

Many organizations, organic certifiers, and even the USDA organic regulations provide glossaries of terms for organic certification, but many of those terms are not relevant to handling operations. In this resource lesson, you will find lists of common words, phrases, terms, and acronyms used in the organic certification process for handlers and their plain language definitions. Most terms also include links to further reading on that subject.



Glossary of Terms for Organic Certification for Handlers

The full and complete text for definitions included in the USDA organic regulations can be found in the electronic Code of Federal Regulations at <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-I/subchapter-M/part-205>. When there is a difference between the plain language summary definition presented here and the official definition in the regulations, the eCFR governs.

Glossary of Terms

Accredited Certifiers Association (ACA) - A professional organization for organic certifiers. ACA aims to ensure consistent implementation of USDA Organic Regulations through collaboration and education of accredited certification agencies. <https://www.accreditedcertifiers.org/>

Adverse action - A decision from a certifying agent that adversely affects the certification of an operation, including a proposed suspension or revocation; a denial of certification, or reinstatement; a cease and desist notice; or a civil penalty. § 205.2

Agricultural input - All substances or materials used in the production or handling of organic agricultural products. § 205.2

Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) - The Agricultural Marketing Service of the United States Department of Agriculture.

Audit trail - The set of documents in an operation's record keeping system that is sufficient to determine the source, transfer of ownership, transportation, and organic ingredients of any certified organic product. § 205.2

Certification or Certified Organic - A determination made by a certifying agent that a production or handling operation is in compliance with the USDA organic regulations. § 205.2

Certified operation - A crop or livestock production, wild-crop harvesting or handling operation that is certified by an certifying agent as utilizing a system of organic production or handling that meets the USDA organic standards. § 205.2

Certifier or Certifying Agent or Accredited Certifying Agent - An organization or entity accredited by the National Organic Program for the purpose of certifying a production or handling operation as organic. § 205.2

Claims - Statements or communications presented to the public or buyers of agricultural products that relate to the organic certification process. § 205.2



Commingling - Physical contact between unpackaged organically produced and nonorganically produced agricultural products during production, processing, transportation, storage or handling, other than during the manufacture of a multiingredient product containing both types of ingredients. § 205.2

Determination letter - A document issued by a certifying agent after the completion of the annual certification application process detailing the certification decision made by the certifying agent.

Electronic Code of Federal Regulations (eCFR) - The online listing of all federal rules. <https://www.ecfr.gov/>

Exit interview - Conducted at the end of an on-site inspection. The inspector will review the findings of the inspection, summarizing what was observed, confirming the accuracy of the information provided, and discussing any potential issues that may need clarification or additional documentation.

Genetically Engineered (GE) - Genetically engineered foods have foreign genes inserted into their genetic codes. This process can be done to plants, animals, and microbes. This process is an excluded method and not allowed in USDA organic production and handling.

Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) - An organism whose genome has been modified through genetic engineering.

Handle - "To sell, process, or package agricultural products, including but not limited to trading, facilitating sale or trade on behalf of a seller or oneself, importing to the United States, exporting for sale in the United States, combining, aggregating, culling, conditioning, treating, packing, containerizing, repackaging, labeling, storing, receiving, or loading." § 205.2

Handler or Handling operation - "Any person that handles agricultural products, except final retailers of agricultural products that do not process agricultural products." § 205.2

Import certificate - A document issued by an organic certifying agent required for the import of certified organic products into the United States.

Information panel - "That part of the label of a packaged product that is immediately contiguous to and to the right of the principal display panel as observed by an individual facing the principal display panel, unless another section of the label is designated as the information panel because of package size or other package attributes (e.g., irregular shape with one usable surface)." § 205.2

Ingredient - Any substance used in the preparation of an agricultural product that is still present in the final commercial product as consumed." § 205.2

Ingredients statement - "The list of ingredients contained in a product shown in their common and usual names in the descending order of predominance." § 205.2

Input - see "Agricultural Input"

Inspection - The examination of the production and/or handling practices of an operation that is applying for organic certification. § 205.2

Inspection report - A document prepared by an organic inspector detailing their observations and findings from an on-site inspection of an organic operation. This document is submitted to the certifying agent for use in making certification decisions.

Inspection, Spot - A discretionary inspection conducted by an organic certifying agent to verify ongoing compliance with the regulations. A spot inspection may be unscheduled, targeted, and narrow in scope (focusing on a specific area of concern). Spot inspections are often in response to an elevated risk factor such as in response to a complaint filed against the operation.

Inspection, Unannounced - An inspection conducted without advance notice. § 205.2

Inspector - The person hired by the certifying agent to conduct an organic inspection. § 205.2

International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) - IFOAM's mission is to empower, mobilise, and lead the global organic movement and its allies to drive transformative food and farming systems changes and policies for the benefit of people and the planet. <https://www.ifoam.bio/about-us>

Irradiation - Exposure to ionizing radiation. Food irradiation is a synthetic process that is not allowed in organic production.

Label - "A display of written, printed, or graphic material on the immediate container of an agricultural product or any such material affixed to any agricultural product or affixed to a bulk container containing an agricultural product, except for package liners or a display of written, printed, or graphic material which contains only information about the weight of the product." § 205.2

Labeling - All written, printed, or graphic material accompanying an agricultural product at any time. § 205.2

Lot - A set or group of containers which contain an agricultural product of the same kind located in the same conveyance, warehouse, or packing house and which are available for inspection at the same time. § 205.2

Lot number - see "Production lot number/identifier"

Market information - "Any written, printed, audiovisual, or graphic information, including advertising, pamphlets, flyers, catalogues, posters, and signs, distributed, broadcast, or made available outside of retail outlets that are used to assist in the sale or promotion of a product." § 205.2

Mass balance audit - In a mass balance audit, the inspector evaluates whether the operation received or produced enough organic ingredients to support the amount of organic product manufactured, shipped, and/or sold. The purpose of the mass balance is to verify that the operation had enough organic product available for reported production or sales.

Minor issue - An issue noted during the inspection and certification review process that does not rise to the severity of a noncompliance. Minor issues do not, of themselves, disqualify an operation from achieving organic certification, but they do require correction. An example of a minor issue would be an inconsistency in the operation's record keeping system.

National List - A list of allowed synthetic and prohibited nonsynthetic substances under the USDA organic regulations. § 205.2

National Organic Program (NOP) - The program authorized for administering the USDA organic regulations and rulemaking. The NOP is housed in the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service.

National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) - A Federal Advisory Board made up of 15 dedicated public volunteers from across the organic community that considers and makes recommendations on a wide range of issues involving the production, handling, and processing of organic products. The NOSB also has special responsibilities related to the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/organic/nosb>

Natural or Nonsynthetic - A substance that is derived from mineral, plant, or animal matter and does not undergo a synthetic process. Nonsynthetic is used as a synonym for natural. § 205.2

Noncompliance - A formal notification issued by an organic certifying agent indicating that an operation has violated one or more requirements of the National Organic Program rules.

Nonretail container - Any container used for shipping or storage of an agricultural product that is not used in the retail display or sale of the product. § 205.2

Organic - A labeling term that refers to an agricultural product produced in accordance with the USDA organic regulations. § 205.2

Organic certificate - An official document issued by an organic certifying agent that verifies an operation complies with the USDA organic regulations under the National Organic Program.

Organic exporter - The final certified exporter of the organic agricultural product from a foreign country to the United States. § 205.2

Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 (OFPA) - The act of Congress that created the National Organic Program. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/Organic%20Foods%20Production%20Act%20of%201990%20%28OFPA%29.pdf>

Organic fraud - "Deceptive representation, sale, or labeling of nonorganic agricultural products or ingredients as organic. § 205.2

Organic Fraud Prevention Plan (OFPP) - A written, risk-based strategy that identifies and mitigates the risk of fraudulent organic claims in an operation's supply chain. It is a required component of the Organic System Plan (OSP). § 205.2(a)(3) [https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/part-205#p-205.201\(a\)\(3\)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/part-205#p-205.201(a)(3))

Organic importer - The operation responsible for accepting imported organic agricultural products within the United States. § 205.2

Organic Integrity Database (OID) - The National Organic Program's electronic, web-based reporting tool for the submission of data, completion of certificates of organic operation, and other information about certified organic operations. <https://organic.ams.usda.gov/integrity/Default>

Organic Integrity Learning Center (OILC) - The Organic Integrity Learning Center supports the professional development and continuing education of professionals working to protect organic integrity by providing free online training. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/organic-certification/training>

Organic Livestock and Poultry Standard (OLPS) - Effective January 12, 2024, this rulemaking amended the origin of livestock and poultry production requirements by adding new provisions for livestock handling and transport, slaughter, and avian (poultry) living conditions; and expanding and clarifying existing requirements covering livestock care and production practices and non-avian living conditions. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/11/02/2023-23726/national-organic-program-nop-organic-livestock-and-poultry-standards>

Organic management - Management of a production or handling operation in compliance with all applicable provisions under the USDA organic regulations. § 205.2

Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) - "OMRI is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides an independent review of products, such as fertilizers, pest controls, livestock health care products, and numerous other inputs that are intended for use in certified organic production and processing." <https://www.omri.org/>

Organic system plan (OSP) - A comprehensive, written document that describes how a certified operation will comply with the USDA organic regulations under the National Organic Program. The requirements for the contents of an OSP are set forth in § 205.201. <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/section-205.201>

Origin of Livestock Rule (OOL) - Effective June 6, 2022, this rulemaking amended the origin of livestock requirements for dairy animals under the USDA organic regulations. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/04/05/2022-06957/national-organic-program-origin-of-livestock>

Parallel operation - An operation that produces or handles both organic and nonorganic agricultural products that are of the same type (e.g. organic and nonorganic oats). See also "Split operation".

Part 205 - The section of the Code of Federal Regulations that contains the rules and regulations governing the administration of the USDA National Organic Program. <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-I/subchapter-M/part-205>

Petition - A request to amend the National List that is submitted by any person in accordance with the USDA organic regulations. § 205.2

Practice standard - The guidelines and requirements through which an operation implements a required component of its production or handling organic system plan. § 205.2

Processing - "Cooking, baking, curing, heating, drying, mixing, grinding, churning, separating, extracting, slaughtering, cutting, fermenting, distilling, eviscerating, preserving, dehydrating, freezing, chilling, or otherwise manufacturing and includes the packaging, canning, jarring, or otherwise enclosing food in a container." § 205.2

Processing aid - A substance that is added to a food during processing but that is either removed, transformed, or otherwise present at insignificant levels in the finished product. § 205.2

Production lot number/identifier - "Identification of a product based on the production sequence of the product showing the date, time, and place of production used for quality control purposes." § 205.2

Prohibited substance - A substance whose use is prohibited by the USDA organic regulations. § 205.2

Record Keeping - The maintenance of records concerning the production, harvesting, and handling of agricultural products that are intended to be sold, labeled, or represented as organic. § 205.103

Records - Any information in written, visual, or electronic form that documents the activities undertaken by a producer, handler, or certifying agent to comply with the USDA organic regulations. § 205.2

Regulations - The set of rules that an operation must adhere to in order to be eligible for organic certification.

Residue testing - An official procedure that detects, identifies, and measures the presence of chemical substances in or on agricultural products. § 205.2

Retail establishment - “Restaurants, delicatessens, bakeries, grocery stores, or any retail business with a restaurant, delicatessen, bakery, salad bar, bulk food self-service station, or other eat-in, carry-out, mail-order, or delivery service of raw or processed agricultural products.” § 205.2

Review or Certification review - “The act of reviewing and evaluating a certified operation or applicant for certification and determining compliance or ability to comply with the USDA organic regulations. This does not include performing an inspection.” § 205.2

Rules - The specific requirements that an operation must adhere to in order to be eligible for organic certification.

Split operation - An operation that produces or handles both organic and nonorganic agricultural products. The organic and nonorganic products may be the same on both sides (e.g. organic and nonorganic oats), or different (e.g. organic oats and nonorganic milk). See also “parallel operation”. § 205.2

Strengthening Organic Enforcement Rule (SOE) - Effective March 20, 2023, this rulemaking amended the organic regulations to strengthen oversight and enforcement and to protect the organic supply chain. Topics addressed include: applicability of the regulations and exemptions from organic certification; National Organic Program Import Certificates; recordkeeping and product traceability; certifying agent personnel qualifications and training; standardized certificates of organic operation; unannounced on-site inspections of certified operations; oversight of certification activities; foreign conformity assessment systems; certification of producer group operations; labeling of nonretail containers; annual update requirements for certified operations; compliance and appeals processes; and calculating organic content of multi-ingredient products. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/strengthening-organic-enforcement>

Supply chain traceability audit (also “Traceback audit”) - The process of identifying and tracking the movement, sale, custody, handling, and organic status of an agricultural product along a supply chain to verify the agricultural product’s compliance with the USDA organic regulations. § 205.2

Synthetic - “A substance that is formulated or manufactured by a chemical process or by a process that chemically changes a substance extracted from naturally occurring plant, animal, or mineral sources, except that such term shall not apply to substances created by naturally occurring biological processes.” § 205.2

Traceback audit - see “Supply chain traceability audit”

Transition to organic or Organic transition - The period of time between when an operation begins the process of organic certification and when the operation achieves certified status. For handlers, this period of time varies depending on the unique factors of the operation and is not defined by the USDA organic standards. A handling operation will write their organic system plan, standard operating procedures, product formulations, and design product labels. For producers (farms and ranches), this period of time is defined as 36-months from the last date that a prohibited substance was applied to the land for which certification is sought (§ 205.202 [https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/part-205#p-205.202\(b\)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/part-205#p-205.202(b)))

Transitional Production Plan (TPP) - A production plan for crop producers transitioning to organic. It is most often used to meet the requirements for eligibility for transitional crop insurance through USDA Risk Management Agency (RMA). <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/TransitionalProductionPlanCrops.pdf>



Certifiers

Organic certifiers are often referred to by an acronym. The NOP maintains a database of all accredited certifiers and their assigned acronym. The official, up to date list, as well as further information about each organic certifying agent, can be found at <https://organic.ams.usda.gov/integrity/Certifiers/CertifiersLocationsSearchPage>.



Acronyms

Below are common acronyms used in the organic certification process. This list is not exhaustive. Many organic certifiers maintain a list of acronyms used internally at their organization.

ACA - Accredited Certifiers Association

AMS - Agricultural Marketing Service

eCFR - Electronic Code of Federal Regulations

IFOAM - International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements

NOP - National Organic Program

NOSB - National Organic Standards Board

OFA - Organic Farmers Association

OFPA - Organic Foods Production Act of 1990

OFPP - Organic Fraud Prevention Plan

OID - Organic Integrity Database

OILC - Organic Integrity Learning Center

OLPS - Organic Livestock and Poultry Standard

OMRI - Organic Materials Review Institute

OOL - Origin of Livestock Rule

OSP - Organic System Plan

OTA - Organic Trade Association

SOE - Strengthening Organic Enforcement Rule

TPP - Transitional Production Plan

USDA - United States Department of Agriculture



United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program

