
Certified Organic Producer Perceptions of U.S. Organic Regulations and Organic Certifying Agents

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Questions & Comments

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Introduction

Organic food is one of the fastest growing sectors of the U.S. agricultural industry. Between the years 1990 and 2010, national sales of organic food grew from \$1 billion to \$26.7 billion.¹ From 2009 to 2010 alone the sector grew eight percent – eight times the growth of the food industry as a whole.² Central to the continued growth of the organic food sector is consumer confidence in the legitimacy of food products marketed and sold as “organic.”³

As established by the 1990 Organic Foods Production Act, organic food marketing in the U.S.A. is governed by the United States Department of Agriculture’s National Organic Program (NOP). Under the Act, operations that make over \$5,000 a year in organic food sales and wish to market their products as “organic” must hold organic certification under the NOP. To acquire and maintain organic certification, operations must comply with NOP regulations that establish the practices and input substances that are allowed and prohibited in organic food production.

The NOP design is based on the International Organization for Standardization standards for third-party monitor accreditation and certification systems. As such, the NOP is responsible for accrediting independent third-party organizations (referred to as accredited certifying agents; ACAs), to serve as regulatory administrators. ACAs in turn certify operations according to NOP regulations, and then inspect certified operations for regulatory compliance. As of 2012, the NOP accredited 82 ACAs globally, 48 of which were based in the U.S.A.⁴ These ACAs have a variety of organizational forms, including private for-profit organizations, nonprofit organizations, and state and county government departments.

Reflecting the diversity of U.S. agriculture, generally, certified organic operations produce a wide variety of products, and are categorized according to four organic certification types: crops, wild crops, livestock and handling. In 2012, the NOP recognized 27,109 organic certifications issued globally. Based on the determination of the research team, 18,212 of these were organic producers (farmers), while the remainder were food product handling and processing facilities.⁵

This study sought the perspectives of certified organic producers on several facets of organic food regulation in the U.S.A. The objectives of the study were to better understand:

- Producer motivations for using organic practices and pursuing organic certification.
- Producer selection of accredited certifying agents.
- The services provided and regulatory behaviors exhibited by accredited certifying agents.
- Producers’ assessment of U.S. organic regulation appropriateness.
- Producers’ experiences in maintaining compliance with U.S. organic regulations.

Study Data

The data for the study were collected through an online survey of National Organic Program certified organic producers in the winter of 2013-2014. All certified operations holding any combination of crops, wild crops, and livestock certifications for whom the USDA listed a valid email address were included, representing approximately half of all certified organic producers. Processing operations that held only handling organic certification were excluded. In total, 9,542 domestic and international certified organic producers were sent a survey request. Responses were received from 1,055 domestic producers (17%) and 413 international producers (13%) for a total of 1,468 survey respondents and an overall response rate of 15%.

Key Findings

1. Reducing worker exposure to chemicals, decreasing the environmental impact of agricultural production, and personal values contribute to the use of organic practices, with 86% or more of respondents agreeing that these factors motivate them to choose organic practices over conventional practices (see *Question 1*).
2. A majority of producers pursue USDA organic certification to differentiate their products from other products claiming to be 'natural' or 'sustainable,' with 75% of respondents listing this factor as "important" or "very important" (see *Question 2*).
3. Accredited certifying agent reputation and regulatory expertise are reported to be the most important factors in producers' selection of certifiers, with certifier services reported as the least important factor (see *Question 3*).
4. A solid majority of producers report that their accredited certifying agents and inspectors are highly competent in regards to the National Organic Program regulations (85%), and strictly interpret the regulations (89%; see *Question 5*).
5. Almost half of producers (49%) express that National Organic Program regulations should more precisely specify allowed and prohibited substances. Seventy percent disagree with allowing more synthetic substances under the regulations (see *Question 8*).
6. Eighty-five percent of producers agree or strongly agree that National Organic Program regulations increase consumer confidence in products marketed as "organic," while a smaller percentage (59%) indicate that the regulations directly increase consumer understanding of the difference between conventional and organic products (see *Question 9*).
7. Producers report high levels of compliance with National Organic Program regulations. Under 26% report receiving one or more notices of noncompliance in the last year, 2% report that their operation's organic certificate has at some time been suspended, and under 1% indicate that their organic certificate has at some time been revoked. Ninety-three percent disagree when asked if their operation is frequently out of compliance, and 81% deny ignoring trivial instances of noncompliance at their operations (see *Questions 10-13*).
8. Ninety-five percent of producers report that a concern for their operation's reputation is an important reason for maintaining compliance with National Organic Program Regulations, while a minority (37%) indicate that pressure from other certified producers is an important reason for maintaining compliance (see *Question 14*).

Section I: Producer motivations for using organic practices and pursuing organic certification

Q1. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. I practice organic farming because, compared to conventional practices, it...

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
reduces workers' exposure to potentially harmful chemicals.	2%	2%	5%	28%	63%
decreases the environmental impact of agricultural production.	2%	3%	7%	27%	60%
more closely aligns with my personal values.	2%	2%	9%	27%	59%
results in superior products.	3%	6%	15%	39%	38%
is more efficient, and requires less technology, equipment or inputs.	10%	27%	30%	21%	13%

Q1(a). (Open ended) Other indicated reasons for pursuing organic practices:

- Consumer demand
- Higher market price compared to conventional products
- Improved animal welfare
- Improved soil health
- Reduced chemical content of food products
- Avoidance of genetically modified organisms
- Differentiation of product
- Spreading business risks among several markets
- Contract requirements

Q2. How important are the following factors in your decision to be certified USDA organic?

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
To differentiate my products from other products claiming to be 'natural' or 'sustainable'	5%	5%	15%	37%	38%
To support the organic movement by participating in the National Organic Program	12%	13%	24%	30%	23%
To increase my operation's profits	10%	10%	28%	30%	21%
To avoid the penalty of marketing non-certified products as 'organic'	41%	11%	15%	16%	16%

Q2(a). (Open ended) Other indicated factors in the decision to be certified USDA organic:

- Import and export sales
- Contract or purchaser requirements
- Consumer trust in organic products
- To encourage others to adopt organic practices

Section II: Producer selection of accredited certifying agents

Q3. How important were the following factors in selecting your organic certifier?

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
Certifier reputation	8%	6%	19%	39%	27%
Certifier expertise regarding the National Organic Program regulations	9%	7%	21%	40%	22%
Certifier expertise regarding your organic products	9%	9%	23%	38%	22%
Certifier proximity to your operation	17%	12%	24%	27%	19%
Cost of services	11%	12%	34%	29%	15%
The particular services offered by your certifier	11%	14%	28%	33%	13%

Q3(a). (Open ended) Other indicated factors in selecting an organic certifier:

- Only available certifier in the area
- Local/regional knowledge
- Quick turn-around on paperwork, inspections, and certification decisions
- Customer service

Section III: The services provided and regulatory behaviors exhibited by accredited certifying agents

Q4. How would you rate the quality of the following services provided by your certifier and inspectors?

	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good	Excellent	Not provided
Education related to National Organic Program regulations	4%	12%	25%	29%	26%	4%
Education related to organic practices	5%	11%	24%	26%	27%	7%
Organic Systems Plan guidance	6%	12%	25%	29%	21%	6%
Advocacy related to organic policy	4%	11%	21%	27%	26%	11%
Marketing	12%	19%	24%	15%	9%	20%
Additional certification labeling such as “fair trade” or “gluten free”	11%	11%	16%	10%	7%	45%

Q4(a). (Open ended) Other indicated services provided by organic certifiers:

- Export labeling
- Apprenticeship and training

Q5. What is your level of agreement with the following statements regarding your certifier and inspectors?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
My <u>certifier</u> is highly competent regarding the National Organic Program regulations.	<1%	2%	9%	49%	40%
My <u>inspectors</u> are highly competent regarding the National Organic Program regulations.	1%	3%	11%	50%	36%
My <u>certifier</u> strictly interprets the National Organic Program regulations.	<1%	<1%	12%	49%	38%
My <u>inspectors</u> strictly interpret the National Organic Program regulations.	<1%	2%	12%	50%	35%
My <u>certifier</u> understands the intricacies of my organic business.	2%	7%	19%	46%	26%
My <u>inspectors</u> understand the intricacies of my organic business.	2%	7%	17%	45%	28%

Q6. How many times in the last year has your organic certifier conducted the following inspections of your operation?

	Has not conducted	Once	Twice	Three or more times	I don't know
Scheduled inspection	2%	84%	10%	4%	<1%
Unannounced inspection	75%	17%	1%	<1%	6%

Q7. What is your level of agreement with the following statements regarding your certifier and inspectors?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
My certifier always administers notices of noncompliance for serious issues.	<1%	2%	29%	43%	25%
My certifier always administers notices of noncompliance for minor issues.	1%	8%	35%	41%	16%
Before administering a formal notice of noncompliance, my certifier always allows me to correct the noncompliance issue.	5%	13%	35%	33%	13%
My <u>certifier</u> frequently offers information and/or assistance that help me comply with National Organic Program regulations.	4%	10%	22%	45%	19%
My <u>inspectors</u> frequently offer information and/or assistance that help me comply with National Organic Program regulations.	5%	11%	24%	42%	18%

Section IV: Producers' assessment of U.S. organic regulation appropriateness

Q8. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: The National Organic Program regulations...

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
establish a minimum standard for organic practices, but my operation goes "above and beyond" the requirements.	1%	5%	28%	42%	23%
reflect what I consider to be ideal organic standards.	4%	18%	34%	39%	5%
should specify allowed and prohibited production practices more precisely.	3%	12%	36%	38%	11%
should allow more synthetic substances.	35%	35%	20%	8%	2%

Q9. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: The National Organic Program regulations directly result in...

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
increased consumer confidence in the integrity of products marketed as "organic."	<1%	3%	11%	59%	26%
improved environmental conditions and biodiversity.	1%	5%	19%	49%	26%
potential organic producers opting out of Program participation due to burdensome certification requirements.	3%	16%	27%	38%	16%
a profitable organic market for my products.	3%	11%	29%	44%	13%
increased consumer understanding of the difference between organic and conventional products.	4%	16%	22%	46%	13%
cooptation of the organic market by "Big Ag."	2%	10%	43%	33%	12%

Section V. Producers' experiences in maintaining compliance with U.S. organic regulations

Q10. Approximately how many notices of noncompliance has your operation received in the past year?

None	1	2 to 3	4 to 5	Over 5	I don't know
74%	16%	8%	1%	<1%	<1%

Q11. Has your operation's organic certification ever been suspended?

No	Yes	I don't know
96%	2%	2%

Q12. Has your operation's organic certification ever been revoked?

No	Yes	I don't know
99%	<1%	<1%

Q13. What is your level of agreement with the following statements regarding your operation's compliance with National Organic Program regulations?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I immediately notify my certifier of noncompliances at my operation.	3%	7%	31%	11%	48%
When my operation is not in compliance, it is for administrative requirements such as paperwork.	12%	13%	31%	10%	34%
Maintaining compliance is extremely difficult.	13%	45%	13%	4%	25%
I ignore noncompliances at my operation that I consider to be trivial.	47%	34%	3%	1%	15%
My operation is frequently out of compliance.	60%	33%	2%	<1%	5%

Q14. How important are each of the following reasons for you in maintaining compliance with National Organic Program regulations?

	Not at all important	Moderately important	Extremely important
A concern for your operation's reputation	4%	15%	80%
A personal sense of duty	2%	18%	79%
Fear of penalty from your certifier	29%	44%	27%
Fear of penalty from the National Organic Program	31%	42%	27%
Pressure from other certified producers	63%	28%	9%

Section VI. Survey respondent demographic characteristics

Q15. U.S. domestic vs. international survey respondents:

Domestic	72%
International	28%

Q16. Was your operation certified organic prior to the implementation of the National Organic Program in 2002?

No	61%
Yes	36%
I don't know	3%

Q17. How would you characterize the size of your operation, relative to other operations producing similar certified organic products?

Smallest	10%
Small	37%
Average	32%
Large	16%
Largest	3%
I don't know	3%

Q18. Please indicate your professional role(s) within your organization (Check all that apply):

Owner or manager	68%
Field supervisor	19%
Farm hand	16%
Crew foreman	12%

Q19. Please indicate the scope(s) for which your operation is currently certified USDA organic (check all that apply):

Crops	67%
Handling	16%
Livestock	14%
Wild crops	1%

Q20. Please indicate the types of commodities you produce, and whether they are certified organic or not (check all that apply):

	Certified Organic	NOT-Certified Organic
Vegetable crops	31%	5%
Grains, alfalfa, mixed hay, other field crops	24%	5%
Tree or vine fruit, nut crops	24%	4%
Herb crops	22%	3%
Brambles, berries	15%	3%
Nursery, floriculture, greenhouse crops	11%	3%
Beef	7%	6%
Eggs	5%	6%
Dairy products	5%	2%
Poultry	4%	5%
Apiculture	3%	4%
Lamb	2%	3%
Pork	1%	5%
Other	12%	3%

End Notes

1. Organic Trade Industry. (2011). U.S. organic industry overview. Retrieved from <http://www.ota.com/pics/documents/2011OrganicIndustrySurvey.pdf>. Accessed October 7, 2014.
2. Reuters. (April 8, 2011). Organic farming grew eight percent in 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/18/idUS3458720020110418> . Accessed October 7, 2014.
3. Sønderskov, K. M. & Daugbjerg, C. (2010). The state and consumer confidence in eco-labeling: Organic labeling in Denmark, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 28(4), 507-517.
4. National Organic Program. (2014). USDA Accredited Certifying Agents (ACAs). Retrieved from <http://www.ams.usda.gov>. Accessed October 7, 2014.
5. As of the writing of this report, the NOP published a list of all certified operations which is available at the NOP website: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/nop>.

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The **Workshop on Policy Process Research** is a research center under the School of Public Affairs's Buechner Institute for Governance at the University of Colorado Denver. The Workshop brings faculty and students together in the pursuit of cutting-edge research focusing on the interactions between individuals, public policy, and contemporary governance.

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