



Anatomy of a USDA Organic Certificate

An organic certificate is the ultimate currency of trust in the organic supply chain. As a certified handler, you wear two hats: you must maintain your own certificate to prove your compliance to buyers, and you must rigorously verify the certificates of your suppliers to protect your ingredients. This article breaks down the anatomy of a USDA organic certificate. It explains what a certificate looks like, how to interpret the critical dates and addendums in your suppliers' paperwork, and how to avoid the most common verification pitfalls using the Organic Integrity Database (OID).

What You'll Learn

- The dual role of organic certificates: proving your own compliance and verifying your supply chain.
- Mandatory fields on an OID-generated organic certificate and what each one means.
- The difference between Effective Date, Anniversary Date, and Issue Date.
- When to request a Certificate Addendum (Product Listing) and why the main certificate isn't enough.
- How to verify a supplier's certificate using the Organic Integrity Database (OID) and QR codes.
- Common red flags to watch for when reviewing incoming supplier documentation.

An organic certificate is a critical part of the paper trail holding your supply chain together: a verifiable and auditable record confirming that an operation has passed third-party inspection and is authorized to sell or represent its products as organic.¹

As a certified handler, you work both sides of this equation. You give your own certificate to buyers so they can legally use your ingredient in their finished organic product, and you collect certificates from every supplier selling you organic ingredients to use in your operation. Those certificates are your legal evidence that your ingredients are approved and that you are entitled to call your finished products organic.^{1,2} The organic certificate for your ingredients is one of the most important parts of your audit trail. Protect yourself by doing your homework. Five minutes up front will result in confidence in the products you produce.

Every valid organic certificate originates from one source: the USDA's Organic Integrity Database (OID), an electronic platform that generates certificates, tracks their status, and makes them publicly searchable.³ Only one operation appears on each certificate, so you'll need a separate document for every operation in your supply chain.¹

An organic certificate can consist of two parts: the main certificate and the addendum (or product listing). Certificates can be generated electronically or provided on paper. All main certificates look the same and the information contained is simple and straightforward. The addendum can look different based on the issuing certifier but will contain the informational details about the covered organic products.

“Finding who is certified organic has also gotten very easy because there is now the Organic Integrity Database that allows you to look up companies and see if they really are certified organic, download their organic certificate, see the scope of what their organic products are ... all you see is certified organic things.”

Jessica Jones
Brewer/Co-Owner
Giant Jones Brewing

VISUAL ANATOMY OF THE CERTIFICATE

Because every USDA organic certificate is generated through the OID, the format is standardized. Your receiving team can learn to recognize the key fields on sight.¹

Mandatory Elements

Every valid USDA organic certificate will contain the following information.

- **Certified Operation’s Legal Name and Address:** Operation names can closely resemble one another, so carefully check the full name and address of your supplier.
- **Certifying Agent’s Information:** The accredited third-party agency that conducted the audit (e.g., CCOF, Oregon Tilth, MOSA), including their address and contact details.
- **Relevant Dates:** The Effective Date, Issue Date, and Anniversary Date. See the “Dates on the Certificate” section below for a full breakdown.
- **Scope of Operations:** The category of production covered: Crops, Wild Crops, Livestock, or Handling.
- **Regulatory Statement:** “Certified to the USDA organic regulations, 7 CFR Part 205.”
- **Continuation Statement:** “Once certified, a production or handling operation’s organic certification continues in effect until surrendered, suspended, or revoked.” Once issued, the organic certificate does not expire, though it is updated annually by your certifier with a new issue date.
- **Traceability Link:** A unique NOP Operation ID paired with a scannable QR code that links directly to the operation’s live profile in the OID.

! WATCH OUT

Recognize fraudulent certificates! Sad to say it, but organic certificates can be faked. It is a better practice to look up a supplier’s organic certificate on the Organic Integrity Database than to rely on paper certificates.

? LEARN MORE

More information about labeling categories can be found in the articles [Product Composition - 100% Organic](#), [Organic](#), and [Made with Organic and Livestock Feed Composition and Product Formulation](#).

Certifier Name and Contact Information **Certifiers 'R Us**
 555-555-5555 - organic@certifiersrus.org
 www.certifiersrus.org
 100 E Main St.
 Anytown, IL 60000, United States of America
 certifies that

Operation Name and Contact Information **Jammy Jams**
 123-456-7890 - products@jammyjams.com
 www.jammyjams.com
 Mailing Address
 1 Organic Place
 Savannah, GA 31405, United States of America

Scope of Operations
 is certified to the USDA organic regulations, 7 CFR Part 205, for the categories of
 Crops, Handling

Once certified, a production or handling operation's organic certification continues in effect until surrendered, suspended, or revoked. Status of this certification and specific certified organic products covered may be verified at
<https://organic.ams.usda.gov/Integrity>

Regulatory Statement

Continuation Statement (No Expiration)

Traceability Links

Relevant Dates

Certifier Client ID: CRU-00123
 Certificate Number(s): XXX0000123
 NOP Operation ID: XXX0000123
 Effective Date: 01/01/2003
 Anniversary Date: 01/01/2027
 Issue Date: 7/17/2026

CERTIFIERS 'R US

ORGANIC CERTIFICATE

USDA ORGANIC

DATES ON THE CERTIFICATE

Organic certificates don't have an expiration date. Certification stays in effect until the operation surrenders it, or it is suspended, or revoked.⁴ That said, certifiers do issue a fresh certificate each year with updates about the operation's certified scope, products, and contact information. Therefore, a document that has been sitting in your file for several years doesn't tell you much about where a supplier stands today. The traceability tools on the certificate are a great way to verify the active status of your supplier for every shipment.

The certificate shows three separate dates, each with a distinct meaning:

- **Effective Date:** This is the date that the operation was first certified organic. This date rarely changes, but does so if an operation leaves certification and reenters later.
- **Anniversary Date:** The annual deadline for the operation to submit updated paperwork to their certifier.
- **Issue Date:** The date the certifier updated the content of the certificate or reissued it without changes. This is the date you will reference most as a handler.



HANDLER TIP

Industry practice is to keep a current certificate on file for all suppliers, meaning the Issue Date falls within the last 12 months. If a supplier's certificate is older than that, request a fresh copy before placing your next order.⁵

CERTIFICATE ADDENDUM

The main certificate you download from the Organic Integrity Database (OID) is a one-page summary. It confirms an operation holds a valid certification and lists broad product categories, but often leaves out the specific details you need to approve a particular ingredient.

Those details live in a separate document issued by the certifier, the **Certificate Addendum**, also called a Product Listing, Client Profile, or Operation Profile.⁶ The Addendum is where you verify that a specific product ("Diced Apricots"), its brand ("Sunrise Farms"), and its label category ("100% Organic") have all been approved as organic by the certifier.

The Addendum matters most for multi-ingredient processed products and private label arrangements showing all the details about each product. For simple raw agricultural commodities like whole apples or bulk grain, the addendum can be very simple. When a supplier is processing or co-packing, the Addendum is the document to request in addition to the organic certificate.

The Addendum is not always publicly posted. Because they can reveal proprietary product lines and private label relationships, certifiers may not load them into the OID. In those cases, request the Addendum directly from your supplier or their certifying agent. The Addendum should clearly list the brand names and organic labeling category for the specific products you are purchasing.

A valid Addendum must include the following information:⁶

- Name, address, and contact information for the certified operation;
- Certified operation's unique ID number;
- A link to the operation's profile in the OID along with a statement indicating that the certification status may be verified at the OID;
- Name, address, and contact information of the certifier;
- An issue date for the addendum.

If the Addendum does not contain the required information, that is cause for concern and a new Addendum should be requested directly from the certifier, or the supplier should be flagged for further vetting within your operation.

"Even if you can pull it out from the Organic Integrity Database, we require [the supplier] to send [their certificate] to us, and we also require them to send their product listing and brands ... We require that information so we can confirm that the products that they are trying to sell us are listed on the certificate and ... that the brands that they are intending to sell to us are included there."

Humberto Maldonado
Safety and Compliance Manager
Organically Grown Company (OGC)

USING THE OID

Every legitimate organic certificate traces back to the OID, which makes it your best verification tool.³ Paper documents and PDFs can be forged. Don't rely solely on an emailed certificate from a new supplier.

Verification takes under a minute. Scan the QR code, click the link printed on the certificate, or enter the NOP Operation ID at organic.ams.usda.gov. Check the operation's status:

- **"Certified"**: valid and active
- **"Suspended," "Revoked," or "Surrendered"**: no longer valid

Certifiers must update OID within three business days of issuing a suspension or revocation notice, or the effective date of an operation's surrender, so you can trust that this verification is up to date and timely.⁷

WATCH OUT

A mismatch between a certificate's listed scope and what a supplier is actually selling you is a red flag. If a supplier's certificate lists only strawberries under the "Crop" scope but they're delivering strawberry jam, a processed, multi-ingredient product, something doesn't add up. A crop-certified operation is not authorized to sell processed organic goods. Before placing an order with any new supplier, confirm that the scope on their certificate matches the product they're selling you.

CONCLUSION

An organic certificate is a short document, but there's a lot packed into it. Knowing what each field means, which dates matter, when to ask for the Addendum, and how to run a quick OID check will serve you every time a new supplier comes through the door. Add these steps into your receiving process now, before the first order shows up.

ACTION ITEMS

- For each active organic supplier, confirm you have their current certificate on file and, where applicable, their Certificate Addendum (Product Listing).
- Look up each supplier in the [Organic Integrity Database](#) using their QR code or NOP Operation ID and confirm their status shows "Certified."
- Flag any supplier certificate where the listed scope does not match the type of product they are selling you. Follow up!
- Once certified, pull your own current organic certificate and verify information is accurate.
- Contact your certifier if the Issue Date is over 12 months old.
- Verify your Certificate Addendum lists all of your products, each in the correct labeling category.

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United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program

