

What Does the USDA Organic Seal Mean For You?

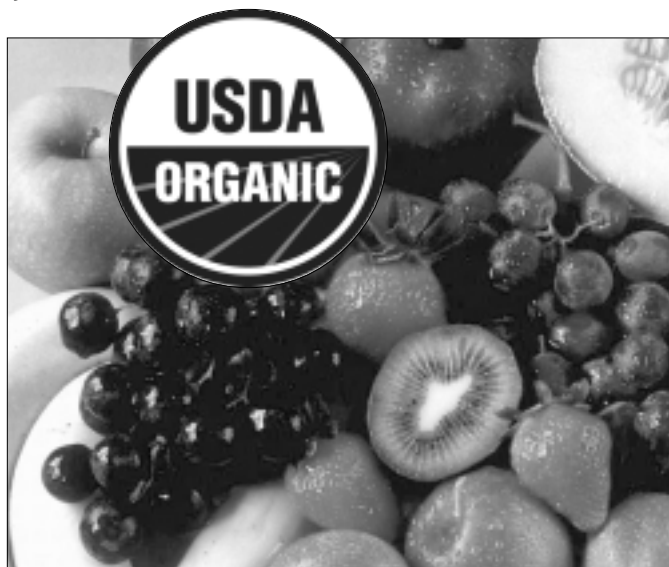
A national organic standards fact sheet

“These are the strictest and most comprehensive organic standards in the world.”

— Dan Glickman, US Secretary of Agriculture, December 2000

Background

- On October 21, 2002, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched a new set of national standards for food and fibers labeled “organic,” whether it is grown in the United States or imported from other countries.
- As of October 21, 2002, when you buy food labeled “organic,” in the United States, you can be sure that it was produced using the highest organic production and handling standards in the world and certified by a USDA-accredited certifying agent.
- In 1990, Congress passed the *Organic Foods Production Act* (OFPA) to determine uniform standards for the term “organic.” The new National Organic Standards are the result of this legislation.
- The National Organic Standards offer a national definition, a precise set of standards and a regulatory and compliance procedures for farmers and processors to use the term “100% organic”, “organic” and “Made with organic ingredients.”
- They detail the methods, practices and substances that can be used in producing and handling organic crops, livestock, greenhouse, wild and organic processed food and fiber products.
- They establish clear organic labeling criteria, and specifically prohibit the use of genetic engineering methods, ionizing radiation and sewage sludge.
- The National Organic Standards replace a patchwork of different state and private certification standards, and are designed to take the confusion out of what organic means for consumers.



- While all organic food farmers and processors must be certified by the USDA, use of the “USDA Organic” seal on products labeled “100% organic” and “organic” is voluntary.

What the National Organic Standards mean for consumers

- The National Organic Standards will provide clear and consistent labeling for use of the term “100% organic,” “organic” and “Made with organic ingredients” and help eliminate confusion as to what the term *organic* really means.
- For consumers who buy organic food and fiber products, the standards will ensure that they can be confident in knowing what they are buying (including the exact organic content). The involvement of the USDA may inspire further consumer confidence.
- For consumers who are concerned about Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), the

the National Organic Standards reinforce the fact that organic food is never produced with genetically engineered or modified, and is never irradiated.

What is organic?

Organic food and fiber is grown without relying on synthetic chemical pesticides. Organic farming helps protect our air, soil, water and food supply from potentially toxic chemicals and other pollutants. Organic farming conserves natural resources by recycling natural materials and it encourages an abundance of species living in balanced, harmonious ecosystems. Organic farmers are required by the National Organic Standards to minimize soil erosion; implement crop rotations; provide for the humane, general welfare and health of farm animals and prevent contamina-

tion of crops, soil, or water by plant and animal nutrients, pathogenic organisms, heavy metals, or residues of prohibited substances.

Before a product can be labeled organic, a USDA agent annually inspects the farm where the food or fiber is grown and the facility where organic food or fiber is processed to make sure the farmer and the processing operation are following all the rules necessary to meet USDA organic standards. Companies that handle or process organic food or fiber must be certified as well. The name and address of the USDA-approved organic certifier must also appear on all packaged products that use organic ingredients.

Labeling

To assist consumers, the USDA has designed a seal that may be used on products labeled as “100% Organic” or “Organic.” The actual percentage of organic content may be displayed on all products, regardless of label category. The new National Organic Standards will allow four different labeling options based on the percentage of organic ingredients in a product. These include:

“100% Organic”—100% of the substances, ingredients, processing aids, food additives including colors and flavorings are certified organic

“Organic”—Contains at least 95% organic ingredients. The remaining 5% can be substances petitioned, reviewed, published for public comment and if found that no organic substitute exists are placed on the USDA’s National List of Allowed substances. Under the USDA rule, the National List includes the following types of substances:

- Synthetic substances allowed in organic crop production;
- Synthetic inert ingredients as classified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for use with non-synthetic substances or synthetic substances used as an active allowed crop or livestock pesticide ingredient;
- Non-synthetic substances prohibited for use in organic crop and livestock production and processing;
- Synthetic substances allowed for use in organic livestock production;
- Nonagricultural (non-organic) (both non-synthetic and synthetic) substances allowed as ingredients in or on pro-

cessed products labeled as “organic” or “made with organic (specified ingredients or food group(s));” and,

- Non-organically produced agricultural products allowed as ingredients in or on processed products labeled as “organic” or “made with organic ingredients.”

“Made with Organic Ingredients”—Contains between 70-94% organic ingredients. For example, a soup made with at least 70% organic materials and only organic vegetables could be labeled “made with organic peas, potatoes and corn” or “soup with organic vegetables.” Non-organic ingredients and synthetic substances normally allowed in conventional food and fiber production are allowed for use in up to 30% of the content of products labeled “Made with organic ingredients.”

Products with less than 70% organic ingredients may only list the organic ingredients on the ingredient panel (rather than the primary panel). Non-organic ingredients and synthetic substances normally allowed in conventional food and



USDA will oversee and enforce the entry of only qualified organic food and fiber products into the United States

fiber production are allowed in 31% or more of the content of products labeled using this labeling category.

What about organic foods and fibers imported into the US?

In addition to ensuring that domestically produced organic products have met the standards, USDA will oversee and enforce the entry of only qualified organic food and fiber products into the United States, thus ensuring all organic products sold within the United States meet the same stringent standards.

This article was adapted from the Horizon Organic website: <http://www.horizonorganic.com>.