

Organic Handling in Practice: Organically Grown Company

Mike Dill (00:11):

Organically Grown Company or as we're known as OGC, we're a produce wholesaler and distributor. We buy certified organic produce from farmers, and distributors, and marketers, and importers, and we distribute it to restaurants, retailers, food buying clubs, other processors. We receive produce every day. We ship produce every day, and we've been doing that since 1978. OGC was founded by a bunch of hippies. They really wanted to support these local organic growers in the region and nourish people with healthy organic food.

Amanda James-Martin (01:01):

My name's Amanda James-Martin, and I'm the Food Safety and Compliance Specialist here at OGC. If I were just starting out, I think a good place to get information would be from really multiple certifiers. Almost every certifier has a lot of information on their sites about how to get started. You can also talk to people within the organic community. The one other piece of advice I'd have for someone who was starting was not to expect everything to be perfect right away. It's going to be a growing process, like the recordkeeping process that you start with probably won't be the one that you end with.

Humberto Maldonado (01:48):

Selecting your suppliers is a very important part of any operation. We not only look for compliance with organic, but also compliance with food safety, and other legal requirements like insurance.

Humberto Maldonado (02:03):

So, here we are at the top of the OGC warehouse, where everything starts and ends from an operations perspective. Our receivers will check whatever is in the purchase order and see if that matches with what we are receiving. Every load of product that is received is checked for quality assurance, also for compliance, mostly regarding the labeling. During the receiving process, we place these tickets, as you can see here. So, this is the product number and this is the log number. First six digits are the purchase order and the last two are the line in that purchase order.

Amanda James-Martin (02:50):

When I was first starting, I wish that I would've had a better understanding of some of the complexities of the supply chain. I think that was the hardest thing for me to learn. Honestly, I was like, all organic certificates are the same, but they're not. There's crop certificates, there's handler certificates. Some of those like nuances, that was the hardest part of what I was learning.



Mike Dill (03:17):

Alright, we want to welcome you to cooler E. This is our warmest cooler in our warehouse.

Humberto Maldonado (03:22):

We have products like mangoes, tomatoes, papayas, eggplants, ginger, winter squash, sweet potatoes, potatoes, bananas, melons, and watermelons.

Mike Dill (03:33):

Every pallet is going to have one of these lots stickers on it, and the information in the barcode is the same as the information that would be on our warehouse management system.

Humberto Maldonado (03:46):

That will help us a lot with the organic certification, because it will help us to maintain the trustability, not only to the supplier level, but to the farm level. And that's a great advantage. Welcome to cooler A. This is our busiest cooler. As you can see behind me, there's the repack area. A hundred projects every day go to repack for different purposes.

Mike Dill (04:14):

This is where people are actually handling the product. They are actually relabeling, so that changes what it's branded as. It gives it a new lot number. So this is like a repack sheet. This is more critical than probably anything else that we do, because this is showing that exact in out balance. So it tells you all your inputs, what time you start, what time you finish, total time it took, total cases, the table is clean and sanitized. We have to track everything down to the box level. Every pound we can account for through these sheets.

Humberto Maldonado (04:58):

Here we can see that they are sorting potatoes. Potatoes is a product that is rarely consumed raw. When they move into a product that is expected to consume raw, they will need to clean this table. So for that purpose we use alcohol, and this is a cleaner and a sanitizer that is approved for organic. We have a master sanitation schedule that ensures that we have a clean operation all year, and all the products that we are using are approved by our certifier for the intended use.

Mike Dill (05:39):

One of the problems in produce is that packages aren't sealed and they're not in tamper-proof and tamper-evident boxes, it's very easy for someone to potentially grab the wrong tomatoes and put them in a different box, or for product up above to fall into this box, or even to get contamination. Maybe there's a leak from the roof or from a cooling unit or something. So, we've been supportive of SOE from the beginning, because we wanted to close that loophole and make sure that all the handlers of fresh produce, open produce like this, were certified to ensure that organic integrity is maintained through the time that they have it in their possession.



Amanda James-Martin (06:28):

For retail packaging, we usually are collaborating mostly with our marketing team on that. The marketing team will come up with their draft of the packaging, and then send that to the compliance team just to see if we see any areas of concern, and we submit that to our certifier, so that they can have that final approval.

Mike Dill (06:51):

In our small pack program and other areas of our business, rather than having to submit every label for every variety of product, what we did is we worked with our certifier and we created an SOP, or standard operating procedure, that allowed us to have a template, and that is printed on every label, and what changes is the item number and the lot number. And here's another example of a template. So we have PLU stickers that have all the required information. Just one more way that we don't have to submit everything, because we have a standard process for how we manage our PLU stickers and other labels that we do.

Humberto Maldonado (07:39):

Here are some pallets ready to go to our customers.

Mike Dill (07:44):

This is how we finish that complete paperwork, where we can go to a sales order number and look up exactly what that customer has ordered. From that, we can trace it back through our system and all the way back to our vendor.

Amanda James-Martin (08:04):

Our recordkeeping system has evolved a lot. When I first came on, a lot of the vendor documentation was just stored in folders, and then the expiration dates were in this giant, giant Excel sheet. And it was very hard to keep up with. So then we moved all that documentation into our current system, which is working great. I think the takeaway from that story is that the first thing that you try might not be the best thing, but don't be discouraged, there's still going to be a better thing down the road. You just have to keep trying and eventually you'll find the right fit.

Amanda James-Martin (08:40):

The traceback exercise is really just kind of an audit trail exercise to track an item from sales all the way back to receiving. So we'll start our traceback with our sales order. So I'm going to choose one here at random, and we're going to traceback some trumpet mushrooms. So you can see here this is where our sales order number is, and from the sales order screen, we also can look at attachments, and find the invoice that was sent to our customer. And then we can see that those mushrooms are on that invoice for the quantity that we said that we brought in. And then another good thing to verify at this point would be that the vendor is actually certified to sell this item. So we would do that in document compliance network. Right here we can see that those trumpet mushrooms were included on that organic certificate.

Amanda James-Martin (09:44):

Advice I would have for a younger me going into their first inspection would honestly probably be to be a little bit more relaxed. If there is a finding, that's just something that can make you better. That's just an opportunity to improve the systems you have in place, and it took fresh eyes to find that. When I am preparing for an inspection, first off, I usually like to kind of go through any kind of records I think that they might ask of me, and they are very good about sending out a checklist of everything that you could need to look for. Another thing I really like to do is practice the mass balance, and then also the traceback activities, because I feel like those can actually be the most challenging part of an inspection if you aren't prepared for them or don't do them very often.

Humberto Maldonado (10:35):

The inspectors are not the enemy. They are our partners in ensuring organic integrity. So this is a team effort and it is important for us and for them to understand how we operate. We try to make things as simple as possible. We provide them with SOPs, specification sheets, and other kinds of documentation that explains who we are, so it's easier to show them how we operate and the complexity of our business.

Mike Dill (11:09):

When we get done with our inspection and we don't have any non-compliances or issues of concern, that feels good, and it just validates everything that we work so hard to do. And so I take pride in working for a company that really prioritizes compliance, integrity, transparency, and just serves a purpose rather than a profit.

Humberto Maldonado (11:33):

The good thing about OGC is that organic culture is part of what we are, and you can see that with every coworker that is around. This company is committed to organic and to food safety.

Mike Dill (11:49):

If you believe in the movement, you believe in organic practices, you want to support farmers that are doing the right thing, then don't let the little bit of additional recordkeeping hold you back. Yes, you have to develop an organic system plan, but it's really no different than your food safety plan. All these things require a little bit of effort, but it's all for a reason.

Humberto Maldonado (12:15):

If you care about people on the earth, I will recommend you to consider organic production. If your vision goes beyond profits and if you are trying to do the right thing, organic is the option.



United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program

