



## **Organic Handler Certification: Frequently Asked Questions**

*Resource Developed in 2026 by the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association.*

United States Department of Agriculture  
Agricultural Marketing Service  
National Organic Program  
Transition to Organic Partnership Program



*This resource was supported through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP). TOPP is a program of the USDA Organic Transition Initiative and is administered by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) National Organic Program (NOP).*

## Organic Handler Certification: Frequently Asked Questions

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For many farmer-producers who are already certified organic as growers, the topic of organic handling certification may be confusing. If I'm already certified to *grow* organic products, but I *handle* them (wash, pack, cool, ship) before my CSA/Farmers Market, does that mean I also have to be certified as an Organic Handler? What if I'm certified as a livestock grower who also processes or slaughters on-farm: does that mean I'm *already* a handler/processor? What if I ship my organic chickens to an off-farm slaughter facility: does that mean *they* have to be certified?

You'll find the answers to the above questions, and others, in this FAQ guide, breaking down the 10 most common questions about the Handler certification process and eligibility. By no means is this a comprehensive list, but it's a good place to start; find additional resources linked at the end of this document. Often, for certified growers/producers, it's best to ask questions to your current certifier.

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### 1. What is the definition of a certified Organic Handler?

A "handler" is any operation that sells, processes, or packages agricultural products, except for final retailers that do not process agricultural products.

- *Processing activities include, but are not limited to:* milling, freezing, chilling, dehydrating, drying, pickling, canning, preservation, fermenting, churning, pasteurizing, mixing, separating, combining ingredients to create a new product, cooking, baking, curing, heating, pressing, extracting, distilling, slaughtering, grinding, eviscerating, packaging, or repackaging.
- *Handling activities include, but are not limited to:* trading, importing/exporting, combining/aggregating, processing/packaging, repackaging, labeling, receiving/storing/loading.

### 2. Who needs to be certified as a Handler?

Anyone doing any of the activities listed above in #1 would most likely require certification as an Organic Handler. Certain basic wash/pack operations are allowed under the "Grower" certification, but most of the tasks listed above would most likely be done off-farm. See examples further below in #4. Your certifier would be your first point of contact for which category/application forms would apply to your operation.

### **3. Are there any exemptions?**

Very few, as listed in the regulations. Such as:

- Have gross organic sales of \$5,000 or less per year.
- A retail establishment that does not process organic agricultural products or processes organic agricultural products only at the point of sale, such as final bake in an in-store bakery.
- Handles only products that contain less than 70% organic ingredients.
- Only receives or stores products that are in sealed, tamper-evident packages, and remain in the same packaging while in the control of the operation (this applies to some warehouses).
- Only arranges for the shipping, storing, or transportation of organic agricultural products.
- Is a licensed customs broker.

### **4. If I'm a Farmer Certified as a Grower, do I need Handler certification?**

As an example, if you are growing strawberries and doing a basic wash/clean/pack for food safety and sale on-farm, or via CSA direct-to-consumer, you may be covered under your grower certification. But if you are processing strawberries off-farm, such as to make jam or other canned products for retail sale at farmers' markets, that would be considered added processing, and that location would require Handler certification.

Another example – slaughtering livestock on-farm vs. shipping to an off-site slaughter facility. On farms, you could be certified as a producer/processor/handler, or you could be an organic producer who ships to an off-site certified organic handler slaughtering facility. Your certifier would help you determine which application category fits your operation.

### **5. How long does it take to get certified as an Organic Handler?**

The process and timing may vary depending on whether you are already certified as a grower/producer. If so, then you would fill out the additional Handler paperwork, submit any additional support documents (see #8 below for specific handler focus areas), have an additional inspection, and obtain final certifier approval. This could still take several months.

Once completed, you would only need one combined grower/handler inspection annually. If you are not currently certified, the process could take 3-6 months, depending on project complexity and certifier workload.

## 6. How much does it cost?

Certification fees vary by certifier. But generally, there is an initial application fee, an annual certification fee, plus inspection/inspector travel costs. For handlers, there is usually a sliding-scale fee based on a percentage of gross organic revenue for the previous year. Some certifiers cap this fee. Expediting fees are also available for those who need to obtain their certification more quickly than the typical turnaround times mentioned in #5 above.

## 7. Is there a Cost-Share reimbursement option?

In May of 2025, Congress reauthorized the Organic Certification Cost Share Program through 2031, with reimbursement, up to \$750 per certified entity, to go toward certifier fees. Administrative delays have resulted in a delay in processing 2025 reimbursements; reimbursements for 2026 are expected to include a concurrent option for both years.

## 8. What are the biggest focus areas for Handler certification?

If you are an organic farmer, you're probably familiar with typical inspection questions around acreage calculations, crop rotation plans, seed sourcing, pest management, recordkeeping, lot number traceability, and yield calculations/mass balance. A helpful guide can be found here: [Certification Process Overview for Handlers](#). Here are some typical handler focus areas:

- *Maintaining Organic Integrity:* Separation from receiving through sorting/cleaning/processing/packaging/finished product shipping, if made in a shared production area with non-organic products. This is done by submitting an Organic Systems Plan to the certifier, including a plant layout and process flow diagram.
- *Cleaning/Sanitation and Pest Control Materials:* Only approved materials can be used, and must be on the National List. Very strict protocols on inputs; must be approved by certifiers before use.
- *Water and Product Contact Steam:* Requires test results and filtration system review.
- *Lot Number Traceability and Mass Balance:* Very similar requirements to be able to trace product from sourcing/purchase, through finished product, and also an exercise for a period of time to show "organic in = organic out." Takes into account production and yield losses and is verified against approved formulas.
- *Retail and Wholesale Labeling:* Consumer labels are regulated, ensuring that all regulatory copy is consistent and approved by the certifier. USDA Seal and Organic product claims are based on product formulations, and consumers can trust them.

## 9. What is the SOE regulation I keep hearing about?

The Strengthening Organic Enforcement Act went into effect in March 2024, as authorized by Congress, to give the USDA National Organic Program authority to increase oversight and enforcement of Organic supply chains, including imports/exports, brokers, warehousing, and other previously uncertified entities. Since its implementation, USDA NOP has tracked the effectiveness of these initiatives and has successfully reduced the number of uncertified entities in order to reduce organic fraud, especially around imported ingredients and products. Each domestic U.S. certified organic entity is now required to conduct a vulnerability assessment and a supply chain assessment, at a minimum, annually. [More SOE information here.](#)

## 10. Where can I find more information?

- A great place to start is with a document called [“A Newcomer’s Guide to Organic Regulations for Handlers,”](#) put together by the Organic Trade Association (OTA) and Organic Agronomy Training Service (OATS) for the USDA National Organic Program.
- Southeast Transition to Organic Program Partnership offers [Organic Handling Resources.](#)
- Finally, the USDA National Organic Program, via the Agricultural Marketing Service, has an FAQ that is helpful, called [“Who Needs to be Certified?”](#)

*Bottom line - for further information, check with your certifier first!*