

Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau Ask Laura Newsletter Column
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Q: How do I go about getting my small farm certified organic? I am new to farming and don't know where to start.

A: As a farmer in California you will want to know about two regulatory statutes: the federal Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 and the state California Organic Products Act of 2003. Both statutes regulate practices and procedures of those farming organically and are designed to protect consumers from fraudulent claims of the term 'organic' in the marketplace. The federal law, administered by the United States Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program (USDA-NOP), requires all growers and handlers of fresh or raw agricultural products marketed and labeled as organic to be certified by a USDA accredited certifying agent on an annual basis. There is one exemption: if gross farm sales are \$5,000 or less, certification is not required (though adherence to organic practices and processes are still required). The state law, administered by the California Department of Food and Agriculture's Organic Program (CDFA-SOP) requires annual registration for all growers and handlers of fresh products marketed and labeled as organic regardless of sales amount. It is important to note that registration and certification are two different processes.

As mentioned above, organic registration and certification both require adherence to certain practices and processes, which include substantial record keeping and documentation of farm operations and inputs, and sales activities. Both programs also have fees associated with them, which depend on, among other aspects, the amount—or in the case of a new farm the projected amount—of gross farm sales, the size of the operation, number of parcels, and whether or not the operation has mixed organic and conventional production. Certification procedures and fee structures for accredited certifying agents differ. You might want to consider studying two or more agent's processes and fees to determine the 'best fit' for your farm. A list of USDA accredited certifying agents and a fee chart for annual registration in California can be found at the CDFA website listed below.

CDFA's State Organic Program:

http://www.cdfa.ca.gov/is/i_&c/organic.html

More specific information about the federal program can be found at USDA's National Organic Program:

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/NOP>

Two additional websites that may be of interest, and that can provide more specific information related to organic farm practices, input, and record keeping requirements are:

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service's Organic Farming:

<https://attra.ncat.org/organic.html#overview>

Organic Materials Review Institute:

<http://www.omri.org>

Please contact us at (831) 763-8040 if we can assist with other questions.