

Requirements for Organic Certification of Crops and Livestock

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Abstract: The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulates the production and labeling of “organic” crop and livestock products under the National Organic Program (NOP) in Section 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 205, also known as the “Final Rule”. This article summarizes the regulations for the production and labeling of crop and livestock products as “organic” in the United States.

Under the Final Rule, “organic production” is defined as “a production system that is managed ... to respond to site-specific conditions by integrating cultural, biological and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity.”

In simplified terms, the NOP Final Rule requires:

For crop farms –

- 3 years with no application of prohibited materials (no synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, or GMOs) prior to certification;
- implementation of an Organic System Plan, with proactive fertility systems; conservation measures; environmentally sound manure, weed, disease, and pest management practices; and soil building crop rotation systems;
- use of natural inputs and/or approved synthetic substances on the National List;
- no use of prohibited substances while certified;
- no use of genetically engineered organisms, (GMOs) defined in the rule as “excluded methods”;
- no sewage sludge or irradiation;
- use of organic seeds, when commercially available;
- use of organic seedlings for annual crops;
- restrictions on use of raw manure and compost;
- maintenance of buffer zones, depending on risk of contamination; and
- no residues of prohibited substances exceeding 5% of the EPA tolerance.

For livestock operations –

- implementation of an Organic System Plan;
- mandatory outdoor access;
- access to pasture for ruminants;
- no antibiotics, growth hormones, GMOs, or cloned animals;
- 100% organic feed and approved feed supplements;
- proactive health management and living conditions which accommodate the natural behavior of the species;
- organic management from last third of gestation or 2nd day after hatching; and
- no rotation of animals between organic and non-organic management.