



Preparing for the Organic Inspector: Tips for First Year Applicants (and Reminders for Old-Timers) By Cheryl Bruce, VOF Certification Staff

Organic certification is about verifying that you are managing your farm to grow crops and raise livestock according to the National Organic Standards. In 2007, approximately 75 dairy farms completed their transition to organic and went through the organic certification process with Vermont Organic Farmers (VOF) for the first time, bringing the total number of certified dairy farms to just over 200. Here's what you all can expect during the certification process.

Being in transition to organic is just the first step. When you are about 6 months away from your intended date to begin shipping organic milk, you will receive your first organic certification application. Make sure you fill it out promptly so that your certification process is not delayed.

After you submit your application for certification, VOF will review and forward it to a contracted organic inspector. The organic inspector conducts an on-site inspection and a review of your record keeping to verify that the application you submitted to VOF accurately reflects your operation and is in compliance with the NOP standards. Inspections happen prior to the initial certification, then annually thereafter.

The inspector will contact you directly to schedule a time to visit

your farm. Please be prepared for the inspection to last at least 3-4 hours. A big part of certification is record keeping, so the better records you keep, the easier the process will be. The inspector will look at your cropland, paying particular attention to soil fertility and crop health, input purchases and applications, buffer areas between neighboring fields, erosion control and pasture management. Inspection of livestock production will include the animal housing and living conditions, feed production and purchase records, feed rations, and health management practices. Storage areas and farm equipment should also be accessible. Records should be readily available and organized for inspector review and may include the following:

- Three year history and signed affidavit for all new fields
- Field production logs that include crops planted, dates and rates of manure or other input applications, and harvest yields
- Current and updated farm maps with all boundaries and buffer areas
- Purchase records for all inputs (ex. lime, organic fertilizers)
- Receipts for all purchased seeds
- If untreated non-organic seed is purchased, documentation must be available that organic versions were commercially unavailable
- Untreated and/or inoculated seed labels (to verify that the product has not been treated with prohibited substances)
- Signed statements verifying neighboring landowners management practices
- Production, harvest and/or sales records for buffer crops, transitional or conventional crops
- Production and harvest records for organic forages
- Receipts and valid certificates for all organic forage purchases
- Receipts for all organic grain purchases
- Animal feed rations for the summer and winter months (the inspector will use these to calculate the percentage of dry matter animals are obtaining from pasture)

- Labels for all feed supplements (including salt/mineral blocks)
- Health care product inventory listing all products used or that may be used
- Health management records that list the date, animal(s) treated, health issue, and treatment used (including vaccinations and vet treatments)
- Animal inventory list that identifies all animals on the certified operation and documents animals entering and leaving the farm

At the end of the inspection, the inspector will conduct an exit interview with you to confirm the accuracy and completeness of his or her observations. The report will be forwarded to the VOF

office for review. VOF determines whether your operation is eligible for organic certification based on the inspector's report. At this point, you will receive a letter that outlines any requirements for certification. Requested information must be forwarded to VOF within the specified amount of time. A certificate of organic certification is issued if your operation is determined to be compliant under the NOP standards.

Please note that although annual certification inspections are scheduled with the farmer in advance, some inspections are unannounced. Surprise inspections of dairy farms will be conducted each year to check for winter outdoor access compliance, pasture quality during the grazing season and in some cases to complete full inspections, including a feed audit. Any farms that have had

complaints brought against them will have a follow up with a surprise inspection, in addition to those farms we select at random for surprise audits.

Remember that the role of the inspector is to gather on-site information and provide a report to VOF. The inspector cannot serve as an advisor or consultant. The inspector cannot make recommendations or give advice for overcoming barriers to certification. Finally, the inspector does not make the certification decision; that decision is made by VOF. The farmer can be assured that the inspector has signed both a conflict of interest and a confidentiality agreement with VOF to protect all personal business information.

If you have any questions about what is needed for the inspection, please feel free to call us at the VOF office, 802-434-4122.

