

Organic Fact Sheet for Consumers

Frequently Asked Questions

Organic Products

1. What is organic?

Organic refers to products that are produced without using conventional pesticides, irradiation, or fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or bioengineering. For example, organic meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products come from animals that are not given antibiotics or growth hormones and are fed organic feed.

Source: *USDA National Organic Program (NOP)*

Organic is all about how a product or food is grown and processed. Organic does not mean that a product is free of something, nor is it a judgment about the quality, safety or nutrient value of a product.

2. What is organic agriculture?

The National Organics Standard Board defines “organic agriculture” as an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain, and enhance ecological harmony.

3. Is organic food grown in another country required to meet U.S. organic regulations?

Yes, all organic food that is going to be sold as organic in the U.S. is required to follow the U.S. standards, as well as be certified by a USDA-accredited certifier.

4. Can organic food from China truly be organic?

Yes, organic foods that meet [National Organic Standards](#), no matter where it comes from, can be classified as organic.

5. Why should I buy organic? Is organic food healthier?

There is increasing evidence at this time to suggest that organically produced foods may be more nutritious. Organic foods and fiber are spared the application of toxic and persistent insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and fertilizers. Many EPA-approved pesticides were registered long before extensive research linked these chemicals to cancer and other diseases. In the long run, organic farming techniques provide a safer, more sustainable environment for everyone.

Source: *Organic Trade Association*

6. Are organic products completely free of pesticide residues? Is residue testing required under the NOP?

Certified organic products are grown and handled according to strict standards without the use of pesticides or other synthetic chemicals. These standards also set strict requirements for how to prevent contamination such as buffer zones between conventional and organic growing fields and storing organic products above conventional products on shelves to avoid cross contamination. Organic crops can, however, be inadvertently exposed to agricultural chemicals, such as those present in rain or ground water, or soil previously used for non-organic farming.

Regulation 7 CFR 205.670 does not require residue testing. Products may be tested by a certification agency for pesticide or GMO contamination issues in response to a complaint and/or if there is “reason” to believe that there are contamination issues.

7. Where can I buy organic food?

Organic has become mainstream. Consumers can now find organic foods everywhere, including local organic food markets, health food stores, retail chains and even conventional stores.

8. Why is organic food more expensive?

Prices for organic foods reflect many of the same costs as conventional items in terms of growing, harvesting, transportation and storage. Organically produced foods must meet stricter regulations governing all of these steps, so the process is often more labor- and management-intensive, and farming tends to be on a smaller scale. There is also mounting evidence that if all the indirect costs of conventional food production—cleanup of polluted water, replacement of eroded soils, costs of health care for farmers and their workers—were factored into the price of food, organic foods would cost the same or, more likely, be cheaper.

Source: *Organic Trade Association*

9. What does "certified organic" mean?

"Certified organic" means that a non-profit, state or private certification organization that is accredited by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has verified that the product meets strictly defined organic standards. The certifier inspects the location where the organic product is produced and handled to ensure that all the rules necessary to meet USDA organic standards are being followed. Companies that handle or process organic food before it gets to the local supermarket or restaurant must also be certified. Annual inspections ensure continued compliance.



Source: *National Organics Standard Board*

10. What types of products can become certified organic?

Any agricultural product that meets certification requirements may be considered organic. Organic products can include foods ranging from canned products to fresh produce, meats, poultry, bakery products, to beverages including juices and milk and even personal care products.

11. How can QAI assure consumers that its mark as a certifier means that oversight has occurred?

One of the requirements of the National Organic Program is that an annual on-site inspection is conducted. This is a requirement of certification. There are 95 accredited certifiers, but as part of their stringent requirements to maintain their accredited certifier status with the USDA, they need to uphold the requirements of the National Organic Program. As such, they must require annual on-site inspections for all their clients.

12. Can you help me understand certain organic claims? For example, what is the difference between 100% Organic vs. Made with Organic?

There are four types of organic claims:

- Products labeled “100 Percent Organic” must show an ingredients list, the name and address of the handler (bottler, distributor, importer, manufacturer, packer, processor, etc.) of the finished product, and the name/seal of the organic certifier.
- Products labeled “organic” must contain at least 95 percent organic ingredients. The label must contain an ingredient list that identifies the organic, as well as the non-organic ingredients in the product and the name of the organic certifier.
- Products labeled “Made with Organic (specified ingredients or food groups)” must contain at least 70 percent organic ingredients. The label must contain an ingredients list that identifies the organic, as well as the non-organic ingredients in the product, along with the name of the organic certifier.
- If a product contains less than 70 percent organic ingredients, the product can make an ingredient panel only claim, i.e. where the organic ingredients are specified on the ingredient panel. These products cannot use the word “organic” on the principal display panel or display any certifier seals.

13. Are products labeled “natural” the same as “organic?”

No. The term “natural” suggests that products have been minimally processed or are free from synthetic ingredients. Natural and organic are not interchangeable. Only products labeled "organic" have been certified as meeting USDA organic standards. Other claims, such as free-range, hormone-free, and natural can still appear on product labels. However, such claims should not be confused with the term "organic.”

Organic Standards

1. Who regulates certified organic claims?

The Organic Food Production Act of 1990 (OFPA) established standards for the production, processing and certification of organic food. The National Organic Standards Board develops guidelines and procedures to regulate organic crops. The National Organic Program (NOP) is a federal regulation created by the USDA. The NOP is responsible for developing and implementing the organic standards. The NOP also accredits state agencies and private organizations that will certify organic producers and handlers; it also oversees enforcement of the standards.

2. What is the National Organics Standard Board?

The National Organics Standard Board (NOSB) assists the USDA Secretary in developing standards for substances to be used in organic production. The NOSB also advises the Secretary on other aspects of implementing the national organic program.

The NOSB consists of 15 members from all four U.S. regions:

- Farmers/growers (4)
- Handlers/processors (2)
- Retailer (1)
- Scientist (1)
- Consumer/public interest advocates (3)
- Environmentalists (4)
- A USDA-accredited certifying agent (1)

Source: *USDA National Organic Program*

3. What is the National Organic Standard?

The National Organic Standard (NOS) is a federal regulation created by the USDA and administered by the National Organic Program (NOP) to:

- Develop and implement national standards governing the marketing of agricultural products as organically produced
- Facilitate commerce in fresh and processed food that is organically produced
- Ensure consumers that such products meet consistent standards

Source: *USDA National Organic Program*

4. Can you provide some background on organic regulations?

- 1970s: Organic certification agencies began developing standards to support organic farming and thwart consumer fraud.
- 1990: *Organic Foods Production Act* passed by U.S. Congress in Farm Bill.
- 1997: USDA released proposed regulations.
- 2000: Second draft of the proposed regulations released. Irradiation, GMO's and sewage sludge excluded.
- 2002: Full implementation and enforcement of National Organic Program (NOP).

5. Can personal care products make organic label and marketing claims?

Yes. If the personal care products meet the requirements of the National Organic Program, then they may be certified to the USDA standard. Additionally, there is a new voluntary NSF Draft Standard 305: *Organic Personal Care Products*, which specifies materials, processes, production criteria, and conditions that shall be met in order for personal care products to make organic label and marketing claims. The NOP has traditionally been considered a food label claim standard. NSF 305 allows for certain chemical processes and ingredients common in the personal care industry that aren't necessarily permitted in the NOP. However, to support organic agriculture, NSF 305 requires that these ingredients are organically derived. The voluntary draft standard contains requirements for agricultural ingredients, synthetic ingredients, and methods of extraction based on the final product's label claim. Products covered by the standard

include rinse-off and leave-on personal care and cosmetic products, as well as oral care and personal hygiene products.

The Organic Certification Process

The intricacies of the organic certification coupled with the dynamics of international trade, can make for a complex system. The QAI Certification Program is designed to certify every step of the organic chain. From the land on which the product is grown, to the producers growing the product, from the post-harvest facilities preparing the product, to the processing and handling facilities transforming the product, our job at QAI is to verify that the organic integrity is maintained.

We work with other certifiers to help ensure that your organic food is truly organic. Some of the certifiers are in China for instance, and some are in the U.S. From farm to fork, we all work together under the USDA's oversight. Here's how the process works.

1. What does the certification process entail?

Organic certification is a five-step process:



Application for QAI Certification

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The Inspection

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Technical Review

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Resolution & Notification

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Certification

This process provides the consumer with confidence in the products they choose to eat or use. It's important for consumers to note that inspection, according to the NOP, does not necessarily mean that the product was tested. Inspection means an annual on-site inspection and certifying agent review has occurred. If a certifier suspects that prohibited pesticides or genetically modified organisms were used in the formation of the product, they reserve the right to have the product tested. Each department is methodically assessed to confirm that they are in compliance with organic standards.

2. Can products imported from other countries be certified “organic?”

USDA regulations allow agricultural products grown outside the U.S. to be certified organic. Regardless of the country of origin, agricultural products must meet the stringent requirements of the NOP in order to make an organic claim in the U.S. A complete list of requirements can be found at: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop>.

For example, if Company A imports certified organic vegetables from China and Company B in the U.S. processes the vegetables by blending them with other certified

organic vegetables and placing them in a package, the certification process for these vegetables would be as follows:

A. Application for Certification

The organic certifier (QAI) makes sure company A has met the requirements of the NOP by reviewing their certification documentation for the vegetables coming into the U.S.:

- Description of basic practices and procedures
- Description of monitoring practices and procedures
- Description of record keeping system
- Description of barriers to commingling and contamination
- Desk audit by Application Review Staff

B. Inspection

The organic certifier will then audit company B by visiting the factory to make sure they also meet the NOP.

- Cleaning and sanitation
- Record keeping and audit trail
- Documentation review (i.e. organic certificates, all organic procedures and verification information purchase order, production and repacking records, receiving log, storage of raw material, sanitation and pest control records, audit tracking and much more including documentation that is kept on hand on how they sourced the material from Company A).

C. Technical Review

The Organic Compliance Plan and inspection report of company B are reviewed and compared to the requirements of the NOP. A non-compliance letter is assembled if additional information, documentation or changes to the operation are necessary to demonstrate organic compliance for company B.

D. Resolution and Notification

This part of the process determines if improvements are necessary at company B to make sure organic integrity is being maintained. If needed, corrective actions are implemented. Then a re-inspection of company B's operations is required. If company B has correctly met the requirements then certification is given. If not, depending upon the outcome of the inspection, there is a denial, temporary suspension or a permanent revocation of company B's certification. The process does allow a company to appeal.

E. Certification



If requirements are successfully met, the third-party certifier (QAI in this case) will allow the company B to place our mark on their package of vegetables. Consumers know then that the vegetables in the package meet the U.S. law for organic when they see the certification mark from an organic certifier such as QAI.

3. Does QAI have a presence in China?

While QAI does not have a presence in China, we rely on our USDA ACA counterparts to uphold the requirements of the NOP. Further, per Regulation NOP 202.501, QAI is required to accept their certification documentation. Therefore, consumers can trust that through the series of accreditations and certifications that occur from China to the United States, and from farm to fork, organic integrity has been maintained.

4. Why is certification important?

It's required at each step in the supply chain and it determines that the organic process has been followed along the chain. At QAI we accept the certifications of previous certifiers earlier in the chain. In this case, we accepted the certification of another independent, third-party certifier for company A in order to certify company B.

Certification is important for consumers, industry and the regulatory community for a variety of reasons, including:

- Assures organic integrity from seed to shelf
- Boosts consumer confidence
- Protects consumers from fraud
- Provides for product differentiation

The NOP requires certification of agricultural products making an organic label claim. According to the OTA, "All food and beverage products sold in the U.S. as organic must meet or exceed U.S. federal organic standards, which include third-party certification by a USDA accredited certifier for any farm that sells to processors, and for any processor/handler."

The fact sheet is based on information from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the National Organic Program (NOP) and the Organic Trade Association's (OTA) websites.