

NATIONAL ORGANIC STANDARDS

On Oct. 21, 2002, the U.S. national organic standards officially went into effect. As a result, we now have one consistent, legally-enforced definition of organic food and agriculture across all states and certifiers – a definition largely consistent with those in other countries around the world.

What an incredible achievement for what started as just a dream. Seeing the poisoning of the earth, our food, and our bodies by “modern” toxic pesticides and fertilizers, a partnership of farmers, consumers, activists, and others worked to create another path – one that chooses instead to work collaboratively with nature, including recovering traditional methods that have successfully fed humanity for over ten thousand years. These pioneers defined the option of organic, and now farmers, producers, and consumers worldwide are shifting away from the toxics that poison our world.

How We Got Here

The implementation of the national organic standards was a major milestone in a process that started with the 1990 Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA). The organic community had sought national laws because standards in the U.S. had become a patchwork of state laws and certifier rules. While the organic community had achieved a high level of consistency and agreement on many specifics, there were differences and most importantly gaps, where a lack of laws could allow deceptive practices. Organic proponents worldwide were working to put consistent standards into law, in order to help ensure the integrity of the word organic, and protect both consumers and the industry from the corrosion that happens to standards without a legal definition (such as “green” and “sustainable”).

Through OFPA, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was directed to put into national law the organic standards that the community had developed. In 1997, the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) released its first proposed standards for public comment. Unfortunately, it had not fulfilled its mandate to implement the community’s organic standards, allowing unacceptable exceptions for GMOs, toxic sludge, and irradiation. In an inspiring demonstration of our shared power, the community communicated their rejection of these proposed rules, through the media, government representatives, and by sending in over 275,000 comments – the most comments ever received for a USDA proposed rule. (The previous record was 25,000.) The USDA withdrew their proposal, saying that they were “committed to developing national organic standards that organic farmers and consumers will embrace.” They brought in new NOP staff from the organic community to completely re-draft the standards.

In 2000, the USDA released their new proposed standards, which remedied not only the large flaws of the previous proposal, but also adjusted a variety of details that would’ve drained the validity of organic agriculture. The majority of the community felt that the USDA had largely succeeded this time in creating credible organic standards that reasonably reflect the community’s definition.



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ORGANIC PRODUCT LABELS

The national organic laws established rules for consistent use of the word organic by everyone in the supply chain. Keep these in mind as you shop. Note: These rules currently only apply to food and beverage products.

- **ORGANIC.** Individual items labelled as organic must be certified by a USDA-accredited third-party certifying agency. (An exception is made for growers selling less than \$5,000 a year, who can make some use of the term organic without being certified. In California, these growers must be registered.)
- **TRANSITIONAL.** Items grown according to organic standards, but not yet for three years, can use the word transitional. They can’t call themselves organic.
- **PROCESSED PRODUCT LABEL CATEGORIES:**
 - **“100% organic”.** All ingredients (except water and salt) must be organically-produced.
 - **“Organic”.** At least 95% of ingredients must be organic, and the front label can state the percentage. There are strong limits on the other 5% of ingredients, including no GMOs.
 - **“Made with Organic Ingredients”.** At least 70% of ingredients must be organic. The front label can use the phrase “Made with organic” then list up to three ingredients or food groups. It can also state the total organic percentage. There are limits on the non-organic ingredients, including no GMOs.
 - **Ingredients label only.** A product with less than 70% organic ingredients can only list them on the ingredients panel, indicating which are organic.

For the first three items above, the certifier name must be stated. The “USDA Organic” seal is only allowed on the first two categories. Products with less than 70% organic ingredients cannot state a certifier on the package.

- **SHOPPING AT THE STORE.** To help ensure that a non-packaged product at the store is indeed organic, retailers must follow certain rules about how they handle, store, and sell organic products. They must prevent co-mingling between organic and conventional products; protect organic products from contact with prohibited substances (such as pest control products); label products clearly and properly; and provide information about the source of their products to state officials. Be aware that some self-serve equipment might be used for both organic and conventional goods (e.g., coffee grinders). Some stores provide separate self-serve scoops for organic products to help ensure organic integrity.
- **STORE CERTIFICATION AND REGISTRATION.** Some retailers choose to have their stores certified organic, for third-party verification that they’ve followed these laws and practices. In California, stores can also choose to be registered organic with their local county Agricultural Commissioner; organic practices are then added to the checklist for spot inspections of these stores. Stores are not required to be certified or registered unless they want to process or package their own organically-labelled products (which can be as simple as repackaging bulk products with a label and price tag). This is to ensure that proper procedures are followed to protect the integrity of the product.

