

The Organic Certification Process

The intricacies of the organic certification, coupled with the dynamics of international trade, can make for a complex system. The Quality Assurance International (QAI) Certification Program is designed to certify every step of the organic chain. From the land on which the product is grown, to the producers growing the product, from the post-harvest facilities preparing the product, to the processing and handling facilities transforming the product, our job at QAI is to verify that organic integrity is maintained.

We work with other certifiers to help ensure that your organic food is truly organic. Some of the certifiers are located abroad, and some are here in the U.S. From farm to fork, we all work together under the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) oversight. Here's how the process works.



Farming

Improving the quality of the soil is the basis for organic.

The farm's soil must be free of prohibited substances for a minimum of three years prior to harvesting crops that will be labeled as organic.

The National Organic Program (NOP) encourages farmers to improve soil fertility and rotate crops to naturally increase crop yields and disease resistance.

Harvesting

Organic crops are picked, cut, and cleaned in the field.

To ensure organic integrity, certifying these operations is necessary.

Equipment used for harvesting and processing must be cleaned and sanitized in accordance with NOP requirements.

Packaging

Packaging may occur in the field, at a facility or where a product is cleaned, canned or bagged, and given a product label, name or an identification number such as a UPC code.

Organic products are verified to make sure organic integrity has been maintained through the packaging process.

Processing

Organic crops can be processed further with other organic crops or spices.

To ensure the organic integrity of a product has been maintained, a USDA-accredited certifying agent, such as QAI, must inspect these operations to ensure that they are operating according to the NOP and certify their compliance.

Labeling

Labeling is a very important and complex part of the NOP.

How agricultural products have been handled, processed, and combined with other ingredients determines how it can be labeled organic.

100% Organic = 100% organic ingredients and processing aids

Organic = At least 95% organically produced ingredients, with the remaining % from the National List of allowed ingredients

Made with Organic Ingredients = Minimum of 70% organic content with the remaining % of allowed ingredients

Shipping

Products are shipped to distributors or to retail stores.

To ensure the continued organic integrity, products must be protected from contamination by non-organic products.

Prior to loading and unloading, trucks are verified for shipping practices that maintain this integrity, such as the prevention of commingling of organic and non-organic products and impermeable packaging.

Distribution

Products are compiled from farms, processors, or other distributors to one central location in order to distribute products.

If organic product is repackaged, perhaps to smaller sizes, QAI would confirm that organic integrity has been maintained.

Transportation

Similar to shipping, special accommodations must be in place to protect organic products from contamination.

Retail

Consumers can look for the USDA's organic seal and a certifier's mark, such as QAI's mark, to ensure that each step in the entire organic supply chain meets the NOP guidelines.