

# WSDA ORGANIC PROGRAM UPDATE

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The organic industry is built on a foundation of farmers tending diverse acreage. While the overall organic industry has grown steadily over the years, recent USDA statistics have shown that the number of certified farms in the US has plateaued. The statistic has not gone unnoticed and efforts are underway to address this trend and to ensure organic certification remains a viable alternative to conventional agriculture.

## LESS TIME AT THE DESK

The National Organic Program (NOP) acknowledges that the paperwork burdens of certification may play a role in whether a farmer chooses to become certified. Under the auspices of "Sound and Sensible," NOP has begun to implement measures to streamline the certification process while maintaining organic integrity, as described by the program in the passage below. At WSDA, we continually look at our own processes and have taken the NOP's "Sound and Sensible" initiative as even greater incentive to improve our services. We look forward to continuing to serve the farmers of WA State in the best way possible and growing the organic community in our state.

Consumers purchase organic products expecting that they maintain their organic integrity from farm to market. Under the USDA organic rules, organic farmers must demonstrate they are protecting the environment, supporting animal health and welfare, and producing their products without the use of prohibited substances (<http://blogs.usda.gov/2011/12/16/organic-101-what-organic-farming-and-processing-doesn%E2%80%99t-allow/>).

However, farmers have reported spending more time completing forms and maintaining records. A certain amount of records are essential to ensure organic farmers are meeting the organic standards, such as planting non-genetically modified seeds or raising dairy cattle on organic pasture. But, too much focus on paperwork can detract from farming activities that support organic principles, such as conservation and cycling of resources. To address this, the National Organic Program (NOP) initiated a program aimed at helping reduce the paperwork and other burdensome aspects of organic certification while maintaining high standards, ensuring compliance, and protecting organic integrity.

The 'Sound and Sensible' initiative (<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5103512>) involves identifying and removing barriers to certification, streamlining the certification process, focusing enforcement, and working with farmers and processors to correct small issues before they become larger ones. The overall goal of this new initiative is to make organic certification accessible, attainable, and affordable for all operations.

## "SOUND AND SENSIBLE" PRINCIPLES

When developing this initiative, we outlined five guiding principles. The first is *efficient processes*, eliminating bureaucratic processes that do not contribute to organic integrity. Secondly, we are working to *streamline record keeping* to ensure that required records support organic integrity and are not a barrier for farms and businesses to maintain organic compliance. Thirdly, we are asking for *practical plans, or straightforward Organic System Plans* that clearly capture organic practices. The fourth principle is *fair, focused enforcement*. We plan to focus enforcement on willful violators, handle minor violations in a way that leads to compliance, and publicize how enforcement protects the organic market. Finally, as always, we *put integrity first* by focusing on factors that impact organic integrity the most, building consumer confidence that organic products meet defined standards from farm to market.

The NOP has a number of projects underway to introduce 'Sound and Sensible' principles related to organic certification. For example, organic certification requires farmers to support biodiversity and conserve natural resources. Some farmers also participate in conservation programs through NRCS. Due to their compatible objectives, the NOP is collaborating with NRCS to streamline participation in both programs. We are also working on a project focused on identifying the key barriers to organic certification encountered by small businesses, and determining paths forward for removing these barriers.

Organic certification ensures the integrity of organic products around the world, and this initiative will make sure the process is accessible, attainable, and affordable for all.



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# ORGANIC

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**Celebrating 25 years of dedication to organic integrity through certification and outreach, the WSDA Organic Program is proud to be a member of the organic community in Washington State.**

**Come join us!**



*The WSDA Organic Food Program protects organic integrity through inspections, audits, sampling and enforcement.*

