



Certifying Agent Accreditation and Agreements with Foreign Governments

The Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 (OFPA) directs the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to accredit certifying agents, which authorizes them to certify that producers and handlers representing their products as organic have complied with USDA National Organic Program (NOP) regulations. The NOP's accreditation program establishes requirements an applicant must meet to become and maintain its role as an organic certifying agent. The program is designed to ensure that all organic certifying agents act consistently and impartially. There are about 100 private and State organic certifying agents worldwide.

Applicants for accreditation must:

Employ personnel, including inspectors, with sufficient experience and training in organic production and handling to carry out certification activities.

Demonstrate their ability to certify organic producers and/or handlers; maintain proper records; adequately communicate with producers, handlers, and the public; and communicate with the NOP about their decisions.

Prevent conflicts of interest and maintain strict confidentiality.

Applicants granted accreditation must conduct annual performance appraisals of their inspectors and other personnel involved in the certification process, in addition to having an annual program evaluation of their certification activities.

Accreditation process

Certifying agents apply for accreditation to the Administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service.

The NOP evaluates the application to ensure that the certifying agent can comply with the NOP requirements, including a site evaluation at the applicant's place of business. An agent remains accredited for 5 years. Applications for renewing accreditation are due 6 months prior to expiration of the accreditation. Certifying agents must submit to the NOP annual updates on their certification activities. The NOP will conduct one or more site evaluations during the period of accreditation to determine compliance with the OFPA and NOP regulations.

Agreements with foreign governments

Certifying agents operating in foreign countries may also apply for USDA accreditation. Foreign applicants are evaluated based on the same criteria as domestic certifying agents.

In lieu of accreditation, USDA may determine that a foreign government can accredit certifying agents as meeting the requirements of the NOP. The NOP has such recognition agreements with Denmark, India, Israel, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and Japan. Further, when a country's organic standards are considered equivalent to that of the USDA, the country is authorized to market their products in the United States as organic. The same applies for U.S. products. A determination of equivalence currently exists with Canada.

The NOP also has an export arrangement with Japan and Taiwan, enabling the U.S. to export organic products and represent them as organic in those international markets.

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