New National Organic Standards
Part 2 of 2

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As promised in Part 1 of this two-part series on the new National Organic Standards Act (NOSA), here is information about the organic certification process and organic system plans. This is a summary of information found at www.ams.usda.gov/nop/NOP/standards/CertReg.html and www.ams.usda.gov/nop/NOP/standards/CertPre.html. Those of you who are seriously interested in obtaining organic certification are encouraged to read the wealth of information available at www.ams.usda.gov/nop.

What is an Organic System Plan?
An Organic System Plan is a required written management plan that covers all components of an organic production and handling system. Such a plan must be developed annually and must include:

1. A description of practices and procedures to be performed and maintained;
2. A list of each substance to be used in production or handling, indicating its composition, source, location(s) where it will be used, and documentation of commercial availability;
3. A description of the monitoring practices and procedures to be performed and maintained, including their frequency;
4. A description of the record keeping system implemented to comply with established requirements;
5. A description of the management practices and physical barriers established to prevent co-mingling of organic and non-organic products on a split operation and to prevent contact of organic production and handling operations and products with prohibited substances; and
6. Additional information deemed necessary by the certifying agent (CA) to evaluate compliance with the regulations.

The Certification Process
To obtain certification, a producer or handler must submit an application for certification to an accredited CA along with required fees. The application must describe the applicant's business, their organic system plan and other information. The form is available at www.ams.usda.gov/nop/CertifyingAgents/Accreditation.pdf. The CA will review the application and determine whether the applicant appears to comply or may be able to comply with the applicable production or handling regulations. The CA will communicate his/her findings to the applicant within a reasonable amount of time. If the applicant is believed to be in compliance with the applicable production or handling regulations, the CA will schedule an on-site inspection of the applicant's operation to determine whether the applicant qualifies for certification.

The CA will conduct an on-site inspection of each production unit, facility, and site that produces or handles organic products and that is included in the applicant's operation. This inspection will be made when an authorized representative of the operation who is knowledgeable about the operation is present. Inspectors will require complete access to the production or handling operation, including non-certified production and handling areas, structures and offices. CAs will follow auditing guidelines prescribed by the International Organization for Standardization Guide 10011-1, "Guidelines for Auditing Quality Systems - Part 1: Auditing." The CA will use the on-site inspection to determine whether to approve the request for certification and to verify the operation's compliance or capability to comply with the NOSA and regulations.
The on-site inspection must verify that the information provided to the CA accurately reflects the practices to be used by the applicant and that prohibited substances have not been and are not being applied to the operation. CAs may collect and test soil, water, waste, plant tissue, and plant, animal and processed product samples to accomplish this verification. The inspector will conduct an exit interview with an authorized representative of the operation who is knowledgeable about the inspected operation to confirm the accuracy and completeness of information gathered during the on-site inspection. The CA shall, within a reasonable time, provide the inspected operation with a copy of the on-site inspection report for any on-site inspection performed and provide the operation with a copy of the test results for any samples taken by an inspector.

**Notification of Approval**
A CA will review the on-site inspection report, results of sample test analyses and any additional information provided by the applicant within a reasonable time after completion of the initial on-site inspection. The CA will grant certification upon making two determinations: that the applicant's operation and its organic system plan is in compliance with the NOSA and regulations, and the applicant is able to conduct operations in accordance with its organic systems plan. Upon determining the applicant's compliance and ability to comply, the CA will grant certification and issue a "certificate of organic operation."

**Non-compliance**
If the CA determines that the applicant is not able to comply or is not in compliance with the NOSA, he/she will issue a written notification of non-compliance to the applicant. The notification of non-compliance will describe each item of non-compliance, the facts on which the notification is based and the date by which rebuttal or correction of each non-compliance must be made. Applicants who receive a notification of non-compliance may correct the non-compliance(s) and submit a description of correction and supporting documentation to the CA by the date specified.

**Continuation of Certification**
To continue certification, the certified operation must update its organic production or handling system plan annually, submit the updated information to the certifying agent and pay certification fees. The updated organic system plan must include a summary statement and supporting documents that detail deviations from, changes to, modifications to, or other amendments to the previous year's organic system plan. The CA will then conduct an on-site inspection of the certified operation. In addition to annual inspections, a CA may conduct additional on-site inspections of certified operations; these inspections may be announced or unannounced. Upon completion of the inspection and a review of updated information, the CA will determine whether the operation continues to comply with the NOSA and regulations. If he/she determines that the operation is in compliance, certification will continue. If any of the information specified on the certificate of organic operation has changed, the CA will issue an updated certificate of organic operation. If the CA finds that the operation is not complying with the Act and regulations, a written notification of noncompliance will be issued.

**Additional Requirements**
Certified organic producers and/or handlers are required to maintain all records applicable to the organic operation for not less than five years beyond the creation of each record. Authorized representatives of regulatory agencies and/or the CA must have access to these records. Also, the CA must be contacted immediately if a prohibited substance has been applied (including through accidental drift) to any organic production unit or if there is any change in any portion of a certified operation that may affect its compliance with the National Organic Standards Act.
Exemptions
For details about exemption to the NOSA, go to www.ams.usda.gov/nop/NOP/standards/ApplicReg.html. A production or handling operation with gross annual agricultural income from organic sales of $5,000 or less is exempt from certification and from submitting an organic system plan. However, it must comply with all other applicable organic production, handling and labeling requirements. The products from such operations shall not be used as ingredients identified as organic in processed products produced by another handling operation. Other specific exemptions exist.

Resources
In addition to the resources listed in Part 1 of this series, another resource for information on organic agriculture is the OrganicAgInfo web site, which is at www.organicag.info. This is a free on-line database of research reports, farmer-to-farmer information, outreach publications and more. The database can be searched by keywords, region, crop or livestock type. If you have information on organic agriculture that you think would be useful to others, you can upload it to the site yourself.

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