



Ten Steps to Organic Certification in California

Organic farms in California must comply with USDA National Organic Program (NOP) regulations and register with the CDFA State Organic Program (SOP)*. Here are ten steps needed for certification and registration.

- 1. Get prepared and contact a certifier:** Land must be free of prohibited substances for 3 consecutive years prior to certification. Use and become familiar with organic practices during this transition period (<https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/organic-certification/transitioning-to-organic>). Select and meet with an organic certifier to discuss their certification process, including their Organic System Plan (OSP) template and any associated fees (<https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/is/organicprogram/pdfs/CertifiersList.pdf>).
- 2. Register with CDFA:** Prior to the first organic sale and before attaining organic certification, you must register with the CDFA State Organic Program (<https://organic.cdfa.ca.gov/OrganicReg/>). *Pay CDFA SOP registration fee.*
- 3. Submit your application and Organic System Plan (OSP):** Your certifier will provide an OSP template to fill out. This will require you to provide a farm map, as well as describe management and recordkeeping practices. *Pay an application fee.*
- 4. Certifier reviews your OSP:** Your certifier reviews your OSP with you to ensure it is complete and in compliance with USDA organic regulations (<https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/organic>). This is often, but not always, a back-and-forth process. Make sure to ask your certifier how they approach this process.
- 5. Inspector visits your operation:** The certifier's inspector completes an on-site inspection of your operation and ensures that your OSP matches what is happening on the ground.
- 6. Certifier reviews inspector report:** Your certifier then reviews the inspector's report and works with you to address any concerns or discrepancies, to help ensure compliance with NOP requirements.
- 7. Certifier grants certification:** After your certifier grants certification you can start using the USDA organic label. *Pay the certifier an annual certification and inspection fee.*
- 8. Run your operation, keep records, update your OSP as needed:** Once certified, operations must follow practices described in the USDA NOP regulations. If you make changes to your management practices, work with your certifier to ensure that they are in compliance with organic regulations and then added to your OSP. This is especially important when using new inputs like pesticides or compost.
- 9. Prepare for annual inspection:** Your certifier will inspect your farm annually to ensure you remain in compliance with USDA NOP regulations. Make sure your records (e.g. practices, inputs, sales, seed/planting stock receipts, etc.) are organized prior to inspection and trace-back audits.
- 10. Complete annual inspection and registrations:** Your inspector conducts an annual on-site inspection. Address any concerns with the certifier and *pay annual certification and inspection fees*. Register your organic operation annually with CDFA and *pay annual registration fees*.

*Farms that sell \$5,000 or less in organic products annually do not need to get certified, but do need to register with the CDFA SOP and comply with organic production regulations, including recordkeeping.

How Much Does Organic Certification Cost?

- **Certifier Fees** - Certifiers charge an initial application fee, annual certification fee, and annual inspection fee. Fee structure varies between certifiers. For example, some certifiers charge fees based on gross sales or acreage while others charge a flat fee. Small, simple operations may cost as little as \$700 to get certified while large, complex operations can cost more than \$20,000. For an accurate estimate of fees talk with your certifier.
- **CDFA SOP Fees** –Registration with the CDFA SOP requires payment of an annual registration fee. These fees are determined by your operation’s gross sales and can range from \$25 to \$3,000. For an accurate estimate of CDFA fees visit https://organic.cdfa.ca.gov/OrganicReg/Registration_Fee_2017.aspx

Financial Assistance for Certification – Cost Share and Grant Programs

- Pending funding availability, USDA offers cost-share programs that reimburse up to 75% or \$750 of eligible certification costs each year. Both CDFA and your county USDA Farm Service Agency administer these funds. <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/resources/programs/organic-certification-cost-share-program-occsp>

Financial Assistance for Transitioning to Organic - Cost Share and Grant Programs

- The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) has an Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative to provide technical and financial assistance to producers who are transitioning to organic, certified organic, or exempt from certification of the National Organic Program. They also have cost share programs for practices that benefit natural resources and wildlife habitat. Reach out to your local NRCS office to learn more: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/> (scroll to the middle of the website page)
- California Alliance with Family Farms (CAFF) Organic Transition grant program will open in 2025. Producers can apply for up to \$30,000 in direct funding to support the transition process. There may be an opportunity for awarded farmers to qualify for an additional \$1,000/per acre up to 30 acres for field preparation practices. Watch for an announcement on their website: <https://caff.org/otpp/>
- California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) Organic Transition grant program offers \$10,000 per year for 3 years to off-set the cost of transitioning. There may be the opportunity for eligible transitioning farmers to qualify for an additional \$1,000/transitioning acre up to 30 acres for soil building practices. Details here: <https://www.ccof.org/foundation/grants-education/organic-transition>
- Ventura County Resource Conservation District offers up to \$60,000 in financial assistance and technical assistance for producers transitioning to organic in Kern, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and Ventura Counties. To apply and learn more visit their website: <https://vcrd.org/otp/>

Technical Assistance

There are multiple public agencies, university extension programs, private consultants and non-profit groups that offer organic agriculture technical assistance:

- UC Cooperative Extension Farm Advisor: https://ucanr.edu/sites/ucanr/County_Offices/
- UC Organic Agriculture Institute: <https://organic.ucanr.edu/>
- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/> (scroll to middle of page)
- California Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs): <https://carcd.org/page/regions>
- Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF): <https://caff.org/organic-certification/>
- California Certified Organic Farmers Foundation (CCOF): navigate to resources <https://www.ccof.org/>
- NCAT’s ATTRA Sustainable Agriculture Program: <https://attra.ncat.org/about/>
- Rodale Institute Organic Consulting: <https://rodaleinstitute.org/consulting/>