



Becoming a Certified Organic Producer in Virginia

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Introduction

As of January 2019, there were 288 certified organic farms and handlers operating in Virginia, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's national Organic Integrity Database. Virginia producers grow and market a surprisingly wide range of organic products, such as flowers, fruits, herbs, seeds, transplants, vegetables, tobacco, tea, coffee, essential oils, mushrooms, sweet potato slips, grains, hops, chicken, ducks, beef, pork, eggs, and dairy products. Virginia's neighbor North Carolina boasted 632 certified organic operations, while Maryland claimed 213 in January 2019 (USDA NOP 2019).

Within Virginia, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences (VDACS) is the state regulatory body dealing with organic certification (VDACS, n.d.). Although the department provides regulatory guidance and administers an organic cost-share program, VDACS does not provide certification services. Certifications are completed by third-party entities on a fee basis. Producers may select the certifier that is the best fit for their operations. As of early 2019, the 288 certified organic farms in Virginia used the following certifiers: A Bee Organic; Baystate Organic Certifiers; BioAgriCert (no longer operating in Virginia); CCOF Certification Services, LLC; Ecocert ICO, LLC; Global Organic Alliance, Inc.; International Certification Services, Inc.; Natural Food Certifiers; Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association; OneCert, Inc.; Oregon Tilth Certified Organic; Organic Crop Improvement Association; Pennsylvania Certified Organic; Quality Assurance International; Quality Certification Services; and SCS Global Services, Inc. (USDA NOP 2019). See the appendix for contact information for these certifiers. The complete list of USDA-accredited organic

certifiers that operate in Virginia can be found on the USDA Certifier Locator webpage (which is frequently updated): <https://organic.ams.usda.gov/integrity/Certifiers/CertifiersLocationsSearchPage.aspx>

The expanding market for organic foods is promising. Nationally, the sale of organic foods in 2017 reached \$45.2 billion, increasing 6.4 percent from 2016 (Organic Trade Association 2018). The organic food category accounts for 5.5 percent of the retail food products sold in the U.S., including 14.1 percent of all produce and 8 percent of all dairy products (OTA 2018). According to the Organic Trade Association, 83 percent of Virginia households purchase organic products (OTA n.d.). With consumer confusion over food branding terms such as “sustainably grown,” “pesticide-free,” “chemical-free,” “naturally grown,” and “locally grown,” the USDA NOP certified organic label is trusted by more than 75 percent American households (OTA 2018). Within a competitive marketplace, producers may benefit from mainstream recognition of the certified organic label. Becoming certified organic may pay off economically: Researchers comparing the 40 years of financial performance data of 55 organic and conventional crops spanning five continents determined that organic farms are 35 percent more profitable than conventional farms (Crowder and Reganold 2015).

Profitability is not the sole driver of a producer's desire to become certified organic. Environmental concerns and socially conscious lifestyle choices may influence their decision-making processes.

The purpose of this publication is to provide guidance in the form of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) to assist producers understand the necessary steps to become certified organic in Virginia.

Getting Started

Q: What does being “certified organic” mean?

A: The term “certified organic” is a legal labeling term applied to foods and other agricultural products that are subject to the USDA’s National Organic Program organic certification process (VDACS, n.d.). According to the USDA National Organic Program (USDA NOP 2016), “Organic is a labeling term for food or other agricultural products that have been produced using cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity in accordance with the USDA organic regulations. This means that organic operations must maintain or enhance soil and water quality, while also conserving wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife. Synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation, and genetically engineered inputs may not be used. Only products that have been certified as meeting the USDA’s requirements for organic production and handling may carry the USDA Organic Seal.” A detailed list of allowed and prohibited substances can be found in Title 7 of the Electronic Code of Federal Regulations at <https://www.ecfr.gov/> (Office of the Federal Register 2018).

Q: Are there potential benefits in becoming a certified organic producer?

A: Being able to legally apply the term “organic” on a product label may improve a producer’s ability to successfully promote and position products in a competitive marketplace. The use of the organic label may attract certain customers, and those customers may also be willing to pay a premium price for products labeled “organic.”

Q: Can producers state they are “organic” or their product is “grown using organic practices” and not be certified?

A: Producers, handlers, or processors selling less than \$5,000 a year in organic agricultural products may be exempt from certification and may label products as “organic.” They must still adhere to the USDA NOP standards and keep the same records that a certified organic entity must maintain. However, they cannot display the USDA organic seal. If an entity sells more than \$5,000 of produce per year, the term “organic” cannot be used until the operation becomes certified.

Entities that make organic claims are subject to USDA inspection and may be subject to a fine of up to \$11,000 if violations are found.

Q: How long does it take to transition land from conventional production to organic?

A: The duration of time to transition land from conventional to organic production is three years from the last application of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. For further clarification, the USDA offers information online detailing the transitional process. See “A Guide for Conventional Farmers Transitioning to Organic Certification”, <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/10%20Guide%20to%20Transitional%20Farming%20FINAL%20RGK%20V2.pdf>.

Q: If I begin the process of transitioning to organic, can I advertise my products as “transitioning to organic”?

A: This is a difficult question since USDA does not have specific written guidance on this practice. It is possible to verbally state to customers as a producer that your land is currently being transitioned to organic. However, this may damage customer trust if you do not complete the accredited certification process within three years of claiming “transitional organic.” Additionally, using the term “organic” on products for sale (even without the official organic seal) must adhere to the less than \$5,000 annual sales exemption rule with a producer maintaining required organic recordkeeping. In past years, the USDA offered accredited certifiers the opportunity to apply for the National Certified Transitional Program. Accredited certifiers approved by USDA could offer “transitional” entities a branding label such as “Certified Transitional.” Notice how the term “organic” was not included in this branding. However, this program was withdrawn by USDA, likely due to consumer confusion and the concerns of existing certified organic entities who may believe the label of “Certified Transitional” or similarly worded branding may garner an organic price premium from consumer perception of “becoming organic” prior to obtaining stringent organic certification (USDA AMS 2019).

Q: What can you tell me about proper recordkeeping?

A: The type of recordkeeping used by organic producers varies from simple to complex. The important key is to maintain records that will verify your organic practices. Producers can download templates of the types of organic records that are needed, including a Field History Sheet and Input Use Record, by clicking on this link from North Carolina State Extension: <https://www.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/FarmRecords.doc>.

Q: How long must I keep my records?

A: Whatever system is used, producers simply need to make sure they keep records that provide verification of their organic practices. For certified operations, accurate production, harvesting, and handling records must be kept for five years for products that are sold as “organic.”

OK, I want to get certified, now what do I do?

Q: What is the first step to becoming certified organic in Virginia?

A: After adopting certified organic practices, the first step to becoming certified organic in Virginia is to select an accredited certification agency. See Appendix A, List of USDA Accredited Organic Certifiers in Virginia, or find the most up-to-date listings on the USDA’s Certifier Locator website, <https://organic.ams.usda.gov/integrity/Certifiers/CertifiersLocationsSearchPage.aspx>.

Q: What is involved in the application process?

A: After you have identified an accredited certification agency, you will be asked to submit an application containing the following information:

- Operation type (farm or crop, livestock, processing, or combination).
- Field history of applied substances for the previous three years.
- List of organic products raised, grown, or processed.
- Organic system plan (OSP) describing practices and

substances used in production, raising, or processing operations. The OSP includes descriptions of monitoring practices that will verify effective implementation, use of an acceptable recordkeeping system, as well as practices that prevent the commingling of organic with non-organic products.

After the application is completed, you will send it with, typically, your farm plan and field history, to the selected certifying agency and wait for review comments or additional information requests. After your application is deemed complete and satisfactory, you will be assigned an inspector from the agency. The assigned inspector will schedule your inspection.

Q: What will happen after I schedule my inspection?

A: After you have been contacted by your accredited agency’s assigned inspector, you will schedule your inspection date and time. During the visit, your operation will be inspected and the inspector will write a recommendation report. The inspector will submit his or her report to the certification agency for review, and the certifier will respond directly to you with their decision.

What is the typical timeline and cost to become certified?

Q: Can you give me a general idea of how long it takes to become a certified?

A: Unfortunately, the process is not overnight. Typically, it can take from three to six months, or sometimes up to a year from the application submission to the agency decision.

Q: What is the typical cost of becoming certified?

A: Certifying agencies each determine the fees they charge. You can visit agency webpages listed in Appendix A or on the USDA’s Certifier Locator website to view certification fees. Fees include travel expenses for the inspector. Re-inspection is an annual requirement of maintaining certification.

Additional Information

Q: Are there any financial resources available to assist me in becoming certified?

A: Funding may be available on an annual basis through the USDA NOP providing reimbursement to eligible growers and processors for 75 percent of their certification costs, up to a maximum of \$750 per category of certification. The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) administers the Virginia program. Funds are distributed on first-come, first-served basis until depleted. To apply, you must complete a cost-share application requiring your IRS W-9 tax form, current copy your organic certificate from an accredited certification agency, and a dated, paid, and itemized invoice from the certifier detailing the total cost of services rendered. To learn more, visit VDACS' Certified Organic website at <http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/sales-certified-organic.shtml>.

Q: Where do I find the complete rules and regulations of organic certification?

A: The USDA's complete rules and regulations are available online on its Organic Regulations page at <https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/organic>.

Q: Who can I contact to for additional technical assistance on organic production topics?

A: The following organizations in Virginia may provide additional technical assistance to you:

1. Virginia Cooperative Extension county offices. Locate yours on VCE's Local Offices webpage, <https://ext.vt.edu/offices.html>.
2. Virginia Cooperative Extension Small Farm Outreach Program agents. Find yours on the program's webpage, <https://www.ext.vsu.edu/sfop-agents>
3. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Virginia provides resources for the state's organic producers:
Ron Wood, Virginia Organic Initiative Program Manager
Phone: (804) 278-1660
Email: ron.wood@va.usda.gov
Webpage: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/va/home/?cid=nrcseprd427238>

Appendix

List of USDA Accredited Organic Certifiers in Virginia (USDA NOP 2019), in alphabetical order.

Note: This list is updated in real time by USDA. To find the most up-to-date listings, go to <https://organic.ams.usda.gov/integrity/Certifiers/CertifiersLocationsSearchPage.aspx>.

1. A Bee Organic, www.abeorganic.com
Sarah Costin, 202 6th St., Suite 400, Castle Rock, CO 80104
admin@abeorganic.com 760-731-0155
2. Baystate Organic Certifiers, www.baystateorganic.org
Don Franczyk, 1220 Cedarwood Circle, North Dighton, MA 02764
baystateorganic@earthlink.net 774-872-5544
3. CCOF Certification Services, LLC, www.ccof.org
Jake Lewin, 2155 Delaware Ave., Suite 150, Santa Cruz, CA 95060
ccof@ccof.org 831-423-2263
4. Ecocert ICO, LLC, www.indianacertifiedorganic.com
Jeffry Evard, 201 W. Main St., 2nd Floor, Plainfield, IN 46168
info.ecocertico@ecocert.com 888-337-8246
5. Global Organic Alliance, Inc., www.goa-online.org
Betty Kananen, 3185 Township Road 179, Bellefontaine, OH 43311
goaorg@centurylink.net 937-593-1232
6. International Certification Services, Inc., www.ics-intl.com
Dawn Krapp, 301 5th Ave. SE, Medina, ND 58467
info@ics-intl.com 701-486-3578
7. Natural Food Certifiers, www.nfccertification.com
Reuven Flamer, 100 Lawrence St., Suite 304, Nanuet, NY 10954
nfccertification@gmail.com 914-319-9040

8. Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association, www.oeffa.org
Andy Hupp, 41 Crosswell Road, Columbus, OH 43214
organic@oeffa.org 614-262-2022
9. OneCert, Inc., www.onecert.com
Sam Welsch, 1021 D St., Lincoln, NE 68502
info@onecert.com 402-420-6080
10. Oregon Tilth Certified Organic, www.tilth.org
Connie Karr, 2525 SE 3rd Street, Corvallis, OR 97333
organic@tilth.org 503-378-0690
11. Organic Crop Improvement Association, www.ocia.org
Cindy Elder, 1340 North Cotner Blvd., Lincoln, NE 68505
info@ocia.org 402-477-2323
12. Pennsylvania Certified Organic, www.paorganic.org
Kyla Smith, 106 School St., Suite 201, Spring Mills, PA 16875
pco@paorganic.org 814-422-0251
13. Quality Assurance International, www.qai-inc.com
Jonathan Lackie, 4370 La Jolla Village Drive, Suite 300, San Diego, CA 92122
info@qai-inc.com 858-792-3531
14. Quality Certification Services, www.QCSinfo.org
Beth Rota, 5700 SW 34th St., Suite 349, Gainesville, FL 32608
accreditation@qcsinfo.org 352-377-0133
15. SCS Global Services, Inc., <https://www.scsglobalservices.com/services/organic-certification>
Brandon Nauman, 2000 Powell St., Suite 600, Emeryville, CA 94608
bnauman@scsglobalservice.com 510-452-8000

References

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- VDACS (Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences). n.d. Organic Certification in Virginia. <http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/pdf/organicflyer.pdf>.