

How Do I Know that a Product is Really “Organic”?

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) developed legal rules about organic foods that went into effect about three years ago. These rules are very detailed and carry a stiff fine -- \$10,000 – for labeling any food product “organic” unless the USDA standards for organic production are met. The rules cover how the food was produced, how it was processed, and even how it is transported. Every organic food product sold in the United States, regardless of where it was produced, must meet USDA’s standards. Any use of the term “organic” to describe a food product requires meeting USDA standards.

What Are the Standards?

The standards are very detailed. They cover things like the cleaning materials that can be used on machinery, how to store and transport organic products to make sure they do not come into contact with conventionally produced items, and how to protect water quality. You can find a copy of the standards at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/NOP/NOHome.html>.

What Should I Look For?

Every organic food product must have a certification label on it. This will be a small, usually inconspicuous, label that gives the name of the certifying agency and provides information about how to contact the certifier. Here is an example:



The product may also carry the USDA Organic logo, but this is not required. More and more producers are using this logo because it is highly visible and more easily recognized by most consumers.



Private certifiers, or, in some cases, state departments of agriculture, not the USDA are responsible for certification. All of these certifiers are, however, accredited by the USDA. This means that the USDA has verified that the certifier follows all of the procedures that USDA requires for certification and that the



certifier does know and understand the USDA standards for organic production, processing and transportation. You can find a complete list of the certifiers at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/CertifyingAgents/Accredited.html>. There are currently 95 certifying agencies for USDA, 50 domestic and 45 international.

What Does Certification Mean?

Any farm or company that produces an organic product must go through an inspection process. The farmer or producer applies for certification by filling out a lengthy application form that explains everything that he/she has done and will do to meet the national organic standards.

Let's take a farm as an example. A farmer must have followed all of the rules and regulations for organic production for at least three years. The application indicates what the farmer has done in the past, and what he/she will do in the coming year. The farmer provides a new application for re-certification every year. If the farmer's plan meets the requirements for certification, an inspector goes to the farm to make sure that the practices that the farmer said are being used actually are being used – and to make sure that there are no violations of any of the organic standards on the farm. If a farmer fails to meet the standards, decertification follows.

Can I Be Sure?

Consumers must look for the certification label on a product to make absolutely sure that it meets the USDA standards. If someone sells a product at a farmers' market, they should have a copy of the certification documentation for you to see. It is true that farmers who sell less than \$5,000 worth of products per year can use the term organic – as long as they meet all of the USDA standards – but do not have to be certified. Packaged products must have the certifier's seal on them. While there is a stiff penalty for calling a product "organic" that does not meet USDA's requirements, as is so often the case, the consumer must be vigilant and look for the seal. If you suspect that a product is being labeled organic that is not certified, you should contact the USDA and file a complaint. The contact information and procedure is available at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/Compliance/FileComplaint.html>.