

Fact Sheet #31 Organic Certification

Becoming Certified

Organic production offers many advantages for small farmers including ecological production methods, strong consumer demand for organic products, and higher prices. If you use organic production practices and have farm sales of more than \$5,000/year you cannot legally sell your products as “organic” unless your farm has been officially certified. Violation of the use of “organic” can result in fines. Terms such as “chemical free”, “ecologically friendly”, and “GMO free” are often used by farmers who use sustainable practices but are not Certified Organic.

Visit the USDA’s National Organic Program [website](#) to find a list of certifying agencies. You can use any agency listed.

One certifying agent is listed for Massachusetts:

[Baystate Organic Certifiers](#)

683 River St.

Winchendon, MA 01475

Contact: Don Franczyk

Phone: [978] 297-4171

E-mail: baystateorganic@earthlink.net



Fees and Costs

Certifying agencies generally charge a fixed fee to cover the initial certification costs and then an annual fee to cover continued documentation and verification costs. Costs vary so you may want to investigate your certification options.

The [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#) (EQIP) provides funding and technical assistance to farmers implementing new structural and management conservation practices on agricultural land, including transitioning to organic production. Subject to an upper limit for the five year Farm Bill period, EQIP may pay up to 75% of the costs of eligible conservation practices, and up to 90% of these costs for beginning and limited resource farmers. For more information, contact [NRCS-Massachusetts](#) at [413] 253-4350.

Additionally, the National Organic Certification Cost Share Program provides funding to assist farmers with organic certification expenses. The program may cover 75% of costs, up to \$750. Contact the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) to find out if these funds are available. The organic certification cost reimbursement application can be found [here](#). MDAR is no longer accepting applications for reimbursement for certifications acquired between October 1, 2012 and September 30, 2013.

General Overview of Regulations

Organic regulations are complex and ever-changing, which is why it is important to work with your certifying agency on everything that you do to ensure compliance.

In general, you cannot use synthetic pesticides, antibiotics, or petroleum-based fertilizers. To certify a field as organic it must not have had synthetic pesticides or petroleum fertilizers applied for the past three years. To certify animals as organic, there are various transition requirements depending upon the animal species: dairy, beef, pork, poultry, etc.

Great attention is paid to nurturing the soil by the use of composts, cover crops, rock minerals and natural fertilizers. Plant disease and pests are controlled through the use of crop rotations, resistant varieties, cultivation, biological and botanical pest control, and organic pesticides. Animal health is maintained with wholesome food, adequate shelter, access to the outdoors, and preventive health plans.

Documentation of field maps, adjoining fields, crop inputs used, yields, sales, feeds purchased, medications used, and equipment-cleaning logs must be kept to maintain your certification.

Resources for Organic Certification

- USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service administers the [National Organic Program](#)
- [Rodale Institute](#) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that researches organic best practices and shares its findings through field days, workshops, and [online tools for farmers](#)
- See NOFA/Massachusetts's website for more [resources](#) on organic certification
- MDAR [Organic Cost Share Program](#)

Certified Naturally Grown

If organic certification seems out of reach for your farm, you may choose to pursue [Certified Naturally Grown](#) (CNG) status. CNG, whose standards are based on the National Organic Program standards, provides a label that is most useful for farmers who market directly through CSAs, farmers' markets, and local food businesses. To obtain certification for livestock or produce, they ask for a minimum contribution of \$110, though they recommend \$125 - \$200 per year. For the newer apiary certification program, they recommend \$75 - \$200 per year but do not specify a minimum. Contributions can be made in installments over time, and scholarships may be available for farmers who are facing unusual hardships.