



# ATTRA Sustainable Agriculture

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## Tipsheet: Organic Cattle, Sheep, and Goats for Dairy

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) organic dairy regulations apply to all milk animals including cows, goats, and sheep. This tipsheet highlights some of the regulations and points to resources for further study.

### Considerations

- Do you have a market for organic milk?
- Do you have access to certified organic stock or do you plan to raise your own? Are you transitioning a whole herd to organic certification?
- Do you have adequate pasture and a source of organic feed?
- Can you raise your animals in compliance with organic regulations regarding access to the outdoors, pasture availability, and health care?
- Is the premium you will receive for organic milk enough to cover the higher input costs?



*Dairy cow on pasture. Photo: Linda Coffey, NCAT*

### Marketing Strategies

Producers contemplating the transition to organic dairy production should consider both the organic production regulations and the practical viability of an organic dairy business. It is important to determine your market before making the transition to organic production. Organic dairy producers must have a reliable market, with adequate contracts and prices sufficient to cover their production costs and sustain their business. Be sure to understand your market thoroughly and also consider alternate marketing strategies. Wholesale organic milk buyers are not present in all areas of the country.

### Feed

Organic feed for dairy animals must include pasture. Many resources on pasture management and dry matter intake calculation tools are available in the NOP Program Handbook (Section A: Standards and Section H: Notices to Certifying Agents), and in ATTRA publications listed in the Resources section of this tipsheet. In addition to pasture, a reliable supply of supplemental feed—whether it is grown on-farm or purchased—is critical for a compliant and profitable organic dairy. ATTRA offers an online database of organic livestock feed suppliers. You can self-list at [www.attra.ncat.org/directories.html](http://www.attra.ncat.org/directories.html). Another way to locate organic feed producers in your region is to check certifiers' directories.

### Origin of Dairy Livestock

For initial conversion of a herd, dairy animals must be under continuous organic management for at least one year before their milk can be considered organic. The lone exception to this rule is described in 7 CFR §205.236(a)(2)(i), which provides the opportunity for a producer to transition both land and animals simultaneously over three years (with animals consuming third-year transitional feed grown on land that is managed organically as part of the operation's organic system plan).

A producer can transition dairy animals into organic production one time. Once an entire, distinct dairy herd has been converted to organic production, USDA organic regulations (§205.236(a)(2)(ii)) state that “all dairy animals shall be under organic management from the last third of gestation” (the number of days of which, of course, depends on the gestation period of the species). Some certifiers currently allow an established certified organic dairy to convert additional conventional animals to organic dairy production using the one-year transition when they are adding an additional “entire, distinct herd.” The distinction is made that this must be an entire, distinct herd—as opposed to individual animals—in order to prevent an organic dairy producer from continually bringing in new conventional replacement stock for a one-year transition to organic. In addition to complying with the regulations on origin of livestock, many dairy producers consider keeping a closed herd to be instrumental, even critical, to maintaining herd health, as well as being conducive to meeting the goals of a breeding program that selects for adaptation and suitability to local conditions and resistance to prevalent diseases and parasites (§205.238(a)(1)).

Organic rules are subject to change, so please consult your certifier, and the NOP website, for updates.

## Herd Health

The intent of the organic regulations is for producers to consider every detail of their management practices and how these together “establish and maintain preventive animal health care practices” for a healthy herd and dairy operation. These management practices include selection of species, breeding and culling, provision of feed rations, and “appropriate housing, pasture conditions, and sanitation practices to minimize the occurrence and spread of diseases and parasites.” Exercise, freedom of movement, and stress reduction also contribute to overall animal health and well-being. Potential dairy health problems are similarly addressed with a systems approach.

In the article “Contagious mastitis and organic milk production,” Dr. Linda Tikofsky provides ideas for an integrated approach to udder health. Dairy producers who understand the primary disease-causing organisms work to disrupt pest and disease cycles by combining strategies of monitoring, refining milking procedures, maintaining equipment, carefully managing the entire life cycle from calf-raising to dry cow management, and ensuring general cleanliness of the environment, including fly management.

Organic producers must develop an integrated approach to livestock health care that emphasizes prevention (including vaccination and veterinary biologics, vitamins, and other feed supplements to prevent diseases prevalent in the region) and uses allowed materials effectively when needed. Check with your certifier about the regulatory compliance of each material for its proposed use, even if that material is included on the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances (National List). All materials used or planned for use must be included in your OSP and approved by your certifier before use. Tikofsky’s article is available at [www.milkproduction.com/Library/Scientific-articles/Animal-health/Contagious-mastitis-and-organic/](http://www.milkproduction.com/Library/Scientific-articles/Animal-health/Contagious-mastitis-and-organic/). For more guidance on herd health see the tipsheet *Organic Approach to Animal Health*.

## Recordkeeping: Animal Identification, Health Care, and Living Conditions

Records must be sufficient to preserve the identity and track the management of all organic animals and animal products. The Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) requires that mammalian livestock be identified individually. The producer must be able to track details of the life of each animal, including age, living conditions, management, and health care. Health-care records must include the timing of vaccinations, any physical alterations, and/or medications or treatments. Non-routine use of parasiticides in breeding stock must be documented to be at least 90 days before sale of organic milk (dairy stock), and avoid the periods of lactation and the last third of gestation (breeder stock). If any animal must be treated with prohibited materials, such as antibiotics for infection, records must show the identification and (non-organic) destination of that animal. Records (breeding, feed rations, and actual feeding, health care, and living conditions) must be sufficient to document compliance with USDA organic regulations, including the following:

- Organic management during the last third of gestation, except as described above
- 100% organically produced agricultural ingredients in feed, plus allowed additives and supplements
- Fulfillment of the “pasture rule” requirement that ruminants receive at least 30% of their dry matter intake from pasture during a grazing season of at least 120 days per year
- Minimization of pain and stress for any approved physical alteration
- Preventative health-care practices (vaccines and veterinary biologics)
- Year-round access to the outdoors with fresh air, clean water, sun, shade, and exercise areas

- Shelter that provides for natural maintenance, comfort behaviors, exercise, and reduction of potential for injuries
- Documentation of temporary confinement, including the following:
  - ♦ Restricted access to the outdoors, including length of time and reason for each instance: stage of life, health and safety, protection of soil or water quality, health care, breeding, youth projects
  - ♦ Denial of pasture: dry-off, birthing, shearing, and milking



*Dairy goat and kids. Photo: Robyn Metzger, NCAT*

Organic dairy challenges vary by region, although many issues are common. Three regional U.S.-based Organic Dairy Producers Alliances seek to address the needs of organic producers:

- Western Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (WODPA), [www.wodpa.org](http://www.wodpa.org)  
The mission of WODPA is to preserve, protect, and ensure the sustainability and integrity of organic dairy farming across the West.
- The Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (NODPA), [www.nodpa.com](http://www.nodpa.com)  
The purpose of NODPA is to enable organic dairy family farms, situated across an extensive area, to maintain the sustainability of organic dairy farming. The NODPA website's Resources page has a library of articles on livestock health, grazing management, fly control, Integrated Pest Management, growing grains, soil health, economics, and much more.
- Midwest Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (MODPA)  
MODPA is an organic dairy producers group whose goal is to promote communication and networking for the betterment of all Midwest organic dairy producers and enhance a sustainable farmgate price. MODPA combined resources with NODPA in 2011 in order to be more efficient with website and publication resources.

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## Resources

USDA Organic Regulations 7 CFR 205  
[www.ams.usda.gov/nop](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop)

USDA National Organic Program Handbook  
[www.ams.usda.gov/NOPProgramHandbook](http://www.ams.usda.gov/NOPProgramHandbook)

The Table of Contents of this Handbook provides access to relevant and helpful documents, including the following:

- NOP 5017 (a series of documents to help producers comply with the Pasture Rule)
- The Use of Chlorine Materials in Organic Production and Handling



- Evaluating Allowed Ingredients and Sources of Vitamins and Minerals for Organic Livestock Feed
- Guide for Organic Livestock Producers
- Recordkeeping of Certified Operations
- Organic System Plan (OSP) Templates
- Documentation Forms

USDA National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances  
[www.ams.usda.gov/NOPNationalList](http://www.ams.usda.gov/NOPNationalList)

**Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES)**

[www.mosesorganic.org](http://www.mosesorganic.org)

*MOSES provides free on its Web site a guidebook, an upper Midwest organic resource directory, and fact sheets, including Transitioning to Organic Dairy Production, Transitioning to Organic Sheep and Goat Dairy Production, and Pasture and Living Conditions for Organic Ruminant Animals.*

**eOrganic**

[www.extension.org](http://www.extension.org)

*eOrganic has many organic dairy production resources such as articles and videos. A broad list of webinars and articles is available at [www.extension.org/pages/25242/webinars-by-eorganic](http://www.extension.org/pages/25242/webinars-by-eorganic)*

**The Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York—Organic Dairy Transitions**

[www.nofany.org/organic-farming/technical-assistance/organic-dairy](http://www.nofany.org/organic-farming/technical-assistance/organic-dairy)

*Transitioning to Organic Dairy Management Self-Assessment Workbook introduces the basic requirements for managing a certified organic dairy. It also provides farmers with questions to help evaluate whether this is a good option for their farm and business partners. The activities in the self-assessment workbook will help identify the infrastructure and management changes you will have to implement and where to source information along the way.*

*The Organic Dairy Handbook: a Comprehensive Guide to the Transition and Beyond is a whole-farm management resource for farmers interested in organic production. The handbook is a complete survey of proven options for all aspects of organic dairy management including two major risk sources: the management of herd health and animal nutrition.*

**Related ATTRA publications**

[www.attra.ncat.org](http://www.attra.ncat.org)

*Organic Standards for Livestock Production: Excerpts of USDA’s National Organic Program Regulations*

*Pasture for Organic Ruminant Livestock: Understanding and Implementing the National Organic Program (NOP) Pasture Rule*

*Pastures: Going Organic*

*Dairy Goats: Sustainable Production*

*Dairy Resource List: Organic and Pasture-Based*

*Dairy Sheep*

*Tips for Marketing Sheep and Goat Products: Dairy*

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