers choose organic because they believe in an agricultural system that protects soil health, keeps agrochemicals out of waterways, and fosters ecological diversity. The USDA organic seal is the only food production claim that guarantees this promise by law and verifies it through third-party inspection. So why do we care so much about regulatory compliance and standard operating procedures, or SOPs, in organics? Because all the hard work a farmer does to build healthy soil without prohibited inputs is completely erased if we fail to protect that ingredient once it enters a handling facility.

Mike Dill (01:23):

The fact that we are certified organic shows that we have done our due diligence, we've done the proper supplier monitoring, we've verified all our supply, and they can essentially take one certificate, ours, and know that everything that we send them, we stand behind, and is certified, and has been verified.

Jessica Jones (01:45):

At its root, organic certification is an agricultural proposition of how things are being grown on the farm, which ties out to soil health, the health of waterways. Being a handler means that I'm tying that forward to a finished product that's not an ingredient. We are operating within these parameters to keep the integrity of the organic product going. That is the organic claim.

Narrator (02:11):

Consumers are paying a premium for food that matches their values. Our job as handlers is to honor the farmer's labor and the consumer's trust. We do this by developing airtight organic SOPs that address the specific moments in our process where organic integrity could be lost.

Narrator (02:38):

Your facility's entire organic system is designed to prevent two risks, and we can't say them enough: commingling and contamination. Let's dive a little bit deeper into these. Commingling is the physical mixing of unpacked organic and nonorganic products or ingredients. Why are we so obsessive about where we carefully store organic products? Because if a conventional apple falls into a bin of organic apples, the entire bin is now commingled and all of the contents could permanently lose organic status. A single moment of carelessness can cost a company thousands of dollars and instantly break the chain of custody. Contamination is the unwanted pollution of an organic product by a prohibited substance. This is a major consideration when it comes to the why behind cleaning protocols.



Narrator (03:37):

In conventional handling, sanitizers like quaternary ammonia are frequently used because they leave a persistent residue that continues to kill bacteria. But in organic handling, that persistent chemical residue is exactly what we are trying to keep out of our products. These types of sanitizers may only be used in organic if there is an adequate intervening event, like a thorough rinse of the equipment surface, and in some cases, use a test strip to ensure the residue is fully removed. If you use an unapproved sanitizer and the organic product touches that surface, the product is now contaminated and could lose its organic status. That is why you must be so strict about only using substances and cleaning procedures that are approved by your organic certifier.

Narrator (04:27):

If a facility produced both organic and nonorganic products using the same equipment, you might be required to perform an organic purge. This means pushing a sacrificial batch of organic product through the machine to physically sweep out any conventional residue. Why? Because blowing air or wiping the outside of a machine cannot guarantee the hidden internal mechanisms are uncontaminated. We sacrifice a small amount of product to guarantee the purity of the rest.

Chad Olson (04:59):

When we grind coffee, we can clean it before the organics, or we can clean it and purge it. So we're able to combine the clean and the purge. Through our own weights and measures, we're able to determine how we would run a purge. On one of our filling systems, we have air vane system where we're able to pull coffee up from the ground and we weighed how much coffee would go into that tube, it was eight pounds, because that's going to touch everything, is what we thought. And we're not scientists, but we explained our methods to the inspector and the certifier and they agreed with it and said we can do it, so.

Narrator (05:38):

Pest management is where the organic philosophy truly shines. In a conventional facility, it's common for pest control procedures to include using chemicals to exterminate them. In an organic facility, we must treat our building like an ecosystem. The organic regulations require a strict four-tiered approach. We cannot jump straight to chemicals. Why? Because spraying pesticides introduces a massive risk of contaminating our organic ingredients and packaging. Instead, we start with prevention. The why behind housekeeping SOPs is that cleaning is pest control. Sweeping up spilled grain, fixing torn window screens, keeping doors closed and removing standing water eliminates the habitat and food sources pests are looking for.

Humberto Maldonado (06:32):

Pest control is also critical for food safety in organic. We don't want to have pests in-house that may cause food safety issues and that will require a chemical intervention that could jeopardize our organic certification or complicate it. So the best measure for pest control is always about prevention.



Narrator (06:54):

If housekeeping isn't enough, we move to mechanical and physical controls, like nonlethal traps, light traps, and sticky boards. If those fail, we move to step C, using specific materials available on the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances. Only if all of these fail, can you move to step D, using a pesticide that is not on the National List. But here is the critical why. You cannot use a step D chemical without prior explicit approval from your organic certifier. They must approve the exact chemical, how it will be applied, and your specific plan to prevent it from touching organic products or packaging.

Jessica Jones (07:39):

We had a mouse problem here exactly one time. We panicked and just went to the hardware store and bought some traps. And shortly later, we had our first organic inspection, and our certifier said, "Oh, those traps aren't allowed." Had that pest consumed some sort of poison trap but not died from it yet, and that could cross-contaminate.

Narrator (08:02):

Regardless of which pest management step you are at, every part of your pest management SOPs must be pre-approved by your certifier to ensure that there are no unintended opportunities for contamination.

Jessica Jones (08:20):

Checking our facility, so we're doing it generally on Monday. Really, we're saying there's no observation of rodents.

Narrator (08:30):

Finally, we must talk about paperwork. Filling out logs, logging lot numbers, and checking supplier certificates can feel tedious, but there is a massive why behind this: fraud prevention. Organic fraud, where nonorganic products are intentionally sold at an organic premium, is a crime, and it damages the entire industry. It steals from the honest farmers and destroys consumer trust. Your daily receiving logs, your sanitation sign-offs, and your purge records aren't just busy work. They are the sworn evidence that we maintained the chain of custody. Without those records, the organic seal is meaningless.

Mike Dill (09:16):

And that's one of the hardest things is the recordkeeping. Other than that, it's just standard business, but you want to verify your suppliers regardless of whether they're organic or not. You want to validate your practices regardless of what they're for. It's worth the effort and really don't be scared by the additional requirements that you're taking on just because of certification.

Narrator (09:46):

It takes patience and diligence to handle organic products. Yes, you may have to clean equipment more often. Yes, you may have to scrutinize your supply chain closer, but as an organic handler, you must instill this culture in your team. Explain the why behind the requirements constantly. Don't just tell them what the SOP says to do, tell them how that step protects the company's product, the farmer's livelihood, and the consumer's health.

Abel Sanchez-Valencia (10:15):

To make sure that our staff understands the why, we have continuous training available for everybody in which we touch base on updated regulations, concerns, or anything that's related to the organic market itself.

Narrator (10:31):

When your staff understands the why, compliance stops being a burden and becomes a shared point of pride. You are the gatekeepers. You are the defenders of organic integrity. Thank you for doing the work that makes a healthier world possible.



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