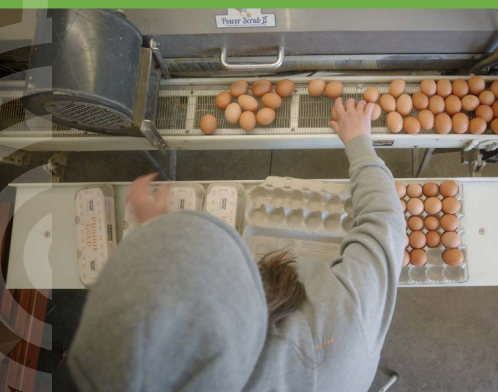




# Who Governs Organic

As you begin navigating organic certification, it's worth getting acquainted with two key players who shape and safeguard the USDA organic regulations: the National Organic Program (NOP) and the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB). Who are they, how did they come to be, and what role do they play? Together, the NOP and NOSB help steward the organic regulations, including the process of updating them over time. Since their original implementation, the organic requirements have continued to evolve — expanded and clarified to keep pace with a changing organic marketplace and to provide greater consistency for producers and handlers alike. This article will walk through how that regulatory update process works and offer guidance on staying current with future changes.



## What You'll Learn

- Historical events leading to the Organic Foods Production Act, which established the NOP and NOSB
- The roles of the NOP and NOSB
- How organic regulations change over time
- How to stay informed

Every house is only as strong as its foundation, and while organic farmers and handlers are the heart of organic, organic certification rests upon a substructure laid out by the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) of 1990. Let's look at how OFPA came to be and what it created.

## HISTORY OF ORGANIC CERTIFICATION IN THE U.S.

The USDA organic regulations underpin the only federally backed marketing claim for organic food sold in the United States. Rewind 50 years, though, and you would have encountered a very different organic scene. In the 1960s and 70s, there was growing public outcry over pesticide use in the wake of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which exposed the negative environmental impacts of pesticides like DDT<sup>1</sup> and led to public demand for pesticide-free food. The blossoming environmental movement embraced organic food and its restrictions on synthetic pesticide usage, and various organizations established their own organic standards and certification programs.<sup>2</sup>

While there was overlap between those diverse standards, there were also inconsistencies, which created problems for the growing organic marketplace.<sup>2</sup> Many advocated that a universal, regulated set of standards was needed for organic to thrive and, in 1990, Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA).<sup>2,3</sup> OFPA created the USDA organic regulations and two important groups: the National Organic Program (NOP) and the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB).<sup>2,3</sup> The USDA organic regulations were implemented in 2002, and have been updated in the years since.

# Timeline of Organic Certification

The environmental movement increased demand for organic food. Various organic certification programs developed.

1960's/70's

The National Organic Standards were implemented in 2002.

2002

1990

The Organic Foods Production Act passed by Congress established the National Organic Program (NOP), National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), and the USDA organic regulations.

The work continues

Organic regulations continue to be developed to address organic needs.

## ROLES OF THE NOP AND NOSB

The NOP and NOSB work together to develop regulations and protect organic integrity, but have very different roles to play. Let's dive in and learn more.

### The NOP

The NOP is part of the USDA and is nested under the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) agency.

The NOP fulfills three primary functions:<sup>4</sup>

1. **Develops standards** with input from the NOSB and the public and issues guidance, instructions, policy memos, and other documents;<sup>5</sup>
2. **Enforces compliance**, including investigating complaints and pursuing administrative and judicial proceedings that can lead to the loss of certification;<sup>6</sup>
3. **Accredits certifiers** who inspect and certify organic operations, with nearly 80 certifiers (in 2026) operating in the United States overseen by the NOP.<sup>7</sup>

### ? LEARN MORE

To learn more about the role of certifiers and inspectors and the certification process, see [Certification Process Overview](#).

Whether analyzing data on imports to look for fraud risk, auditing certifiers to ensure they are meeting organic requirements, or working through complex regulatory updates, **the NOP is where the buck stops on protecting the organic seal.**



## The NOSB

The NOSB is made up of 15 volunteers from the organic community, each appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.<sup>8</sup> Seats are organized by category, representing Organic Producers, Scientists, Environmental Protection and Resource Conservation, Organic Handlers/Processors, Organic Certifying Agents, Retailers, and Public Interest or Consumer Groups.<sup>9</sup>

As an advisory group, the NOSB has two primary responsibilities:

1. **Meeting publicly** to discuss work agenda items, vote on proposals, and make recommendations to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture — recommendations that can include rulemaking.<sup>8,10</sup> Information about upcoming NOSB meetings is published on the NOP's website.
2. **Making recommendations** regarding the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances.<sup>11,12</sup>

It's worth noting that this is an unpaid volunteer role, and one that demands many hours of discussion and preparation. The organic community owes real gratitude to NOSB members for their selfless work in protecting organic integrity.

### LEARN MORE

To learn more about the National List and how it will impact you as a handler, see:

- [Pest Management in Organic Handling](#)
- [Allowed Materials for Cleaning and Sanitizing](#)
- [Navigating the National List for Allowed Ingredients and Processing Aids](#)

## CHANGES TO THE USDA ORGANIC REGULATIONS OVER TIME

You may have heard the old adage “the only constant is change.” The organic regulations are no exception! They haven't remained preserved as they were first envisioned in 1990, but have been updated to clarify language and add new requirements.<sup>13</sup> Proposals for rule updates come from multiple places, including the organic community, discussions at NOSB meetings, or directly from the NOP. They must go through a rigorous process to become regulation, which includes a notice of proposed rulemaking, request for public comment, and analysis of those comments before being published as a final rule.<sup>13</sup>

There are many examples of rule updates that have occurred since 2002. One major update that you will likely hear about as you enter the organic industry is called Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE).<sup>14</sup> SOE was designed, in the NOP's words, to “protect organic integrity and bolster consumer confidence” by requiring more of the organic supply chain to be certified, requiring the use of import certificates, and strengthening recordkeeping and traceability, among other important updates.<sup>15</sup> For many handlers, the implementation of SOE brought welcome change.

### HANDLER TIP

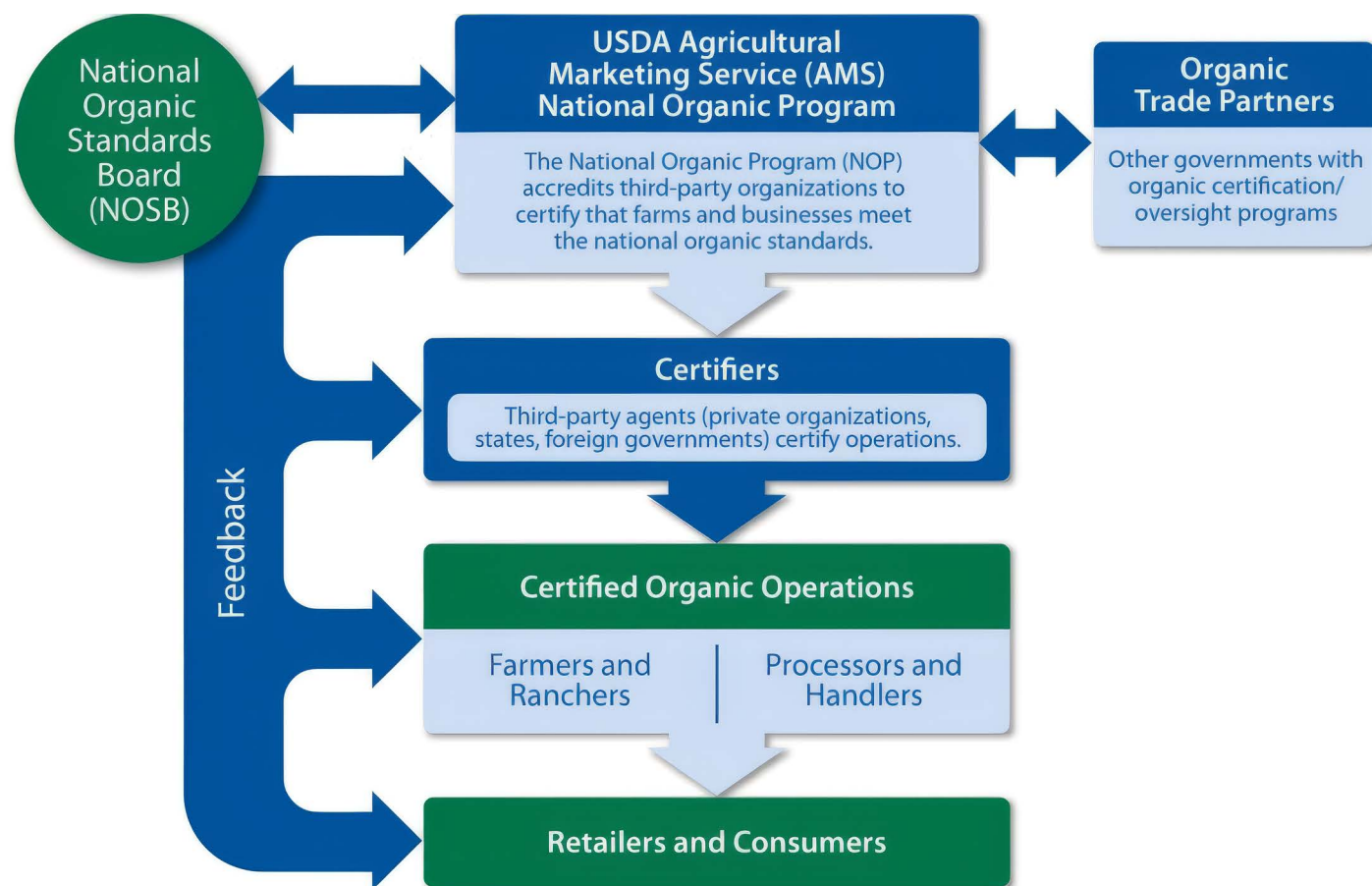
Want to stay on top of communication from the National Organic Program, including about any upcoming changes? Sign up for the [Organic Insider](#) e-newsletter.

*“SOE is the greatest thing to happen to organic certification since organic certification. It has made things more accountable and less paperwork burden on handlers and producers.”*

**Jessica Jones**  
Brewer/Co-Owner  
Giant Jones Brewing

Updating the organic regulations is a team effort and it is built upon not only the efforts of the NOSB and the NOP but also through stakeholder engagement, from certifiers, certified operations, the public, and consumers.

## National Organic Program Stakeholder Map<sup>16</sup>



## CONCLUSION

As of August 2026, there are over 14,000 handlers certified to the USDA organic regulations in the United States alone, with many more located overseas. The certified organic offerings are diverse, from pea protein to seed handling, essential oils to pickles, livestock feed to wine, and importing to warehousing.<sup>17</sup> This broad organic industry is upheld by the organic regulations first set down in the OFPA, which established two important organic guardians: the NOP and the NOSB.<sup>2,3</sup> While these defenders and stewards of organic aren't likely to make an appearance during your annual certification process, they serve as the foundation organic certification is built upon, and their work will interface with yours. Whether it is through the development of new regulations or in recommended changes to the National List, staying informed on their work will help your business foresee what may be on the horizon for organic.

## ACTION ITEMS

- Sign up for the [Organic Insider](#) to stay informed!

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United States Department of Agriculture  
Agricultural Marketing Service  
National Organic Program

