



Why Get Certified in Organic Handling?

Handlers pursue and maintain organic certification for a range of reasons, and while many businesses follow similar procedures and processes to get there, the motivations behind certification can vary from one business to the next. Each business brings its own mix of values, priorities, and market considerations to the decision. Perhaps there's one benefit that speaks most clearly to you, but you may discover additional benefits you haven't considered. You also may not have thought through all of the potential costs associated with organic certification. This article explores the benefits and costs of organic certification so you can take an inventory for your business.



What You'll Learn

- Benefits and costs of organic certification, including handlers' perspectives
- The two main reasons handlers pursue organic certification, and why the reason you start isn't always the reason you stay
- How traceability requirements can be a benefit to your business
- Costs of certification beyond the application fee: time, ingredient sourcing, and change management
- How the Organic Certification Cost Share Program can offset your certification fees

Why pursue certification? Since certification is required for many handlers, the more useful question is often what you hope to gain beyond compliance. The answer may look different for every business, but two primary types of motivations commonly draw people toward organic certification: the choice is often values-based or market-driven. In practice, the reason you first became certified isn't always the reason you stay certified — many businesses uncover additional benefits once certification is up and running as part of their operations. With that in mind, let's look at both the costs and the benefits, so you can weigh the practical tradeoffs for your business.



Benefits:

Supports values of business
Supports values of customers
Access to markets
Trusted label
Price premiums
Traceability
Supports good business practices
Counted as organic



Costs:

Money
Time
Change management

BENEFITS OF CERTIFICATION

The benefits of certification can expand market opportunities for processors/co-packers and add value to existing product lines that choose to offer a certified organic version. Price received in the market isn't automatically tied to certification — realizing a pricing benefit typically depends on a well-developed business model built around it. While the possibility of better pricing, or simply doing what feels right, may be the first things that come to mind as reasons to become organic, there are other advantages to organic certification worth considering.

Supports the Values of Your Business

Organic certification can speak to many different types of value systems. It is touted as good for the environment, good for people and animals, and good for rural communities among other things.^{1,2} Whatever your interests, you may already know that your company's values lead you to organic. As organic handler Rich Fowles of Scratch and Peck states, "We are founded on a vision that's all about health to our bodies, health to our animals, and health to the planet, and that is just central to who we are."

Supports the Values of Your Customers

If you know your customer base values organic products, that can be a motivation to choose certification. Younger consumers, in particular, are invested in values-based approaches to purchasing.³ Certain product types are also purchased with values in mind, when possible. Consider a product like baby food. Market data might point you to organic certification to support parents looking to provide the best possible option for their children.⁴

Other types of businesses work with a variety of types of clients, and aim to support both organic and non-organic clientele. As Lynn Clarkson of Clarkson Grain Company noted, "My company is not strictly organic. We have an organic segment and we have a conventional segment ... [When] we're talking to clients, it's not our business to tell them their values. It's our business to learn their values and try to support those values responsibly."

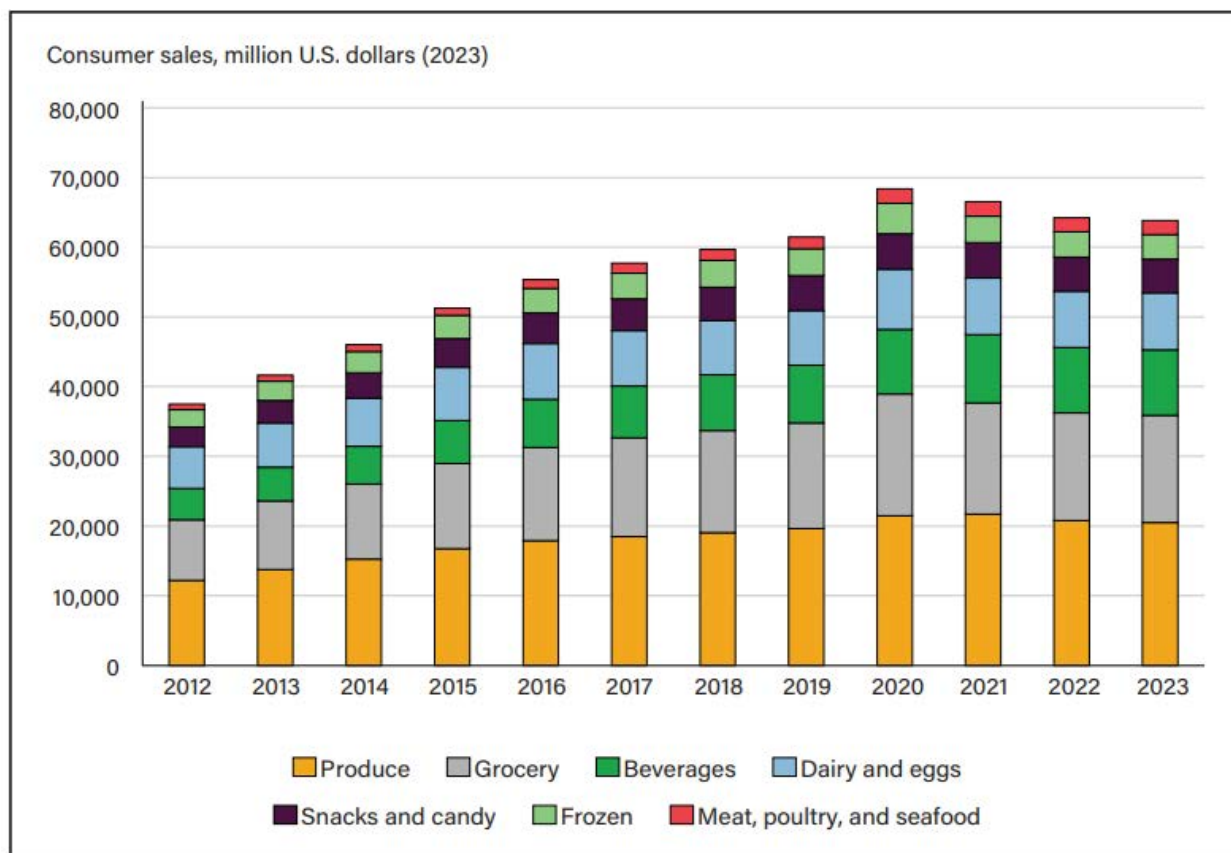


If a customer approaches your business wondering if you would consider organic certification, this can be an entry point. Take the example of Sailer's Meat Processing, who began processing organically at the request of a customer. Kaylee Pickering noted, "I also think being organic shows how much you care about your products and your customers and that you're willing to be honest and show your integrity and produce a quality product that people are going to enjoy and talk about."

Access to Markets

In 2025, certified organic product sales in the United States reached \$76.6 billion with an annual growth rate of 6.8%, which doubled the rate of comparable markets.³ This isn't isolated to 2025. USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) reports that "from 2012–2023 the compounded annual rate of inflation-adjusted organic retail sales was more than 7%."⁵ Additionally, export markets exist for USDA organic products and the USDA has organic equivalency arrangements with governments around the world.⁶ Of course, it is important to research the organic market for your specific product and consider your opportunities.

Organic Food Retail Sales, 2012-2023⁵



Jessica Jones of Giant Jones Brewing always envisioned the brewery as an organic business, and certification has opened doors to specific market opportunities, "Whole Foods just picked up our beer for Wisconsin and the Chicago markets because it's certified organic ... There are places where organic certification gives you the entry."



Trusted Label in the Marketplace

The Organic Trade Association reports that 70% of customers trust the USDA organic seal, making it the most trusted of any agricultural label.⁷ The USDA organic regulations are the foundation for a government-backed program, and any product displaying the organic seal has been verified to meet a universal set of standards.⁸ This creates brand differentiation for organic compared to products with unregulated label claims that clients may not understand or trust. The organic seal can make it simple for consumers to pick from competing options and stick with organic.⁹

As Mike Dill of the Organically Grown Company puts it, “There’s not a lot of space in a produce aisle of a grocery store ... You have a conventional and you have organic ... But the one that stands out is always the USDA seal. And without being certified, we wouldn’t have that ... So without certification, I don’t think we’d be in business right now.”

Price Premiums



While price premiums can vary by product and year, they can represent a huge benefit to organic companies.^{10,11} It is wise to plan for variation and make contingency plans, but for some operations like Janie’s Mill, organic is the path to a successful business model because of the price premiums organic enjoys. As Harold Wilken of Janie’s Mill puts it, “I can’t see starting a food company in this day and age that isn’t organic ... Organic does pay the bills.”

Traceability

A big part of organic certification is the requirement for traceability from seed to shelf, ensuring organic integrity throughout the supply chain.^{1,8,12} At first glance, this might not seem like a benefit to your company but let’s look at a couple of angles: how it impacts ingredient verification, and how it helps you tell your company story to your customers.

- **Ingredient Verification:** Yes, it’s true, as an organic handler you need to maintain detailed records to play your part in tracing ingredients from farm to store.⁸ And this means your organic suppliers do too, and should be able to easily supply whatever documentation organic verification you require. In addition, the USDA AMS maintains a website called the [Organic Integrity Database](#)¹³ that lists all certified organic suppliers. When sourcing organic ingredients, you know these ingredients have been vetted and are what they say they are.
- **Building Trust and Telling Your Story:** Consumers also benefit from this transparency. When you can trace back your product to your suppliers, you can connect with customers in a new way. They can trust in your supply chain.

“Once you can track everything from farm to family, you have the ability to connect the two of them and to tell the stories about the farms to the consumers.”

Bob Wills
Owner
Cedar Grove Cheese

Supports Good Business Practices

Not only do the records required for organic traceability allow you to breathe easier during ingredient verification or better tell your story to your customers, they also support you in developing and maintaining good business practices. Your business can benefit from meeting many organic requirements. Does it benefit you to have clear procedures, keep organized and auditable records, and develop systems to track ingredients and balance outbound sales against inbound shipments?^{12,14} You bet! What about creating a pest control plan that starts with prevention and monitoring to avoid pest control problems?¹⁵ Another win! Can oversight from an inspection each year point out areas of improvement for your business?¹⁶ Sure can!

Organic handlers reflect on how meeting organic requirements has benefited their businesses:

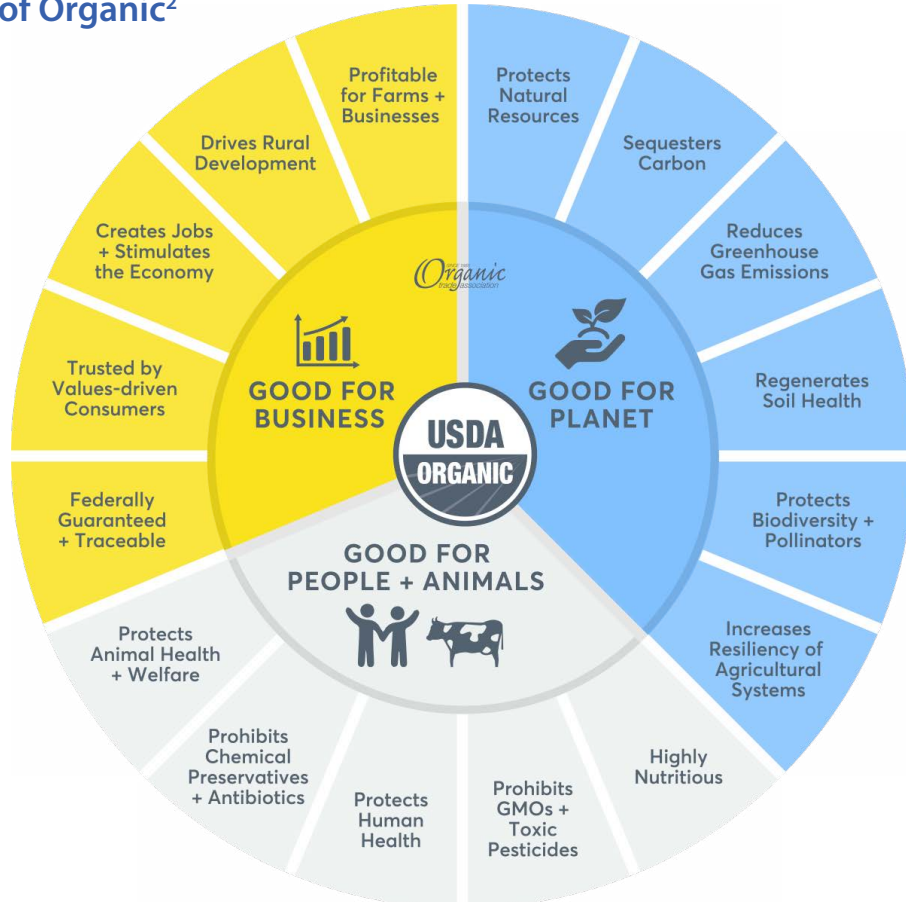
"I probably wouldn't have actually written down all of my SOPs in such a good way if I hadn't been responsible for filing them with my certifier ... I would be the most chaotic version of myself. But instead, I'm this wonderful organized brewer." Jessica Jones, Giant Jones Brewing

"I think it's really basic business practices. So the recordkeeping that organic requires, most of it is records that you want to keep no matter what ... these are all basic records that any business should be keeping. The only difference with organic is that they require it." Mike Dill, Organically Grown Company

Counted as Organic

When you certify, you register your organic practices officially and become counted as part of the organic community. This enables you to be listed in the [Organic Integrity Database](#)¹³ and enables you to be counted when tracking organic sector growth or doing organic market research. It may influence legislative or funding priorities and can, at times, provide access to specific grants or programs.

Benefits of Organic²



COSTS OF CERTIFICATION

We have explored many benefits of organic certification, but what are the potential costs? They are real and important to consider for your business.

Financial Cost

- **Certification Fees:** Organic certification costs money. Becoming certified and staying certified requires paying annual inspection and certification fees. This cost is going to vary by certifier and is one consideration when [Selecting the Right Certifier for You](#). Fortunately, the [Organic Certification Cost Share Program](#) provides cost share assistance. As of August 2026, you can recoup 75% of certification costs, up to \$750 per scope of certification.¹⁷ So, if you are certified as both a handler and a crop producer, the maximum reimbursement for you would be \$1,500.
- **Ingredient Costs:** While you may sell products for higher prices due to organic premiums, you will also likely have higher ingredient costs. This may impact your product formulations and business plans.
- **Changes to Processes:** To obtain organic certification, you may need to make changes to processes throughout your facility depending on your current practices, and some changes incur additional costs. For example, some businesses will need to make changes to their sanitation or pest control plans and inputs. Labels will need to be updated to meet organic requirements. Consider all potential costs as you evaluate the changes you will need to make to become organic compliant.

Time

We've all heard the expression "time is money," and it can be hard to separate out these two potential costs. It is important to think about how the time needed to develop and implement your Organic System Plan factors in as a cost. For example, some businesses require significant staff time to work through the certification process. Or some processes that will be updated to protect organic integrity at your operation, like performing a changeover cleaning on equipment used for both organic and nonorganic processing, will add time to your processing schedule. All time costs will need to be considered and accounted for to avoid unpleasant surprises.

Change Management

It's no secret that not everyone thrives on change and learning new ways of doing things. But if you opt to pursue organic certification, you will need to dive in. The learning curve can feel steep, and it will require an investment in staff training and culture development so everyone is on team organic. Making changes won't be a one-time cost, but the start of a process of ongoing optimization. Take it from organic handler Michelle Pusateri of Nana Joes Granola, "It has been a journey ... And year over year we're just getting better and better with our recordkeeping because we're learning and we're also taking that initiative to really up our game."

Luckily, you won't be alone on this journey should you choose organic certification. This guide will support your journey each step of the way.

LEARN MORE

There are limited exemptions to certification for certain types of operations who perform low-risk activities.^{18,19} Operations who are exempt may still opt into and benefit from certification. To learn more about exemptions, see [Who is Required to be Certified as an Organic Handler?](#)

CONCLUSION

It is a fact that organic certification may not be for everybody. You will need to analyze your business's capacity and market considerations to make the right choice for you. There are a lot of benefits to organic certification that can improve your business practices and your bottom line. There are also costs to consider. As you think about the next steps for your business, consider these words of wisdom from organic handler, farmer, and expert Nate Powell-Palm, "Who has thrived in certified organic? It's companies who said, 'I see that this is a long-term investment, and I'm willing to make the long-term investment in my company to participate.'"

ACTION ITEMS

- Look deeply at what you see as costs and benefits of organic certification for your business.
- Do your homework and consider your markets. How will the organic seal impact your sales?
- Verify your costs, updating your numbers as you learn more.

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United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program

