qcs quality certification SERVICES

Certification Excellence Since 1987

USDA ORGANIC

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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We're Here to Help!

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www.qcsinfo.org

We Are Excited to Work with You!

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Certification in 5 Steps

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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.



QCS CONTACT FOR THIS STEP:

CLIENT CARE SPECIALIST

Our Client Care Specialist will help you during the application process. They will be your primary point of contact until you submit your application.

SCHEDULE A MEETING WITH OUR CLIENT CARE SPECIALIST

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2 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.



QCS CONTACTS FOR THIS STEP:

1. CERTIFICATION PROJECT COORDINATOR

Your Certification Project Coordinator will be the administrator on your account year over year. They can help you with invoices, payments, account updates, and annual renewal. They will be your primary point of contact once you have submitted your application.

2. CERTIFICATION REVIEWER

Your scope reviewer will change year over year. They are responsible for ensuring that your OSP is compliant with organic regulations. It is important to respond to all Requests for Information from your certification reviewer.

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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.



QCS CONTACT FOR THIS STEP:

INSPECTOR

Your inspector will reach out directly to you once your initial review is complete to schedule a site visit. Your inspector will change year to year. Inspectors may be QCS staff members or they may be qualified contractors.

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4 Final Review

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



QCS CONTACT FOR THIS STEP:

FINAL REVIEWER

The final reviewer is responsible for making the certification decision on your application. Your final reviewer may change year to year. It is important to promptly reply to all Requests for Information that your final scope reviewer sends.

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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.



QCS CONTACTS FOR THIS STEP:

1. CERTIFICATION PROJECT COORDINATOR

If you have any questions about invoicing, renewals, updating contacts, or other aspects of your account, reach out to your Certification Project Coordinator.

2. CERTIFICATION REVIEWER

If you would like to add inputs to your OSP or make changes to the processes on your operation, reach out to the most recent certification reviewer.

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.



PREP FOR SUCCESS

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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.



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).

Cost of Certification

Your certification cost is made up of two main parts:

CERTIFICATION COST:

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

Due with submission of application and with annual renewal.

INSPECTION COST:

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.

NEW CLIENT ONBOARDING FEE:

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

Due with submission of first application with QCS.

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.

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



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.

Consulants

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

QCS's List of Consultants

Helpful Links & Resources

THESE ARE GOOD TABS TO BOOKMARK FOR REFERENCE AS YOU BEGIN YOUR ORGANIC SYSTEM PLAN

USDA

- Code of Federal Regulations: National Organic Program
- Organic Integrity Learning Center
- USDA: Sound and Sensible Organics
- National Organic Program Handbook

QCS

- QCS's FAQ Page
- QCS's External Resource Page
- Are You Ready for Inspection?
- Expedited Service Agreement