

ORGANIC REGULATIONS FOR WASHINGTON AND THE UNITED STATES

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The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) has certified organic farms since 1988. The WSDA Organic Food Program (OFP) mission is to protect consumers and support the development of the organic food industry by ensuring the integrity of organic food products. The OFP establishes organic standards and certifies organic producers, processors and handlers. The OFP also provides technical information about organic food production and assists in the development of markets for the organic food industry.

GROWTH IN THE ORGANIC FOOD INDUSTRY

In 1988, the first year of the WSDA OFP, there were 63 certified organic farms producing 2.5 million dollars worth of organic food. In 2000, WSDA certified 518 farms that produced over 100 million dollars worth of organic food products. In addition, 101 processors and 113 handlers were certified by the department to process, pack and distribute organic food products. Organic food is an important export commodity, with an estimated \$20 million in exports in 1999.

According to the Hartman Report (1997) the market for organic food products will continue to expand. The majority of Americans will preferentially buy organic and other eco-labeled food products as long as the core purchase criteria of price, taste, quality, convenience and availability are met. A significant segment of American consumers are also willing to pay a premium for organic food products. Natural food superstores are the fastest growing segment of the retail food industry and will provide additional market outlets for organic foods.

ORGANIC AGRICULTURE

The National Organic Standards Board defines organic agriculture as “an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances bio-diversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain, and enhance ecological harmony. 'Organic' is a labeling term that denotes products produced under the authority of the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990.”

ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

Certified organic means that an independent, third party has verified that all the requirements of organic crop production, processing and handling have been met. In Washington State, all producers who sell organic crops must be certified unless they sell less than \$5,000 worth of product; and sell direct to the consumer (e.g., farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, or on-farm sales).

HANDLING AND PACKING ORGANIC FRUIT

The two primary requirements for handling organic fruit are maintaining the identity of organic food and preventing contamination with post-harvest chemicals. Organic food is identical in appearance to non-organic food. Bin tags, labels, scale tickets, and lot control documents must clearly identify the food as organic. Clear and consistent labeling prevents inadvertent misidentification or commingling by employees. Handlers of organic food must demonstrate that they have procedures in place to maintain the identity and segregation of organic food at all times.

Prior to packing organic fruit the packing line must be thoroughly cleaned. All process water used in dump tanks and flumes must be potable and meet Safe Drinking Water Act standards. Approved natural biologicals may be added to the water (e.g. Bio-Save, Aspire). Approved acids include acetic, ascorbic and citric acids (must be naturally derived). Phosphoric and hydrochloric acid are prohibited. The WSDA OFP allows biodegradable cleansers in process water as long as they are on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) List 4 and followed by a potable water rinse. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Organic Program (NOP) prohibits synthetic biodegradable cleansers in process water.

Chlorine compounds include calcium hypochlorite, sodium hypochlorite and chlorine dioxide. Under WSDA organic standards, chlorine compounds are allowed to sanitize food contact surfaces. Quaternary ammonia based sanitizers are prohibited. Dump tank water, flume water and water used to wash organic food products may contain chlorine compounds up to 50 ppm free chlorine. If chlorine is used in dump tanks it must be followed by a potable water rinse. The NOP prohibits chlorine in dump tanks, flume water or wash water. Ligno-sulfonates and sodium silicate are approved by WSDA and NOP as floating agents. Natural waxes such as carnauba wax are approved under WSDA and NOP standards.

BINS AND BOXES

Organic fruit must be clearly designated as organic on all bins, boxes and other containers that contain organic fruit. Bins and other containers must either be new, used for organic fruit only, lined with food grade plastic, or thoroughly cleaned (e.g., soap and water or pressure wash).

PROCESSED ORGANIC FOOD

Processed organic food is food that is organically grown and has not been treated with artificially derived preservatives, colorings, flavorings or other artificial additives. Processed organic foods that have both organic and non-organic ingredients have specific labeling restrictions on the use of the term “organic.”

CURRENT REGULATORY FRAMEWORK IN THE UNITED STATES

Twenty-six states have legislation pertaining to the labeling of organic food. There are 44 organic certification agencies in the United States, 34 private agencies and 10 state certification programs. States with organic certification programs include Maryland, Kentucky, Colorado, Iowa, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Nevada, Idaho and Washington. Most organic certification is conducted by private organic certification agencies. The largest organic certification agencies are California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), Oregon Tilth (OTCO), Quality Assurance International (QAI), and the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA).

U.S. STANDARDS - USDA NATIONAL ORGANIC PROGRAM (NOP)

In 1990 Congress passed the Organic Food Production Act. Now, more than 10 years later, the NOP is being implemented. On December 20, 2000 the final rules were published in the Federal Register. The rules become effective on February 21, 2001 and will be implemented over the next 18 months.

The NOP establishes national standards for the organic production and handling of agricultural products, and includes a National List of synthetic substances approved for organic production and handling. It establishes an accreditation program for State and private organic certification programs to be accredited to certify organic crops, livestock, and handling operations that comply with the program's requirements. The International Standards Organization Guide 65 (ISO 65) is a major component of the accreditation system. The WSDA OFP is currently ISO 65 accredited.

EUROPEAN ORGANIC STANDARDS

Europe is a significant export market for Washington organic food products, especially organic apples and pears. European organic standards are governed by the European Union but implemented by the member countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. European organic standards are similar to United States standards, though they have specific restrictions that are not part of U.S. standards. These additional restrictions include a prohibition on the use of sodium nitrate, antibiotics for fire blight control, and animal manure from factory farms. Exports to the European Union must be accompanied by an export certificate that verifies these additional requirements have been met.

In 1999, new European Union regulations (EN 45011) became effective that required U.S. shippers of organic products to use an organic certifier that is accredited to the ISO 65 standards. The WSDA OFP obtained ISO 65 accreditation from USDA in 1999 so that exports of organic products could continue.

REFERENCES

Hartman, H. 1997. The Hartman Report. Food and the Environment: A Consumer's Perspective. The Food Alliance. Portland, Oregon.