

## ORGANIC TRANSITIONS

# What is Organic?



Organic is more than a label, it starts on the farm. All organic food is grown and raised using ecological methods. Organic is backed by federal law and enforced by USDA.

## Requirements for Organic Farmers and Ranchers



### Ecological Balance

Organic farmers and ranchers are required to conserve or improve soil, water, wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife. To fulfill this requirement, organic farmers simultaneously implement multiple strategies, including crop rotation, cover cropping, mulching, conservation tillage, compost application, and many other organic practices (sometimes called climate smart practices) that sustain the natural resources and biodiversity of the farm.



### Nutrient and Pest Management

Synthetic pesticides and fertilizers are prohibited. Instead, organic farmers use ecological methods to build soil health and manage pests, weeds, and diseases. Organic allows a limited toolbox of synthetics only after ecological methods prove insufficient and the farmer ensures crops, soil, and water are not contaminated. Out of 900 synthetic pesticides, 27 are approved for restricted organic use while growing food. Each of these 27 materials is reviewed every five years for adverse human and environmental health impacts.



### Animal Welfare

Organic farmers and ranchers are required to accommodate the natural behavior of their animals. Organic livestock must have year-round access to the outdoors, fresh air, shade, exercise areas, direct sunlight, shelter, and clean drinking water. Organic cattle, sheep, and goats must graze organic pasture during the entire grazing season. All feed must be organic, and antibiotics and growth hormones are prohibited. Organic farmers and ranchers must use preventative healthcare practices.



### Three-Year Transition

To transition land to organic, farmers and ranchers cannot apply prohibited synthetic pesticides and fertilizers to the land for three years prior to their first organic harvest. Farmers do not receive the premium organic price during this three-year transition period and can experience yield losses and higher costs as the soil adjusts to ecological management and the farmer learns and invests in new practices. Ranchers face a higher cost of feed and new animal healthcare requirements that focus on preventative rather than diagnostic care.

# Why is Transitioning to Organic Hard?

## » Education

Organic requires farmers and ranchers to adopt ecological methods of farming and ranching. They must learn how to comply with organic requirements, including recordkeeping and conserving natural resources.

## » Costs

Farmers and ranchers must make significant investments to transition to organic. Investments include labor, seed and feed, infrastructure, preventative livestock healthcare, and ecological management of pests, weeds, and diseases.

## » Land Security

If yields drop or operating costs increase before farmers and ranchers receive the premium organic price, then they may not be able to afford their rent or mortgage, jeopardizing their operation.

## » Yields

During the transition period, farmers may experience yield losses as the soil rebounds from synthetics and adjusts to ecological management of pests, weeds, and diseases.

## » Markets

The success of transitioning farmers and ranchers depends on whether there is a market waiting for their organic product. Changes in the marketplace create additional risk on top of the myriad of climate, economic, and COVID challenges they already face.

# What Do Transitioning Farmers and Ranchers Need?



**Organic research, technical assistance, and mentorship that optimize organic systems and support a diversity of farmers and ranchers to transition to organic**



**Direct assistance for farmers and ranchers to implement multiple organic practices that build healthy soils while offsetting the economic risk of transitioning**



**Expansion of markets for organic food that creates more opportunities for new and existing organic farmers and ranchers**