

Organic Certification of Vermont's Hay Fields

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The growth in the number of organic dairy farms has gotten a lot of press in the last year. As you already may have heard, a record number of producers in Vermont and across the country began their transition to organic milk production in 2006. By June of this year, it is expected that just over 200 Vermont dairy farms will be certified organic.

One of the many regulations that an organic dairy farm must follow is that the animals are fed a ration of 100% organic feeds. While most of these farmers grow their own hay and forages, many farmers need to supplement their own harvests with purchased feeds that are certified organic. This is especially true after wet years like 2006, where the harvested forages may have been of reduced quality. With approximately 75 new farms coming online this year, we are anticipating there will be a significantly greater demand for organic hay and forages.

So what does it take to certify your hay land? Fields qualify as organic if at least three years has passed since the last application of a prohibited pesticide, herbicide, synthetic fertilizer or treated seed. Manure applications can come from any source, and non-synthetic materials such as limestone or other mineral amendments are also allowed, as long as they do not contain any synthetic additives. If you are unsure if a material is allowed, call the office for confirmation before applying it. Use of a prohibited material would disqualify a field from organic production for 3 years.

If some of your fields qualify as organic, but others have had recent applications of prohibited products, your farm may still be able to get certified. Those fields that qualify could produce organic crops, while the fields that still have to go through the rest of their 3-year transition would be considered non-organic.



Quality is an important factor in determining price of organic hay

Transitional non-organic feed must be sold on the conventional market and records documenting these sales must be kept.

Example to determine if a field qualifies:

A farmer's last application of a prohibited material is on May 31, 2004

On May 31, 2005 he (or she) has ended his first transitional year

On May 31, 2006 he (or she) has ended his second transitional year

On May 31, 2007 he (or she) has ended his third transitional year.

This means crops harvested after May 31, 2007 can be certified organic.

It seems that there is so much hay land out there that qualifies for certification. We often hear from producers who say 'This field hasn't had anything applied in 10 years.' While this field would be considered certifiable, it is our policy that once a field is certified, the producer must manage the soil fertility. Examples would include applications of animal manure, lime or other mineral inputs, and regular soil testing. An added benefit of fertility management will be a higher quality feed to sell to livestock producers.

Vermont Organic Farmers (VOF) is the certification branch of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT). VOF is accredited by the USDA to certify farms

to the National Organic Program Standards. Organic certification is about verifying to a third party that you are managing your farm to grow crops according to these standards.

The first step towards certification is completing the farm production plan (application). After the application has been submitted, VOF will review and forward it to a contracted organic inspector. The organic inspector conducts an on-site inspection and a review of your record keeping to verify that the application you submitted to VOF accurately reflects your operation and is in compliance with the NOP standards. Inspections happen prior to the initial certification, then annually thereafter.

The inspector will contact you directly to schedule a time to visit your farm. Please be prepared for the inspection to last about 2 hours. A big part of certification is record keeping, so the better records you keep, the easier the process will be. The inspector will look at your cropland, paying particular attention to soil fertility and crop health, input purchases and applications, buffer areas between neighboring fields, erosion control and fertility management. Storage areas and farm equipment should also be accessible. Records should be readily available and organized for inspector review and may include the following:

- Three year history and signed affidavit for all new fields
- Field production logs that include crops planted, dates and rates of manure or other input applications, and harvest yields
- Current and updated farm maps with all boundaries, buffer areas and natural features
- Purchase records for all inputs (ex. lime, organic fertilizers)
- Receipts for all purchased seeds
- If untreated non-organic seed is purchased, documentation must be available that organic versions were commercially unavailable
- Untreated and/or inoculated seed labels (to verify that the product has not been treated with prohibited substances)

- Signed statements from neighboring landowners regarding their management practices
- Production, harvest and/or sales records for buffer crops, transitional or conventional crops

At the end of the inspection, the inspector will conduct an exit interview with you to confirm the accuracy and completeness of his or her observations. The report will be forwarded to the VOF office for review. VOF determines whether your operation is eligible for organic certification based on the inspector's report. At this point, you will receive a letter that outlines any requirements for certification. Requested information must be forwarded to VOF within the specified amount of time. A certificate of organic certification is issued if your operation is determined to be compliant under the NOP standards.

Spring is the ideal time to get your hay land certified. Ideally, we would send an inspector to your farm and complete the certification process before you take your first cut, so that the first harvest qualifies as organic. VOF is unable to certify crops retroactively, so the earlier the process is completed, the more bales you will be able to sell as organic. The certification process generally takes about one month after the application has been received in the office.

We hope to be able to certify enough land to meet the organic forage needs of all the organic livestock in Vermont. If you are interested in certifying your hay land as organic, please call us at the VOF office, 802-434-4122.

