

Choosing and Working with a Certifier

Lynne Haynor (00:23):

The primary role of any organic certification agency is going to be to verify the compliance or noncompliance of the folks who are certified with them or applying for certification. But they cannot give you all the answers. You may have to figure some things out using the information that they provide.

Humberto Maldonado (00:44):

They can also be a resource and help you to understand the organic regulations. Even when you are the expert in your operation, they can help you to see how to apply the organic standards without falling into conflict of interest.

Ellen Rawley (00:58):

All certifiers are certifying to the same standard. That's just important to remember. So the certifiers aren't deciding what you do or do not have to do as an operation. That's being set by the standards. That's part of the USDA NOP framework.

Johanna Phillips (01:22):

There are about, I would say, 72 certification agencies that are accredited. I would encourage some exploratory work across a few different certification agencies because that initial experience is going to give that operation a pretty good sense of what their experience is going to be.

Humberto Maldonado (01:41):

Selecting a certifier is a very important thing. You should consider a number of factors. The first one for me, it's the reputation of your certifier. Because even when all of them are approved by the USDA, not all of them have the same reputation.

Jessica Jones (02:00):

It is a relationship that you will be in for a long time. Think about it like dating, because if you don't find them pleasant to work with and ask questions of, it is not going to be a positive relationship. So if you find the dynamic off for your personal style, try a different one.

Abel Sanchez-Valencia (02:25):

When it comes to choosing your organic certifier, my recommendation would be to go with somebody that is local. You can always call, but there's nothing quite like face-to-face. And it's helped out a lot based on my own personal experience.

Jessica Jones (02:38):



We chose MOSA as our organic certifier because they are local, because they're connected out to our community and the place that we're living. They are the certifiers of most of our colleagues that are doing organic farming. And so it was just a very natural choice for us.

Ellen Rawley (02:58):

And if you're going to, for example, put a sign up at your farmer's market that you're certified organic by whichever certifier, it might be nice to have the certifier's logo that is highly regarded and highly recognized in your state.

Johanna Phillips (03:19):

Because there are options in the marketplace, it has created a dynamic where there's a customer service model in certification. And so if you reach out to the certifier, are they going to be responsive to your questions? Are they responsive to you submitting label revisions or formulation changes in the timeline that you need as a business? Some certifiers, you know, they might have a one to two month timeline for reviewing something. Whereas other certification agencies might have a 72-hour policy or have the ability to expedite.

Nate Powell-Palm (03:55):

So as you're thinking about what your priority is, is it getting certified as cheaply as possible, but it's fairly simple operation, so you don't need high levels of expertise in the handling department? Then one of these regional certifiers is going to be great. If you need labels every few weeks, and you need them printed tomorrow, and you need that kind of customer service where you care that you're going to get a call back within a few hours, and it's going to be by someone who can answer all of your questions, you might look to some of these larger certifiers who have more robust handling departments.

Ellen Rawley (04:28):

Because that's really the piece that's going to be quite different. Since everyone is certifying to the same standard, it's really what's the process working with that specific certifier? So some certifiers have online portals that you're supposed to upload your documentation to if you're going to add a new product for them to review. Others, you have a specific contact that you just email or call. Like, it depends how professional or kind of personal you want that kind of system of working with your certifier to be.

Jessica Jones (05:07):

If you're interested in becoming an organic handler, find certifiers that have worked with your industry before that have done similar scope things. They will have more reference points for working with you. And be in contact with them as early as possible.

Johanna Phillips (05:22):

There are some nuances in certification. Depending on what your production category is, you may encounter some really frustrating challenges in the space of interpretation. So really evaluating what



certification agency has strengths in the area of production that you're looking to work in and has experience with the type of products that you are producing.

Jessica Jones (05:46):

So there are two certified organic breweries in Illinois and MOSA was their certifier. So partly we said, "Cool. They know how to work with a brewery." Relevant industry knowledge is great qualification for your certifier.

Lynne Haynor (06:00):

So there are a number of tools for looking into certifiers and seeing if they fit your needs. One is looking at the Organic Integrity Database certifier locator, doing a search based on certified products, and seeing things that are similar to yours. If you make barbecue sauce and you want to look for other folks who make different types of sauces, you may be able to do a search in the Organic Integrity Database. If you're a livestock feed processor, you can look in the Organic Integrity Database for that. And so you can see who certifies what type of operations.

Nate Powell-Palm (06:39):

Certifiers, depending on the certifier, might charge you a flat fee based on your sales, or they might charge you a percentage of sales. So I would say the biggest companies I've seen are probably \$50,000. And that's usually doing over \$50 million of sales. And so there usually will be a ceiling. As we look to the mid-size companies, I think that usually you can say that spending anywhere between \$3,000 and \$10,000.

Johanna Phillips (07:06):

Typically, least cost, obviously going to get you the least expensive certification process, but it may not get you the most supported certification process, because that certifier may be operating with few resources to help that operation succeed in certification. So I would not consider a least cost certifier to be a good option for someone who has no experience in organic certification, for example. That might be a good option for someone who has a really, really solid team of experienced people. They really just are looking for that third party validation process and the cost component is really important to them.

Genevieve Albers (07:42):

You know, I hear some people complaining about the expense of organic, and I think that comes from the presumption that it's sort of a one and done, you know, that organic is just something that you pay for <laugh> and then it's just done and you just carry it. Rather than sort of baking it into the whole process, making it part of the business plan, part of the budget. You know, it's an ongoing, constantly evolving process.

Jessica Jones (08:10):

Your organic certifier is there to work with you to help improve our organic systems. They are a part of it, you are part of it. It is not an antagonistic thing. It is a partnership and a relationship.



Michael Gutschenritter (08:24):

You might have a dozen inspectors or 20 inspectors throughout your business's life, but you will generally have one or two points of contact within the certification organization. So, build that relationship. And that doesn't mean taking them out to dinner. It means sending them emails with questions. In fact, just last night at 10 o'clock, I wrote to my connection asking a certain question about recording, and he wrote back at, at 7:00 this morning and said, "Hey, thanks for asking this. Great question." So just become friends with them, you know?

Chad Olson (09:00):

When in doubt, shout it out. You know, just tell them, "Hey, I'm telling you this. Should I?" <laugh> Any changes you make, let them know right away. You know, we ran out of this bag. We're going to have to use this bag and put another sticker on it. Tell them right away. They want to see it. They want to approve it before you use it. If you change a process, it's the same.

Jessica Jones (09:31):

Also recently added a storage unit. Before we signed the lease and started using it, we had told our certifier the year before that, "Oh, we're going to have this extra space." And so it's just really good practice to just be in constant casual communication with your certifier, because then everything just flows really easily and it builds trust on both sides. Because like everything else, it's just a relationship. It's a relationship with rules, but it's a relationship.

Nate Powell-Palm (10:02):

Whatever the certifier stamps as approved, you are golden. You are good to go. People get in trouble when they get ahead of the certifier, and because they don't have the expertise, end up making either purchase decisions, or labeling decisions, or formulation decisions that for some reason aren't compliant. And then the certifier tells them after the fact and they've lost a bunch of money because they've already executed it.

Michael Gutschenritter (10:24):

This whole industry wants you to succeed. The only reason that you won't succeed is because you are not communicating your needs, you're not asking questions, or you don't have records to show what you've done.

Lynne Haynor (10:39):

Ask for permission rather than ask for forgiveness I think is a good way to approach organic certification. But more than that, it is about building a relationship. And that's how you're going to learn what it is that you need to know as you're starting on this, you know, new journey as a certified organic handler.

