



LIVESTOCK

MOSES ORGANIC FACT SHEET

Transitioning to Organic Beef Production

Consumers are leading a growing demand for organic beef from pastured animals raised without antibiotics, hormones or synthetic pesticides. Producers able to meet the USDA National Organic Standards for certified organic beef production can take advantage of this market.

Organic Beef Marketing Strategies

To succeed, you must first identify your market(s) or buyer(s), which may dictate breed types, weights, slaughter distances and finishing requirements (grain or grass). Then, choose the option for raising beef that meets your needs, abilities and the demands of the marketplace:

- Organic cow/calf operation—sell weaned calves or yearlings to other organic farmers for finishing.
Pros: Low input costs, minimal marketing.
Cons: Low return on investment.
- Purchase organic feeders, sell finished slaughter animals.
Pros: Higher return, no year round cow herd to manage.
Cons: Limited availability + increasing feed costs.
- Direct market your farm's organic meat that is packed by a certified organic slaughterhouse.
Pros: Highest potential return, direct customer contact.
Cons: High level of marketing skill necessary.
Organic processors are few and far between.
- Grain finish the last few months before slaughter to obtain higher fat content and USDA grading (Select, Choice). The National Organic Standards allow for of temporary confinement for grain finishing, not exceed one-fifth of the animal's total life or 120 days, whichever is shorter.
Pros: Premium prices. **Cons:** High feed input costs.
- Raise and finish entirely on grass.
Pros: Rapidly growing market. Lowered feed costs.
Cons: Longer finishing times + difficult to get consistent meat quality.

Origin of Livestock

Organic beef must be managed organically from the last third of gestation. Health care, feed and living conditions of the brood cow must meet organic regulations for at least three months prior to the birth of the organic calf.

- Brood cows can be transitioned to become mothers of organic calves, but can never, themselves, be sold as organic slaughter animals. If a brood cow is given a prohibited product while she is in the last third of gestation or while lactating, her calf is no longer organic.
- You may buy bred cows from any source if they are under organic management for at least three months before

birthing the organic calf.

- Purchased (organic) or orphan calves must be given organic milk. Milk replacer can only be used if it is organic, and currently, there is no organic milk replacer on the market. Organic nurse cows may be used to raise organic calves and organic dairy cull cows are readily available in some areas.
- Bulls don't need to be managed organically. Artificial insemination is allowed, but breeding hormones are not.

Recordkeeping

Each animal in the herd (cows, calves, feeders, bulls) must be identified (ear tags, tattoos). Document each animal's dam and sire, sex, birth dates, life events (ex. weaning), health events (ex. vaccinations), and specific health products (ex. aspirin). Track feed and pasture records for the entire herd rather than individuals.

Feeds and Feed Supplements

Pasture is mandated for all ruminants. They must be allowed to graze certified organic land that offers feed value when seasonally appropriate. An approved pasture plan is required and a minimum of 30% dry-matter intake from pasture during the grazing season (minimum 120 days but more in regions that have longer grazing seasons). Feeding green chop hay in a dry lot does not meet the pasture mandate. Pastures must be managed as a crop and meet all organic crop production requirements. See the MOSES Fact Sheet *Pasture and Living Conditions for Organic Ruminant Animals* for details. Organic pasture and organic cropland cannot have any prohibited substances applied for 36 months prior to the harvest or grazing of the crop. For specific rules on growing organic crops, see the MOSES Fact Sheet *Transitioning to Organic Crop Production*.

If you plan to raise your own organic feed and have spring calves, your cropland must be certified organic the year before the calves are born. Certification agencies cannot retroactively certify your land from the previous crop year. If you calve in the fall, or you purchase organic yearlings in the spring, you should submit your organic certification application early in that spring. Organic inspections must occur when the crop is growing in order for the inspector to assess compliance to the regulation.

All aspects of organic crop-growing requirements must be followed, including a buffer zone on borders of every pasture

where there may be a risk of contamination from prohibited sprays or chemical fertilizers. Buffer zones generally need to be 25–30 feet wide, but a certifier may require more in certain situations. Certifiers may require a buffer zone only for the year a prohibited product is used or for three years—ask your certifier. A neighbor (or road crew or utility) can also sign a statement verifying no prohibited products were used.

Bulk feed must come from a source that is certified organic. Bagged organic feed should state the name of the certification agency on the bag. Save all receipts and tags. You will be required to produce them at inspection.

All agricultural ingredients in feed supplements, such as wheat middlings, molasses or soy oil, must be certified organic. Feed supplements such as salt, vitamins and minerals cannot contain any prohibited ingredients. Artificial colorings and flavorings are not allowed. Salt containing a synthetic flowing agent, such as Yellow Prussiate of Soda (YPS) or mineral oil (petroleum product) used as a dust suppressant, are not allowed. You can buy salt or mineral from any store as long as the ingredients are acceptable. Read the ingredient list of feed supplements carefully and submit it to your certification agency for approval before feeding it. Save all feed supplement tags to include with your certification application or to show to your organic inspector. Obtain a label or ingredient list for salt or mineral blocks. Never use any product that is in doubt. Your certifier can review products or provide an approved list if needed.

Feed storage areas cannot be made from treated wood, nor have fumigants or herbicides used in or around them. Plastic silage bags, bale wraps and twine cannot be burned or buried, but must be recycled or landfilled.

Health Management and Living Conditions

Health care management for organic beef is based on healthy living conditions, disease prevention and a balanced high-forage ration. When necessary, natural or approved synthetic health inputs can be used to prevent or treat injury/illness. Approved synthetic health products are on the National List of approved substances. See www.ams.usda.gov/nop or ask your certification agency for a current list. Examples of synthetic approved materials include aspirin, glucose and iodine as a disinfectant. Natural items such as herbal products and aloe vera (without preservatives) are allowed. Vaccines are allowed. Approved health input vendors are listed in the MOSES Organic Resource Directory.

- Living conditions must provide freedom of movement, fresh air and access to the outdoors when seasonally appropriate. Pasture (30% DMI minimum) must be provided during the grazing season.
- Parasiticides, hormones, and antibiotics are not allowed for use on animals that will be sold as organic. Cattle rubs using petroleum or other synthetics are not allowed. Ivermectin is a restricted use synthetic parasiticide for emergency treatment of dairy and breeder stock, but is prohibited in slaughter stock. Ivermectin can only be

used when the organic system plan does not prevent infestation and requires certifier approval. Treatment cannot occur during the last third of gestation or during the lactation period for breeder stock. Milk from treated dairy animals must be withheld from the organic marketplace for 90 days following treatment.

- It is not permitted to withhold prohibited health products (such as antibiotics) in order to maintain organic status if it results in excessive suffering or death of an animal. The life of the animal must be saved and the animal segregated or sold as non-organic if a prohibited product is used. Maintain documentation of what was used, when and why.
- Dehorning, castration or other physical modifications are allowed (no tail docking), but must be done in a manner to minimize stress to the animal. Approved pain reducers are available.
- Bedding must be certified organic if the animal typically would consume it, such as hay, straw or cornstalks. Sawdust must be from raw, untreated wood with no glues, paints etc.
- Treated wood of any type cannot be used where the animals could consume grass or crops surrounding the treated wood, or if they can rub or contact the treated wood, such as in a loafing shed. If the treated wood is in place before your first organic inspection, it may remain, but your certifier may require you to prevent animals from making direct contact, depending on the situation.

Resources

National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT Sustainable Agriculture Project) Organic and Grass-finished Organic Beef Production
attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=193

Organic Trade Association
www.ota.com/organic/foodsafety/OrganicBeef.html

USDA National Organic Program
www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/nop

MIDWEST ORGANIC
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The Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) provides education and resources to farmers to encourage organic and sustainable farming practices. To learn more, please see:

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