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# ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

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## Overview

This module presents the certification process, by which producers become certified and can label their products as organic. This includes the people and organizations involved in certification, the NOP rules for transitioning organic land, split operations, reasons for becoming certified, and certification as a marketing strategy. Students learn about these topics in the broader context of ethics and values, across scales and regions.

## Learning Objectives

### Concepts

- The rules for becoming certified organic, the people and organizations involved, and the transition process.
- The underlying reasons that a producer may decide to transition which can include economic reasons and personal values.

### Skills

- Navigate an online resource (*The Road to Organic*) to obtain information about the certification process and producer motives for transitioning.
- Use critical thinking to evaluate producer challenges, successes, and motives as viewed in a video where farmers talk about their certification process and use critical thinking.

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## Notes for Instructors

### Lesson 1: The Certification Process

#### Description

This lesson explores the process of certification with a focus on producer decision making. Students will learn about the steps and decisions a producer must make by completing an online activity (*The Road to Organic*) and answering questions. This features two farmer characters and includes representation of women and people of color. Topics covered in this activity include transitioning, farmer information resources, people involved in organic certification, and record keeping.

#### Lesson Notes

*The Road to Organic* exercise can be completed individually because students make individual decisions to answer questions and move through the activity. The activity could be assigned potentially as homework or in a computer lab with headphones.

If you don't want to use the question bank or collect an assignment, another possibility is to have students move freely through the activity and write a reflection on take home messages to prepare for an in-class discussion.

#### Performance Expectation

Students will navigate an interactive online resource to obtain information about the certification process within the context of farmer decision making.

*Skills:* Ability to use information resources

*Disciplinary Ideas:* Regulations

*Concepts:* Scale and Place

#### Time

Online Activity - 1 Hour

#### Materials

Computer with internet access

## Assignment: USDA's *The Road to Organic*

*The Road to Organic* is an interactive video geared towards farmers who are interested in transitioning to organic. As part of the video you can pick a farmer to follow, help them make decisions about transitioning, and get information about the transitioning process. For this assignment you will need to complete the videos for both farmers (Candice and Bruce) and answer the following questions. You may need to go through the video more than once if there are pieces of information you missed.

- 1.) What are the two concerns that Bruce and Candice mention about becoming certified organic when they're talking at the farmers market?

### Candice

- 2.) What are the five steps to organic certification that Candice learns about from going to the conference?
- 3.) What is the role of the USDA-NOP? (List at least 3 things the NOP does)
- 4.) Are certifying agents part of the federal government?
- 5.) What does a certifying agent do?
- 6.) Inspectors are often independent contractors who work with what two groups in the certification process?
- 7.) What is an Organic System Plan (OSP)? Is this part of the application process?
- 8.) List at least 3 things that are required to be in an OSP according to 205.201.
- 9.) Are there fees and costs associated with getting certified? If so, what is the general range a farmer might expect to pay?
- 10.) Candice is hoping that they can begin selling certified organic products by the end of the summer. What are the reasons she tells her husband why this might be possible?

### Bruce

- 11.) How many years does it take to convert conventionally managed land to certified organic land?
- 12.) Does Bruce figure out that it's better to transition all at once (committing to a significant amount of acreage to transition) or transition slowly with just a few acres to start? List two reasons this is the better choice for him.
- 13.) In general, how long can the certification process take?
- 14.) What three things should farmers review in preparation for their meeting with an Inspector?
- 15.) List the 6 types of records that an inspector may want to look at during an inspection.

- 16.) While Bruce may be able to get the information from multiple sources, ultimately, where should Bruce go for information to make the correct decision about whether or not he should use lime on his certified organic fields?
- 17.) Record keeping is an essential part of Bruce's transition to organic. Describe in 1-2 sentences how he views record keeping in the scope of his farming operation as a business?

## Key: USDA's Road to Organic

Instructors can email Randa Jabbour ([rjabbour@uwyo.edu](mailto:rjabbour@uwyo.edu)) from their institutional email address to request the key.

## Notes for Instructors

### Lesson 2: Producer Certification Perspectives

#### Description

Producers can provide valuable insight into the certification process. In this lesson students will hear producer perspectives on the certification process, why they decided to become certified, recordkeeping, and other related topics. A list of provided questions can be used to guide students through the video or as a basis for an in class discussion.

#### Lesson Notes

This assignment could be completed in class in a computer lab, or assigned for homework. Subsets of the provided questions could be used to shorten the length of this assignment or focus the assignment on certain concepts.

#### Performance Expectation

Students will evaluate successes, challenges and motives for becoming certified organic based on interviews with organic producers.

*Skills:* Critical Thinking

*Disciplinary Ideas:* Regulations, Social and Economic Dimensions

*Concepts:* Scale and Place, Ethics and Values

#### Time

45 minutes

#### Materials

Computer/Device to watch video

## Notes for Instructors

# Video Companion Notes

*Portions of these notes are included in the video descriptions on YouTube.*

## Organic Certification

*Youtube link:* <https://youtu.be/di7DKuz-Ocw>

*Run Time:* 21 minutes

*Organic Producers:* Keith and Wendi Lankister, Juan Raygoza, Malaika Spencer, Jordan Brown, Tony Potenza, Jean and Bryce Hediger

Organic producers get certified for different reasons and can have a variety of experiences getting their certification. Here we hear from organic producers from across the country about their experience with certification.

Keith and Wendi Lankister operate an organic ranch in Glenrock Wyoming, producing grass fed beef for their brand Bar Double L Beef. Glenrock is located just east of Casper in central Wyoming. The Duncan ranch itself is owned by the State, but the Lankister's operation is part of a long term agricultural lease. On their 7,815 acre ranch the Lankisters focus on grass farming as the foundation for their beef business.

Juan Raygoza is the owner of Tera Preta Farms, a 7 acre diversified vegetable farm located in Edinburg Texas. Edinburg is in the very southern tip of Texas, close to the Gulf of Mexico and Mexico border. Juan and his wife Shakera work together, with Shakera managing the marketing, office, media, and helping out on the farm as needed. They market their vegetables through a CSA, farmers markets, and at restaurants. Juan sees healthy soils as the key to healthy produce and healthy people and focuses on building soil as the foundation of his production practices.

Malaika Spencer owns Roots to River Farm with two locations in New Hope, Pennsylvania and Titusville, New Jersey. Her diversified vegetable farm markets their produce at farmers markets, restaurants, and through their CSA. Using season extension techniques like high tunnels, Roots to River Farm produces food year round.

Jordan Brown is the owner of The Family Garden a 20 acre farm in Gainesville Florida, which is situated in the North Central part of the state. Because of the warmer climate, Jordan produces food year round, with a CSA that runs from October through June. Besides organic certification, The Family Garden also has a Food Justice certification. This ensures fair treatment of employees by paying living wage and establishing workers' rights.

Tony Potenza owns Potenza Organic Farms in Trumansburg, New York. Trumansburg is located in the Finger Lakes region of New York, an area defined by long thin lakes stretching north and south.

Tony has been involved in the organic movement for most of his career as a farmer. He was a founding member of an organic growers association called Finger Lakes Organic Growers in the 1970's and was the first producer in the state of New York to become certified organic. After starting out in vegetables, Tony now grows soybeans, dry beans and, small grains.

The Hedigers own Golden Prairie Inc. in Northern Colorado, growing grains and specializing in millet. As a family, the Hedigers work together to manage different aspects of the operation. Bryce and his father Randy focus on farming and production. Jean handles the marketing and works with over a dozen nearby growers to sell their combined 20,000 acres of millet. The Hedigers have been a part of the organic movement in Colorado since the 1980's.

# Assignment: Producer Certification Perspectives

Visit: <https://youtu.be/di7DKuz-Ocw> and answer the following questions.

## Why Organic

1. Where are these 6 producers located?
2. Organic producers gave a number of reasons for being organic, using one sentence each, list 3 of those reasons.
3. How many producers talk about health as a reason for farming organically?

## Getting Certified

4. Why was it problematic to have separate state organic programs before the National Organic Program was created?
5. Why do some farms need to undergo a 3 year transition period and other not? Describe in 2-3 sentences the rules surrounding transition.
6. What aspect of the 3 year transition period does Malika Spencer say was helpful for her?

## Record Keeping

7. Describe in 1-2 sentences how Jean and Bryce Hediger stay on top of paperwork and recordkeeping.
8. List the 4 different kinds of records that the Lankisters talk about keeping.
9. Is record-keeping something that only organic farmers do?

## Management Decisions

10. Jordan Brown talks about farming practices that the public might not consider organic, but are allowed under the National Organic Program. What is one example of these farming practices?
11. Before using a new product or material on his farm, what does Juan Raygoza do first?
12. How does certification most influence Malika Spencer's management decisions?

## Mistakes

13. Describe in 2-3 sentences how the Lankisters handled the situation where part of their certified organic pasture was mistakenly sprayed. (i.e. What steps did they take after noticing the spraying?).
14. Did the area of the pasture that was accidentally sprayed need to go through another 3 year transition period?
15. According to Jordan Brown, what kinds of mistakes are farmers most likely to make with their organic certification?

## Integrity

16. Is there room for dishonesty in the National Organic Program? Briefly describe where dishonesty might happen in organic certification.
17. True or False: Jordan and Jean believe that being honest in their farming practices is important to their customers.
18. Having heard from all of these producers and learning about the organic certification process would/do you purchase organic products. Do you believe in the integrity of the organic certification label?

## Key: Producer Certification Perspectives

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## Notes for Instructors

# Discussion: To Certify or Not to Certify

### Additional Background

The producers we heard from in the farmer videos have all decided to become certified. Similarly, in 'The Road to Organic' both Bruce and Candice also decide to become certified. However, there are a lot of producers who use organic practices and decide not to become certified. Watch the video and read the paper below to learn more about producers who don't get certified:

- Lexicon of Food Video: <https://www.lexiconoffood.com/video/local-versus-organic>
- Veldstra, Michael D., Corinne E. Alexander, Maria I. Marshall. 2014. To certify or not to certify? Separating the organic production and certification decisions. *Food Policy* 49, 429-436. (*This is an open access article under a creative commons license. See 'Resources' for a link to this PDF online.*)

### Notes

This may be a possible point to talk about the role of alternative certifications (Non-GMO Project, Whole Food's "Responsibly Grown", Fair Trade, etc....). These topics may change quickly due to regulations and industry actions, thus we have opted not to link to specific resources here, but current news sources often are a good launching point.

### Discussion Questions

1. Is organic certification worth it? To whom? Why?
2. Would you get certified organic? Why or why not?
3. How important is it that producers believe in the philosophy of organic?
4. As a consumer, do you think certification is less important if you can meet the farmer?

# Resources

## Print

Kuepper, George. 2006. Organic System Plans: Market Farms and Greenhouses. National Center for Appropriate Technology.

*Developed for farmers, this guide is designed to help farmers through the application process by explaining and providing examples of the different parts of the application.*

Organic System Plan Template for Crop and/or Livestock. 2011. National Center for Appropriate Technology.

*A template for record keeping in order to demonstrate compliance by documenting practices and inputs.*

A Guide for Conventional Farmers Transitioning to Organic Certification. USDA, AMS National Organic Program.

*PDF available online at:*  
<https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/medme/10%20Guide%20to%20Transitional%20FarminF%20FINAL%20RGK%20V2.pdf>  
*A step-by-step guide for farmers interesting in transitioning to organic certification.*

DiGiacomo, Gigi, Robert P. King, Dale Nordquist. 2015. Organic Transition A business planner for farmers, ranchers and food entrepreneurs. Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) handbook series; 12.

*This planner delivers information about the certification process and provides write-in places for farmers to begin planning for transitioning to organic. In the appendix there are examples of farmer business plans.*

DiGiacomo, Gigi, and Robert P. King. 2015. Making the Transition to Organic: Ten Farm Profiles. University of Minnesota, Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA).

*PDF available online at:*  
[http://misadocuments.info/Making\\_the\\_TransitioT\\_to\\_Organic.pdf](http://misadocuments.info/Making_the_TransitioT_to_Organic.pdf)  
*These farmer profiles provide insights into the transition process including decision making, strategies, and words of advice. Profiles are from a diverse operation types including crops, livestock and processing.*

Noncompliance and Adverse Action Flow Chart. 2016. United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service.

*PDF available online at:*  
<https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/NCandAdvActionFlowChart.pdf>  
This chart was designed to help certifying agencies with compliance issues and enforcement and is helpful for understanding how noncompliances are dealt with.

Veldstra, Michael D., Corinne E. Alexander, Maria I. Marshall. 2014. To certify or not to certify? Separating the organic production and certification decisions. Food Policy 49, 429-436.

*PDF available online at:*  
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306919214000840>

## Web

USDA AMS Organic Certification and Accreditation

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/organic-certification>

*Provides links for readings on a variety of topics including benefits of certification, becoming certified, and labeling. This website also includes news and announcements related to the national organic program.*

#### USDA AMS Youtube Channel – Organic Sound and Sensible Project

<https://www.youtube.com/user/USDAAMS/videos>

*This Youtube channel provides videos on a variety of topics related to agricultural marketing service programs, including the national organic program. A series created by the Organic Sound and Sensible project contain many videos relevant to certification.*

#### The Road to Organic Certification

<https://access.willinteractive.com/the-road/the-road-to-organic-certification>

*This is an interactive web resources that allows the viewer to 'choose-your-own-adventure' as they follow two farmers through the certification process. Viewers gain insights into farmer decision making and learn about various aspects of certification.*

#### ATTRA Organic Certification Process

<https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/viewhtml.php?id=163>

*This guide is geared towards organic producers and describes the certification process. Related publications and additional resources are also included at the end.*

#### extension Organic Certification Resources

<http://articles.extension.org/pages/25158/organic-certification-resources>

*Provides a list of online resources related to organic certification.*