

Conversion to Organic Agriculture



Committee on Accreditation
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Table of Content

- 1. Conversion to Organic Farming Practices.....3
- 2. Decide on the Organic Production Standard(s) to Use in Your Farming Operations4
- 3. Selection of a Certification Body.....4
- 4. Undertaking the Inspection Process5
- 5. Granting of Certification.....5
- 6. Certification Continuation.....6
- 7. Support Programs for Transitioning Organic Operations.....6

Overview

To be eligible to market their products as organic, farmers need to have their land and agricultural system audited, inspected and certified by a recognized 3rd-party certification body. The organic certification process requires a farming operation to meet all of the production, record keeping, handling, storage and labeling requirements of the legal organic standard of the country where the product is grown and/or sold.

Strict laws and regulations governing organic production and food products are enforced in Québec, Canada and other key market locations such as the U.S., E.U., or Japan. By definition, organic agricultural products are those certified by an accredited, independent organization as having been produced using methods intended to protect ecosystem health and biodiversity, and without the use of synthetic pesticides or fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation or genetic engineering.

Key Steps to Certification

1. Conversion to Organic Farming Practices

Farmers begin the organic conversion process (which is often also commonly referred to as the “transition” process) by adopting organic farming practices, which means eliminating the use of genetically modified seeds, synthetic pesticides, fertilizers and medications and preventing the application of non-authorized substances on their fields. Farmers must also create an operational management plan that is compliant with organic farming principles and regulations. This plan covers the following:

- a map of areas to be farmed within the operation;
- a list of the crops to harvest and/or livestock animals to be raised;
- a description of how using buffer strips, rotational cropping, composting, pasture use and manure management will be implemented;
- crop and livestock pest, weed and disease control strategies;
- harvest and post-harvest handling methods;
- for operations with a non-organic component (i.e., the farm is transitioning field or animal herd units over time, instead of converting the whole operation at once): the operator must describe in detail the segregation of non-organic and organic crops from sowing (or from gestation or birth in the case of livestock production) through to harvest (or slaughter for livestock), storage and shipment from the farm.

As part of the organic farm management plan, the operator is also required, through diligent record keeping, to provide detailed information with regard to the origin of livestock, seed purchases and any inputs to their operation. For quality control purposes, operators must maintain an audit trail of information such as fields where crops or livestock are raised,

when crops were harvested or livestock units were slaughtered, where products were stored and when they were shipped.

Transitioning a field or farm to organic cultivation typically takes three years of full application of the requirements outlined in an organic standard. Depending on the organic standard followed, if crops are grown on land not previously farmed, or land where an official body can testify that no synthetic chemicals have been used in recent years, the farmer may be eligible for organic certification within a year of adopting organic farming practices.

After the three-year transition period, and/or the successful completion of the organic certification process specific to the type of operation, crops or livestock can be marketed as “organic”.

2. Decide on the Organic Production Standard(s) to Use in Your Farming Operations

All operators based in a territory in which a competent authority exerts its jurisdiction and who want to market their products as “organic”, must follow the organic standard prescribed by the government regulation enforced by this authority.

Because many organically grown products are used as ingredients in products that may access multiple markets, operators are also encouraged to consider adopting practices that meet the requirements of more than one organic standard. For example, if a farmer is raising organic products that will be used as ingredients in products sold in the United States, the farming operations must follow the USDA National Organic Program rules for organic crop production or, if the operation is based in Canada, comply with the USA-Canada Equivalency Arrangement concerning organic products. If the organic commodities are to be sold in or processed into products sold in Europe, farming operations must follow EC Regulations 834/2007 and 889/2008 or an accepted equivalent.

Even though national organic standards share mostly similar requirements, there are some key differences between them. For more information to this effect, operators may consult the following document: *An Overview of Organic Certification and National Organic Standards Applied Worldwide*, available on the CARTV and CAEQ websites.

3. Selection of a Certification Body

In accordance with most of organic governmental regulations, farmers need to hold an organic compliance certificate issued by an accredited certification body in order to market their products as “organic”. In addition, many of these regulations, including those in force in Canada, require a farm operation to be under the control of a certification body for the final conversion year, and be granted an in-conversion certificate. Farmers obtain either certificate by applying to an accredited certification body. In this application operators must indicate which standards they wish to have their products certified against, and submit their operational organic compliance management plan for review, along with any other relevant business information. Note that certification fees will be charged.

Next, the certification body must establish whether the applicant is actually the party responsible for ensuring that commodities covered by the application meet all organic standard requirements. It will also review for compliance the operational organic management plan submitted by the operator.

4. Undertaking the Inspection Process

These steps completed, the certification body then sends an agent who will inspect any areas of the operation under organic management, as well as any other cultivated fields, buildings and equipment used for agricultural purposes at this operation site. The inspector sent by the certification body to the operation site for inspection purposes will work with the farm map that has been included in the operational organic compliance management plan submitted by the operator. The farm operator must have ready and available all farm records for the inspector to review.

While inspecting fields and livestock facilities, the inspector will ask questions about the farming practices being used. The inspector will ask for yield estimates for organic crops that are in the ground and will compare these with actual yields obtained. The operator's projections for animal breeding and slaughter will be discussed. The inspector will do visual inspections of the crops and animals and may take samples to determine if there is any crop or feed contamination from the use of genetically modified seeds. They will also verify that the buffer zones between organic and conventional fields are sufficient for the purpose of reducing the drift potential of genetically modified seeds, pollen or chemicals prohibited in organic farming.

Inspectors may also take soil, crop, or water samples to check for chemical residues, nutrient loads and parasite levels. For this reason, it is strongly recommended that farmers consult with the certification body to be sure that farm inputs such as manures, fertilizers, natural pesticides, seeds, and botanical or other remedies are allowed before their use. The inspector will also check that correct practices, such as crop rotations and environmentally sound manure management, are being followed.

Following the inspection, the inspector will conduct an exit meeting where he or she will report to the operator any areas of non-compliance found during the inspection. Neither the inspector nor any other certification body employee will give advice about how to resolve areas in which an operation was deemed non-compliant. The operator will be asked to sign the exit meeting summary report.

5. Granting of Certification

The inspector will transmit to the certification body a written report of the inspection, containing all his or her findings. If the certification body is satisfied that the requirements of the organic standard(s) are being met, an organic compliance certificate will be issued allowing the farmer to market his or her products as organic to the given standard(s) for the following year.

6. Certification Continuation

In order to have its certification maintained in the next years, the operator will be required to submit an updated organic compliance management plan annually for review by the certification body. Yearly on-site inspections will take place to ensure that the farmer remains in compliance with all relevant standards and that his or her records are in order.

Organic certification may be suspended or withdrawn for certain products or for the totality of products inscribed on the certificate, when non-compliant areas or actions threaten organic integrity, when these areas or actions are not corrected within set deadlines, or when the operator abandons organic production methods for certain products or all products. The operator may appeal any adverse decision pronounced by a certification body following a notification of non-compliance.

7. Support Programs for Transitioning Organic Operations

Historically, transitional or conversion crops attract lower premium prices than those received for certified organic crops. Conversion farming operations may result in lower yields (and more labour-intensive work) for a few years. Many local and federal governments have created financial support programs to help operations currently going through the conversion process to overcome such hurdles. Operators should research public assistance programs to determine their eligibility. If your operation is based in Quebec, you may apply for financial assistance within the framework of the MAPAQ *Programme d'appui à la conversion en agriculture biologique*, launched in May 2010.