



**Certification Excellence Since 1987**



# **A Helpful Guide to USDA Organic Certification**

An overview of the USDA organic certification process, helpful resources,  
and information about working with Quality Certification Services.

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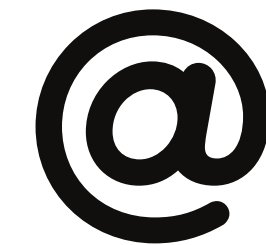
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# We're Here to Help!

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# USDA Organic

## Certification in 5 Steps



# 1 Complete an Organic System Plan

In the Organic System Plan, which is also your application to become certified, you will explain the processes for all aspects of your operation and how they are compliant with organic program regulations.



### Who at QCS Will Help at Step 1: Client Care Specialist

- Primary contact until application is submitted
- Assists potential clients with application process
- Can explain certification process and answer general questions

SCHEDULE A MEETING WITH OUR  
CLIENT CARE SPECIALIST



# USDA Organic

## Certification in 5 Steps



# 2 Application Intake & Initial Review

Our Admin team will process and upload your application to our internal tracking system once we receive it.

During the initial review, a certification reviewer will conduct a desk audit of your Organic System Plan to ensure that, on paper, your operation is compliant with organic regulations.



### Who at QCS Will Help at Step 2:

#### Certification Project Coordinator - Admin Team

- Primary point of contact once you have submitted your application.
- Your dedicated account administrator year over year.
- Can assist you with non-technical questions including invoices, account updates, annual renewal documents, and general questions.

#### Initial Certification Reviewer

- Certification reviewers change year to year.
- Technical staff member responsible for ensuring your OSP is compliant with organic regulations.
- May send you **Requests for Information**.
  - It is important to respond to all requests for information to continue the review of your application.



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## Certification in 5 Steps



# 3

## On-site Inspection

We will send an inspector to perform an on-site audit of your operation. Their primary purpose is to verify that the information outlined in your Organic System Plan align with your on-farm practices.



### Who at QCS Will Help at Step 3:

#### Inspector

- Inspectors can change year to year.
- Inspectors may be QCS staff or they may be qualified contractors.
- Inspectors will reach out directly to you to schedule your on-site audit.



# USDA Organic

## Certification in 5 Steps



# 4 Final Review

Final review ensures compliance between your Organic System Plan and practices observed at your operation during inspection and outlined in your inspection report.



### Who at QCS Will Help at Step 4: Final Certification Reviewer

- Certification reviewers change year to year.
- Technical staff member responsible for making a certification decision on your application.
- Final certification reviewers may issue a **Request for Information**.
  - It is important to respond to all Requests for Information promptly.
- Final certification reviewers may issue a **Non-Compliance**.
  - Non-compliances are a normal part of the certification process and are usually, though not always, correctable.
  - See our [Non-Compliance Guidance Documents](#) for more information.



# USDA Organic

## Certification in 5 Steps



# 5 Certification Decision

After final review, we will reach a certification decision: either that we need more information before we can proceed or that your operation is compliant with organic regulations. Once you have achieved certification, you can market and sell products as certified organic.



### Who at QCS Will Help at Step 5:

#### Certification Project Coordinator - Admin Team

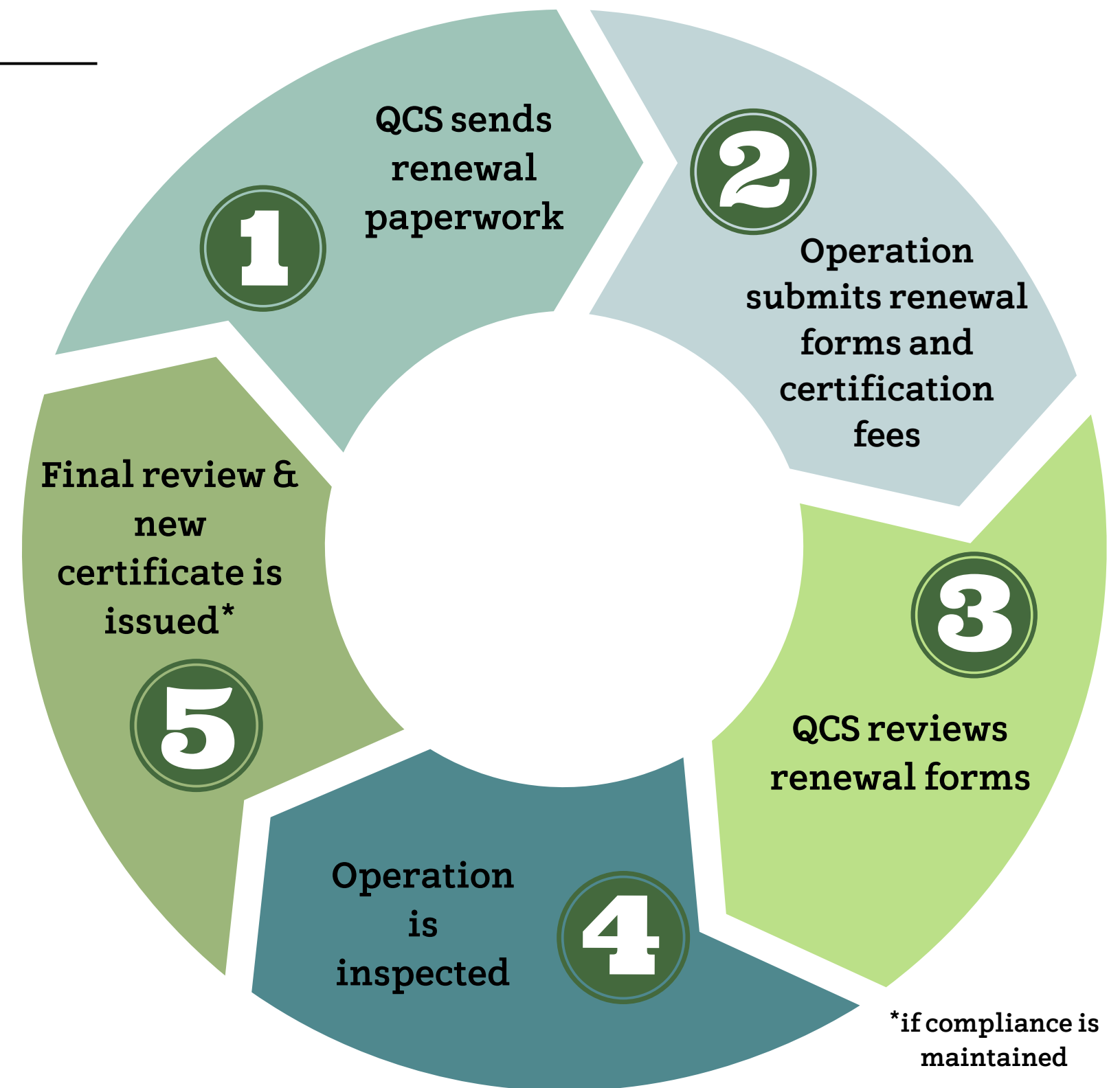
- Your dedicated certification project coordinator can assist you with any questions that come up between annual renewals.
- Can connect you to the correct member of technical staff for organic system plan updates and other compliance-related questions.

# Annual Renewal

ONCE YOU HAVE ACHIEVED CERTIFICATION, HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN IT?

On an annual basis, your certification will come up for renewal.

- Annual renewal is required for continued compliance with organic program regulations.
- You will complete the Annual Renewal Form and submit your annual certification fees to begin the renewal process.
- You do not have to complete a new OSP every year, but we may request a full OSP anytime.
- Always contact QCS **prior** to making updates to your Organic System Plan.





PERFECT SUCCESS



Check out our YouTube video [“Demystifying Organic Certification”](#) for more information on certification.



You can access resources for transitioning to organic practices through the [Transition to Organic Partnership Program \(TOPP\)](#).



To learn more about organic certification, there are many great online resources that are free and publicly available from the USDA:

- [Code of Federal Regulations: National Organic Program](#)
- [Sound and Sensible Organics](#)
- [Organic Integrity Learning Center](#)
- [National Organic Program Handbook](#)

# GOOD TO KNOW



For first time applicants, especially for expedited service, we begin work on the initial review once we have received a completed Organic System Plan and applicable fees.



Our regular timeline for certification is 90-120 days. We have expedited options available - please contact us for more information.



QCS has lots of great resources on our website about organic certification:

- [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [External Resources](#)
- [Non-Compliance Guidance](#)
- [Minor Non-Compliance Guidance](#)
- [Are You Ready for Inspection?](#)
- [Import and Export Guidance](#)
- [Organic Labeling Requirements](#)
- [Video Resources](#)

# Cost of Certification

Your certification cost is made up of two main parts:



## CERTIFICATION COST:

Annual certification cost is based on your operation's annual gross sales of organic products.

Due with submission of application and with annual renewal.



## NEW CLIENT ONBOARDING FEE:

All first-time applicants pay a one-time onboarding fee.

Due with submission of first application with QCS.



## INSPECTION COST:

Annual inspection cost is based on the simplicity to complexity and location of your operation. Inspection cost includes related travel expenses.

Billed after inspection has taken place.

### Additional fees may include:

- international equivalencies
- expedited service fees
- on-farm processing and/or
- other certification services.

# Consultants - Who Can Answer What

CERTIFIERS HAVE RESTRICTIONS ON WHAT INFORMATION THEY CAN PROVIDE TO PREVENT CONFLICT OF INTEREST.

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## Certifier

Anyone who works for QCS falls in this category

- ✓ Can answer yes/no questions
- ✓ Can provide publicly available resources
- ✓ Can explain regulations in general terms

## Consultants

Consultants can work for consulting institutions or be independent.

- ✓ Can advise you on the "HOW" of certification
- ✓ Can give you advice for your specific operation
- ✓ Can complete certification paperwork on your behalf



Think of a certifier as a proctor who has the answer key to a test - we can tell you if you got something right but can't give you the answer.

## QCS's List of Consultants

**WE ARE  
EXCITED  
TO WORK  
WITH YOU!**



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