

The Certified Scoop: Plastic Use in Organic Systems

What's the scoop on using plastics in organic farm systems?

Plastics are actually very common in organic production. They're often used for irrigation tubing, greenhouse covers, weed control, and plenty of other practical applications. That said, there *are* specific rules about when and how plastics can be used. This week's Certified Scoop breaks down what you need to know to stay compliant.

Avoiding contamination of soil and water:



Let's start with the most important regulation governing plastic use:

7 CFR §205.203(d) states that:

“A producer may manage crop nutrients and soil fertility... in a manner that does not contribute to contamination of crops, soil, or water by plant nutrients, pathogenic organisms, heavy metals, or residues of prohibited substances...”

The bolded concept - avoiding contamination - is the foundation of pretty much all organic rules surrounding plastic. Durable, inert plastics like irrigation tubing and greenhouse covers generally meet this standard because they don't break down into the soil.

Where growers are more likely to run into issues is with plastic mulches and weed tarps, which are more prone to damage, degradation, and potentially leaving behind residues.

Plastic mulches & weed tarps:

The key regulation here is 7 CFR §205.206(c)(6), which allows:

“Plastic or other synthetic mulches... provided that they are removed from the field at the end of the growing or harvest season.”



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In short: *plastic-mulches-must-be-removed-at-the-end-of-the-season*. Over time, tarps and mulches can tear, degrade, and leave small plastic pieces in the soil. Removing them each season helps prevent long-term soil contamination.

One important note: Petroleum-based (plastic) mulches *are allowed* under organic rules (as long as they're removed at the end of the season) except for polyvinyl chloride (PVC). PVC is not allowed for use as plastic mulch due to higher risks of leaching.

What about biodegradable mulches?

Many growers are curious about biodegradable or bio-based plastic mulches. Unfortunately, most currently available products are not allowed in organic systems.

To be allowed, a biodegradable mulch must:

- Be truly bio-based (with no synthetic residues),
- Be made without excluded methods (such as GMOs),
- And be proven to fully and safely biodegrade in soil within a reasonable timeframe.



Very few products on the market currently meet *all* of these criteria, which is why most biodegradable plastic mulches are still prohibited.

Seeking support?

Have questions about plastic use in your organic system? Reach out to NW TOPP; we're here to help! We offer one-on-one organic certification assistance as well as farmer-to-farmer mentorship. Email us anytime at TOPP@tilth.org for support with organic certification questions related to crops or livestock.