Principles and Practices of Organic Farming

Part II

Today, the demands of conventional agriculture and the environmental impact have led many people to demand agricultural production systems that are less harmful to their health and the environment. Some of these damaging effects are soil erosion, water pollution, contamination of groundwater, and loss of biological diversity. The shift to organic production is also due to consumers’ concerns about possible harmful effects on their health, when they are exposed to foods that contain chemicals. For these reasons, organic production is making a comeback.

The USDA implemented national organic standards in October of 2002, in response to the increased demand for organic products (Kuepper, 2002). The National Organic Standard identifies what farmers and food processors must (and must not) do to be certified organic. These standards, known as the Final Rule, help describe organic production. When a conventional farmer decides to shift to an organic production system, a three-year transition period is required by the USDA before produce can be certified as organic. During that transitional period, farmers must use cultural, chemical, and biological practices that are approved under the Final Rule. It is recommended that farmers who are serious about converting to an organic production system start a pre-transition period. This can be done by slowly reducing conventional practices such as the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers and transferring to organic practices such as manure and biological control.

Certification - A Quality Assurance Issue

Organic certification is a procedure for verifying that the production process conforms to certain standards. In other words, certification is primarily an acknowledgement that these products have been produced according to organic production standards. The basic role of a certification body is to confirm that these adhere to a specific organic standard (usually the
one established by the importing country or by the certification body itself). Once certified, organic products are marketed, usually carrying a certification label, indicating that the products are certified as organic. (FAO/ITC/CTA, 2001)

The cost of certification can be high, although it varies in relation to farm size, volume of production and which certification body is chosen. Relatively few developing countries have certification bodies within their border (although the situation is changing), and even when sufficient resources are available to pay for certification, farmers often lack the information to find credible inspectors.

Steps to Organic Certifications
There are five steps to becoming a certified organic producer.

1. **Identify a Suitable Certifier**
   - Organic certification agencies may be operated by a state agriculture department or they may be private units, but they must be accredited by the National Organic Program (NOP).
   - Certifiers work as an extension of the federal government, licensing producers to use the term “organic” in selling their products (Kuepper, 2002).

2. **Submit an Application**
   - The producer should request a copy of the certifier’s organic standards and an application packet, which includes an organic farm plan questionnaire. An application fee is normally requested at this stage.
   - The producer must complete the questionnaire, which requests information about the farm or ranch. These include details on soil fertility planning, seeds and seedlings, weed and pest management practices, and storage and handling routines.
   - Farm maps will be required along with crop and input histories for all fields.
   - Strategies to prevent contamination with banned substances must be outlined.
   - The producer may sign a licensing agreement with the certifier at this time (Kuepper, 2002).

3. **Completeness Review**
   - The certifier reviews the organic farm plan application to be certain that it is complete and that the operation appears to be in agreement with NOP standards.
   - If additional information is required the producer will be asked to submit it (Kuepper, 2002).

4. **On-Farm Inspection**
   - If the organic farm plan application is found to be complete and acceptable, the certifier assigns an organic inspector to inspect the farm.
   - He or she inspects the fields, farm implements, and buildings, reviews borders and adjoining land use, and evaluates contamination.
   - The inspector reviews all written records documenting management practices, seed sources, inputs used, compost production, conventional production done on the farm, and records of harvest, storage, transportation, and sales.
An inspection confirmation is completed during the inspection and signed by the producer and the inspector.

The inspector reviews with the producer all identified non-compliance issues at the end of the inspection.

- Finally, the inspector submits a detailed report to the certifier on all findings (Kuepper, 2002).

5. **Final Review**

- The organic farm plan application and inspection report are reviewed by an individual or certification committee with knowledge in organic farming and certification standards.

- There can be several outcomes of the review:
  - Approval for organic certification
  - Request for additional information
  - Notification of noncompliance
  - Denial of certification

- If certification is granted, the producer can begin marketing his or her products as organic.

- The producer is free to use the seal of the certifier and also the USDA’s organic seal.

- Notification of noncompliance means that the applicant will be granted certification, if certain features are changed.

- A producer does have the option to contest a charge of noncompliance.

- A denial of certification is normally given when the certifier finds that the producer is unable to fulfill federal organic standards.

- Producers who market less than $5,000 worth of organic products annually are not required to become certified.

- These operations must still follow the federal standards for organic production, product labeling, and handling.

- They may not use the USDA seal, the seal of a certifier, or otherwise claim that their production is certified.

- They may not sell their products as ingredients for use in someone else’s certified organic product (Kuepper, 2002).

Certified organic production then means production by approved organic methods, with additional care taken to get rid of contamination with illegal materials and mixing with conventional products. It is important, therefore, that producers understand their certifying agency’s standards well and keep in close touch with a representative. In essence, certification is assuring that the buyer is getting what he or she is paying for as an organic product.
References


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