



# TRANSITIONING TO ORGANIC DAIRY PRODUCTION

**Those wishing to sell an organic dairy product must make that product from certified organic milk.** A herd will produce organic milk only if the rules outlined through the National Organic Program are followed.

## Overview of Organic Dairy Farming

- For the 12 months previous to selling your first organic milk, feed to all production animals on the farm (milk cows, dry cows and young heifers) must either be certified organic or be grown on land that is part of your farming operation and is in its last year of conversion to organic (between 24 and 36 months free of prohibited materials). Organic inspection should occur during the season when this in-conversion feed is being grown.
- Pasture used for grazing must meet the same requirements as cropland.
- Feed must be organic, meaning it was harvested 36 months or longer after a prohibited substance had been applied to the land or crop and the land was certified as organic during the crop year that it was grown.
- Prohibited materials include but are not limited to: most chemical fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, synthetic silage inoculants, etc.
- Date of the last prohibited substance application documentation is needed for all fields, including pastures.
- All purchased feed MUST have a certificate of current certified organic status. In-conversion to organic feed (24-36 months free of prohibited materials) cannot be purchased from other farmers and fed to an in-conversion organic dairy herd.
- Once the herd is converted to organic production by this method, all replacement organic production animals must be managed organically from the last third of their gestation period (before their birth).



- No prohibited health materials or feed supplements are to be fed or used in the 12 months previous to selling organic milk (no antibiotics, non-approved parasiticides, minerals or vitamins with prohibited additives such as mineral oil or artificial flavorings).

**Pasture is mandated for all ruminants.** Pasture is defined as offering feed value to the cattle (goats or sheep too). Heifers, dry cows and milk cows must be out on pasture that offers feed value for a significant portion of the day, when seasonally appropriate. Green chop or dry hay fed to cows is not considered “pasture”. Cattle must be grazing the pasture themselves and a dry lot is not considered pasture, since there is no covering on the ground that offers feed value. Calves should be out on pasture once they have developed rumens and can digest grass.

**Housing must allow for freedom of movement and ventilation to promote animal health.** This includes all stages of the animal’s life. Treated wood where there is contact with livestock or with soil growing organic crops cannot be used on any new construction once the operation is certified organic. If the treated wood is present before the operation is fully organic, it can remain. Cows can be confined during winter months, but should have a few hours of outside exercise when weather permits. Calves can be confined when young to prevent illness. Bulls do not need to be managed organically unless they are to be sold as organic slaughter animals. Artificial insemination is allowed. Breeding hormones are not allowed.

**Plan to feed a high forage diet consisting of high quality feeds to promote the health of your animals.** If you raise non-organic steers for meat animals, grinding of feed, storage of feed and animal health products must be kept separate from the organic dairy feed and products. Documentation of equipment cleaning between the handling or storage of non-organic feeds and organic feeds may be necessary.

**Animals must be individually identified** by ear tags, neck tags, distinguishing photos or drawings such as Holstein registration papers. Corresponding individual animal health records must be maintained for each individual animal. Health records must include all health events including birth records. Even if a cow is only stripped clean to control mastitis, this should be noted in her individual health record in order to verify organic management. Record keeping aids farmers in understanding what products and activities are useful and which are not, as well as tracking genetic traits to aid with culling decisions.

**No antibiotics are allowed in organic production.** However, an organic farmer cannot withhold medical treatment to preserve the organic status of an animal. If antibiotics must be used as a remedy, the animal should be treated and sold or tracked and managed as nonorganic. This includes calves that are born on the farm after your operation is certified organic. Once an animal that is part of your organic operation is given an antibiotic, this animal cannot ever be an organic dairy or slaughter animal. Animals that had been given antibiotics before you started your one-year of conversion to organic milk production can be converted to organic. Again, once you have started your conversion to organic, no antibiotics are allowed for future organic production animals.

**Verify with your certification agency that the vitamins and minerals you are feeding meet the organic standards** and do not contain any prohibited synthetic or non-organic substances (such as artificial preservatives, colorings, flavorings, anticaking agents or dust suppressants).

**Verify with your certification agency that all health products used are acceptable.** Dehorning and castration should be performed to provide the least amount of stress to the animal. Tail docking is not allowed in cattle unless there is a health problem that cannot be cured any other way, such as a wound which does not heal.

**You must ensure that pastures and manure application do not cause soil erosion or pollute ground or surface water.** Plastic silage or hay wraps cannot be burned.

**Before you begin your organic transition, find a market for your organic milk and decide on your organic certification agency.** Work with the organic certification agency and time your first inspection to occur no later than 4 months before your shipper can pick up your organic milk.

**More Information** on organic dairy can be found from the following NOFA publications, available on the NOFA-NY website:

- *The Organic Dairy Handbook, A Comprehensive Guide for the Transition and Beyond*
- *Transitioning to Organic Dairy, Self-Assessment Workbook*
- *Organic Dairy Production*

Also see the organic dairy section of the NOFA-NY website: <https://www.nofany.org/organic-farming/technical-assistance/organic-dairy>

*Information developed by the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES)*