



Organic Farming: How To Capitalize On This Niche Market

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Organic farming is the practice of producing food without the use of man made pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. This method of production has become more popular over the past 20 years, fueled by consumer demand. Organic crops demand a premium price in the marketplace, presenting growers the opportunity to capitalize on this niche market. But, along with rapid expansion is the need for quality standards.

This prompted the USDA to become involved with organics a decade ago when they passed the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 (OFPA). The primary focus of the act was to establish a national standard for the certification and marketing of agricultural products deemed to be organic. Through the act, the National Organic Program (NOP) was created. In 1994, this program appointed the first National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), a group that investigated existing organic practices in order to set regulations for the national program.

After much deliberation and research, the NOSB published the national organic standards rule. The rules established standards for organic production of crops, livestock, and handling of organic products in the U.S. The final rule was derived from the Organic Foods Production Act, recommendations from the National Organic Standards Board, a review of existing organic industry standards and practices, and over 300,000 public comments received from previous proposals. The rule establishes a number of requirements for producers and handlers of organic products. The major provisions are requirements for land, crop nutrients, crop rotation, pest management,

livestock, processing and handling, and commingling. USDA guidelines for certification and labeling of organic products make it possible for consumers to buy with confidence.

In 2002, with an extensive list of substances approved for organic production, the National Organic Program started to accredit state and private entities to certify organic farmland. To become accredited as an organic certifier, an application must be submitted and approved by the USDA. The application process requires applicants to document their ability to certify to national standards and to oversee their client's compliance with national regulations. The fee to become an accredited certifying agent of the USDA is \$500.

There has been some confusion about the difference between a State Organic Program (SOP) and a state certification program. A state certification program is equivalent to a private or foreign certification program in that it lacks enforcement power. These certifiers travel to farms and take soil, water, and foliage samples to ensure that there is not any residue from a substance that is forbidden by the national standards. Buffer zones around organic farmland are also measured to ensure that sufficient space separates organic fields from those conventionally managed. This lessens the likelihood that prohibited substances will drift onto organic fields through the air. Once the certifier concludes that the operation meets all of the requirements and certifies the field, the farmer must keep detailed records for such things as fertilizer inputs, pest and weed control, and crop rotation.

If a state wishes to upgrade from a state certification program to a state organic program, the state is required to submit a plan to the USDA for approval to administer the National Organic Program within their state. If approved as a state organic program, the state has the opportunity to petition for requirements that go beyond the national standards.



The Secretary of Agriculture reviews these requests and either approves or denies them depending on their legitimacy. In creating a state organic program, a state agrees to take on enforcement activities that would otherwise be the responsibility of the National Organic Program. States do not have jurisdiction over the accreditation of certifying agents and cannot revoke accreditation. Currently there are no approved state organic programs, although many states that already have state certification programs have applied, including Texas.

Once the USDA accredits a state, private, or foreign entity, it is considered to be an agent of the USDA. Renewal is necessary every five years after the initial accreditation. When certifying in a state that has a State Organic Program, private certifiers will be held to the national standards, plus any additional standards that have been approved for that state.

The accredited certifying agents may set their own fees for the services that they provide to producers. The USDA does not determine the prices that certifiers charge; however, certifiers must submit a fee schedule to the USDA.

In addition to the rules governing organic production, the National Organic Standards Board devised a labeling system for all goods that are grown and certified as organic. The seal is available as a marketing tool to indicate that the products have been grown in conditions that are acceptable by the National Organic Program standards. The USDA Certified Organic label has a strict set of guidelines regarding its use. Only products that have been certified by an accredited agent may use the label. However, a certified business may only use the USDA logo if their product is “100% Organic” or “Organic” (containing at least 95% organic ingredients). Products made with 70-95% organic ingredients may use their certifier’s logo on the information panel. Imported food may be sold as organic in the U.S., as long as the organic production policy in the country where it was grown is equivalent to our own NOP standards. Unless an agent of the USDA has certified the products that are imported, the imported products are not to use the USDA certified organic label. Some private certifiers have labels that are recognized around the world, easing the entry into foreign marketplaces.

Though state organic programs may have additional regulations depending on their individual environmental needs, the national regulations are the foundation for organic certification. This foundation allows consumers the assurance that the organic food they buy, often at a premium price, was produced under a common set of standards sanctioned by the United States Department of Agriculture.



Helpful Web Links

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education

<http://www.griffin.peachnet.edu/sare/>

Sustainable Production Systems Ag Program

<http://sustainable.tamu.edu>

Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas

<http://www.attra.org>

Rodale Institute

<http://fadr.msu.ru/rodale>

Soil Quality Institute

<http://www.statlab.iastate.edu/survey/SQI>

Alternative Farming Systems Information Center

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic>

International Federation of Organic Farming Movements

<http://www.ifoam.org>

National Organic Program

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop>

Seeds of Change

<http://store.yahoo.com/seedsofchange/index.html>

Texas Department of Agriculture

<http://www.agr.state.tx.us>

Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture

<http://kerrcenter.com>

National Center for Appropriate Technology

<http://www.ncat.org>

All Organic Links

<http://www.allorganiclinks.com/>