



**Friends of the Earth**  
**Climate-Friendly Food**  
For Healthy Kids and a Healthy Planet

# Getting Organic Certified:

*A Guide for Farmers and Food Producers*



## School Food Service: How to Use this Guide

- Share with farmers or ranchers who may wish to become certified organic
- Learn about the organic certification process to be more informed

### Why organic?

Choosing to pursue an organic certification is a commitment to ensuring that consumers know that you are farming in a way that restores the land while protecting the people who depend on it. By building healthy soils, avoiding reliance on synthetic chemicals, and supporting biodiversity, organic systems help create more resilient farms and safer food.

At the same time, demand is growing—especially from schools and public institutions that are turning to organic food to reduce students' exposure to pesticides and to meet climate and sustainability goals. For farmers, certification is not just about meeting a standard—it's about being part of a broader shift toward a healthier food system for the next generation.

### Quick facts about organic certification

Becoming USDA Organic certified means managing your farm according to a federally defined set of practices that prioritize soil health, ecological balance, and the avoidance

of most synthetic inputs. To qualify, land must be free of prohibited substances for at least three years. Farmers create and follow an organic system plan that details management of practices, inputs, and recordkeeping. Certification is conducted by an accredited third-party certifier and includes annual inspections and ongoing compliance. The USDA Organic seal is internationally recognized, creating trust and transparency across markets.

### Get support transitioning to organic

The [Transition to Organic Partnership Program](#) supports farms and producers in transitioning from conventional production to organic production with mentorship and resources. Check out the website to be connected with an organic mentor, organic technical assistance provider, or learn about organic community events in your area. For additional in-depth information, check out the [How to Get Certified](#) page from the National Organic Program and the California Department of Food and Agriculture's [Guide to Becoming Organic](#).

## Find a certifying agent

All organic producers are certified by a third-party certifier. [California Certified Organic Farmers](#) (CCOF) and [Oregon Tilth](#) are prominent certifiers in California. Check out their websites as a great place to start, or use this [USDA resource](#) to help locate a certifying agent near you.

## Get financial support for organic practices

Programs through USDA and state agencies can help offset certification costs and support conservation practices, lowering the barrier to entry.

- Check to see if there are [cost-share opportunities](#) available to help reimburse certification costs.
- The USDA [EQIP Organic Initiative](#) provides technical and financial assistance for organic farmers and ranchers and those interested in transitioning to organic.
- Other conservation agriculture programs also support organic practices: Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP) [technical and financial assistance](#), and Farm Service Agency [programs](#).

## Certified Naturally Grown

While USDA Organic certification is a formal, legally defined system, Certified Naturally Grown (CNG) offers a lower-cost alternative based on peer review. It may be well suited for small farms that sell directly to school districts. It is grounded in organic principles and emphasizes direct relationships and community accountability.

However, because CNG relies on peer inspections rather than accredited third-party certifiers, it does not provide the same level of independent verification or supply chain oversight as USDA Organic certification. As market distance increases, this can translate into lower levels of trust and transparency, particularly where buyers lack direct relationships with producers. For this reason, CNG is generally better aligned with direct or relationship-based markets.

Visit the CNG website for more information: [5 steps to get Certified Naturally Grown](#)

CNG uses a pay-what-you-can model with a recommended fee of \$300/year. Financial assistance is available through the [Grassroots Fund](#).

