

Transition to Organic Farming: Ten Steps to Organic Certification in California

Organic farms in California must comply with USDA National Organic Program (NOP) regulations and register with the CDFA State Organic Program (SOP). Farms that sell more than \$5,000 in organic products annually also need to get certified. The certification process takes roughly 4 months to complete after submitting your application to your certifier. Here are ten steps for certification and registration in California.

- 1 Get prepared and choose a certifier**
Land must be free of prohibited substances for three consecutive years prior to organic certification. Use and become familiar with organic practices during this transition period. Contact organic certifiers to discuss their certification process and fees and select one as your certifier.
- 2 Submit your application and Organic System Plan (OSP) to your certifier**
Your certifier will provide an OSP template to fill out. This will require you to provide a farm map and describe management and recordkeeping practices. *Pay an application fee.*
- 3 Register with CDFA**
Prior to the first organic sale and before attaining organic certification, you must register with the CDFA State Organic Program. *Pay CDFA SOP registration fee.*
- 4 Certifier reviews your OSP**
Your certifier reviews your OSP with you to ensure it is complete and in compliance with USDA organic regulations. This is often, but not always, a back-and-forth process. Make sure to ask your certifier how they approach this process.
- 5 Inspector visits your operation**
The certifier's inspector completes an on-site inspection of your operation and ensures that your OSP matches what is happening on the ground.
- 6 Certifier reviews inspector report**
Your certifier then reviews the inspector's report and works with you to address any concerns or discrepancies, to ensure compliance with NOP requirements.
- 7 Certifier grants certification**
After your certifier grants certification, you can start using the USDA organic label. *Pay the certifier an annual certification and inspection fee.*
- 8 Run your operation, keep records, and update your OSP as needed**
Once certified, operations must follow practices described in the USDA NOP regulations. If you make changes to your management practices, work with your certifier to ensure changes are in compliance with organic regulations and then added to your OSP. This is especially important when using new inputs like pesticides or compost.
- 9 Prepare for annual inspection**
Your certifier will inspect your farm annually to ensure you remain in compliance with USDA NOP regulations. Make sure your records (e.g. practices, inputs, sales, seed/planting stock receipts, etc.) are organized prior to inspection and trace-back audits.
- 10 Complete annual inspection and registrations**
Your inspector conducts an annual on-site inspection. Address any concerns with the certifier and *pay annual certification and inspection fees.* Register your organic operation annually with CDFA and *pay annual registration fees.*



organic.ucanr.edu



UC Organic Agriculture Institute
University of California
Agriculture & Natural Resources



How to choose a certifier?

- The CDFA SOP maintains a list of registered organic certifiers in California and the Community Alliance with Family Farmers hosts an organic certifier comparison tool that includes popular organic certifiers. When choosing a certifier, consider the following: Can they provide you with an estimate of how much it will cost to certify your specific operation? What is their fee structure? What is their customer service like? Do they provide educational resources that might help during your transition process? Is their Organic System Plan form in a format that is easy to fill out? Do they offer other types of certification services you might need or want?

How much does organic certification cost?

- **Certifier Fees** – Certifiers charge an initial application fee, an annual certification fee, and an annual inspection fee. Fee structures vary between certifiers. For example, some certifiers charge fees based on gross sales or acreage, while others charge a flat fee. Small, simple operations may cost as little as \$700 to get certified, while large, complex operations can cost more than \$20,000. Talk with your certifier for an accurate estimate of fees.
- **CDFA SOP Fees** – Registration with the CDFA SOP requires payment of an annual registration fee. These fees are determined by your operation's gross sales and can range from \$25 to \$3,000. For an accurate estimate of CDFA fees visit the CDFA SOP website.

Financial assistance for certification

- Pending funding availability, USDA offers cost-share programs that reimburse up to 75% or \$750 of eligible certification costs each year. Both CDFA and your county USDA Farm Service Agency administer these funds. Visit the CDFA SOP website to learn more.

Financial assistance for transitioning to organic

- The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) has an Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative to provide technical and financial assistance to producers who are transitioning to organic, certified organic, or exempt from certification. They also have cost share programs for practices that benefit natural resources and wildlife habitat. Visit the NRCS website or your local NRCS office to learn more.
- The California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) Foundation's Organic Transition grant program gives \$10,000 grants per year for three years to farmers transitioning to organic practices. Program participants receive funding, 1:1 organic technical assistance, access to mentorship, and business training opportunities over a three-year period. Visit the CCOF website to learn more.

Technical assistance

Public agencies, university extension programs, private consultants and non-profit groups offer organic agriculture technical assistance.

- UC Cooperative Extension
- UC Organic Agriculture Institute
- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
- California Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs)
- Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF)
- California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) Foundation
- National Center for Appropriate Technology's ATTRA Sustainable Agriculture Program
- Rodale Institute Organic Consulting

Funded in part by the CDFA State Organic Program, CDFA Office of Agricultural Resilience and Sustainability and the USDA Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP).

