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Conversion and certification for organic farming

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Introduction

'Conversion' refers to the physical and biological processes the farmer and the farming system must undergo to comply with organic standards.

'Certification' refers to a formal process which assesses and then accredits the farming system for compliance with organic standards.

Conversion planning (pre-certification)

Conversion to organic farming is a long-term process. There are no fixed methods for organic conversion. Each farm unit is an individual system and successful conversion requires a careful assessment of the resources available and the interactions between components in that system.

Ease of conversion is largely dependent on what you start with – if you start with a degraded resource base then that's what you'll end up with. Economic pressures resulting from previous activities can be the biggest constraint to successful conversion. More specialised and intensive farms will generally take longer to convert. These systems require more time and effort to re-introduce diversity and to reduce the scale of individual enterprises.

The conversion process requires a high level of commitment to succeed and often entails financial risk. Furthermore, there is little in the way of detailed information and advice to help you through the process. Prior to moving down the conversion pathway ask yourself some key questions to determine what you will need to do. Figure 1 provides a self-assessment tool for determining how

far down the conversion path you are and how close you are to qualifying for organic certification.

Where do I start?

Primarily, the conversion process begins with personal conversion – attitude and approach. Initially, it is important to gather as much information about organic farming as possible.

Sources of information include:

- Australian Standard® AS 6000–2009. Organic and biodynamic products;
- The National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce (Export);
- organic certifiers standards;
- organic farmers;
- conventional and organic advisory services;
- organic farming publications and journals;
- conferences and field days, and
- the internet.

Conversion planning involves developing a planning framework for organic conversion. Often referred to as an Organic Management Plan (OMP), the plan allows for changes in production methods and financial consequences to be considered and outlines your plans for ongoing adherence to organic standards. The OMP should also set out steps to be followed during conversion and a time scale over which it will occur. Preparation of an OMP is an essential pre-certification strategy. Some organic certification organisations provide OMP templates as part of their certification application process.

When developing the OMP you should consider the following questions.

How much, and over what time frame, will I convert?

It is a good idea to initially convert part of the farm to trial organic methods – a drawback to this is that it may not allow for suitable rotations or the scale required for necessary adjustments in techniques and machinery. Converting part of the farm may, however, allow for better financial 'stability' if yields become depressed.

Under organic standards, the growing of organic and conventional product on the same farm is referred to as parallel production. Organic standards prohibit the production of the same crops (or livestock) organically and non-organically on the same farm where the crop (or livestock) products are not visibly different. For example, you could not grow an organic crop of 'Rosella' wheat and a conventional crop of 'Rosella' wheat on the same farm, but you could grow organic 'Rosella' and conventional oats, provided all other sources of contamination were considered.

The operator should demonstrate that the organic management plan identifies the hazards and appropriate risk reduction factors prior to an audit taking place. For example, organic standards require that a process is implemented which documents and monitors the potential for contamination from substances and practices that are not permitted, and that strategies are put in place to avoid these risks.

A risk assessment system would require asking at each point in the production process:

- What are the potential sources of contamination during the production, harvesting, storage, transporting and processing of the crop?
- Which of these contamination risks are significant and likely to occur if not properly managed?
- What must be done to control these risks to an acceptable level?
- What records or evidence will I need for me to demonstrate that I have controlled the hazard?

If parallel production is practised, then harvesting, sowing and transport equipment will need to be thoroughly cleaned prior to handling organic crops. Storage facilities should ideally be separate.

External sources of contamination, such as over-spray from adjoining properties and the potential for contamination of water courses running through your farm should also be identified. The use and source of any external input (even if it is organic), such as seed, fertiliser and livestock feed, must be recorded.

What rotations should I implement?

Choice of rotation should consider the implication of each crop on subsequent crops in the rotation. You will need to consider the potential to host pests and diseases, weed management, fertility management and livestock requirements, and the need to balance this choice with what is profitable for the farming business.

Is my farm layout appropriate?

Now is the time to consider the appropriateness of your farm layout and how it will facilitate organic conversion. Considerations should include soil types, topography, paddock size, fencing and irrigation layout, location of water courses, wetlands and windbreaks.

Do I have appropriate equipment and farm structures?

Conversion to organic management may require the modification or replacement of existing farm equipment and structures. This could include specialised sowing and weed management equipment or construction of special storages such as sealed grain silos that allow for CO₂ disinfection of stored grain to control insect pests.

Do I have a recording and monitoring system in place?

Records of crop and livestock production, cropping history, soil tests and fertility, fertiliser inputs, livestock movements, pest and disease management and crop and livestock sales will help you to monitor the impact of your management and the changes that you have made during conversion. Certifiers will request some information (such as crop yield and sales) as part of your certification contract.

What financial issues should I consider?

You should assess the capital investment required for changes, e.g. livestock housing, machinery, grain storages, processing, packaging, and marketing of produce. A viable marketing strategy should be established before proceeding with your OMP. You will need to assess marketing options, including the availability of markets, premiums available (generally none for in-conversion products), marketing alliances, and value adding potential. As the saying goes, 'Sell before you sow'!

How do I start?

Start slowly – gain experience with new crops and techniques and the potential output of the system. Start with a couple of paddocks entering the rotation for a couple of seasons. Other paddocks are then brought into production and the original paddocks

progress into later stages of the rotation. This way the original paddocks are always a couple of years ahead and mistakes learnt here hopefully won't be repeated. Record observations and redesign the conversion plan each year to take into account your experiences on each paddock.

Having planned and implemented an organic conversion strategy you are now in a position to have this system formally certified.

Organic certification

What is certification?

Certification means having your farm and farming methods inspected to confirm that they meet the certifier's standards for organic farming. The certifier's standards cover all the requirements of the National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce and the Australian Standard[®] AS 6000–2009.

These Standards set out the minimum requirements for production, processing and labelling of organic produce. The National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce requires all exporters, as well as producers and processors, to be certified with an accredited industry organisation.

There are currently seven organisations accredited by the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) to inspect and certify organic producers. Certifiers have their own set of standards which must be complied with in addition to the National Standard. The AQIS website provides up-to-date details on organic certifying organisations – see www.daff.gov.au/aqis/about/contact/aco.

Why become certified?

Whilst becoming certified is voluntary there are a number of good reasons for becoming certified.

Certification ensures the integrity of the organic product from 'paddock to plate'. Certification also protects the interests of genuine organic producers in maintaining and increasing their market share. The *Trade Practices Act 1974* (the TPA) can help ensure that products being sold as 'organic' are in fact organic. Severe penalties can apply for selling non-organic produce as organic. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) is a national agency responsible for enforcing the TPA. See: *Organic claims and the Trade Practices Act*.

<http://www.accc.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/907148>

There appears to be significant potential for export of Australian organic product. To qualify for export, organic products must be certified. Producers and

exporters need to be especially aware that any treatment, preparation, and packaging of the organic product prior to export must be covered by a certification program. All exporters must also be approved for this purpose.

The domestic market has also expanded for organic produce. Domestic consumers now recognise a certified organic product as their best guarantee that the product was produced using organic practices. This is particularly important to consumers with health concerns. Organic retailers and wholesalers generally will not purchase uncertified produce. Organic produce sold on the domestic market is often purchased by exporters.

See also [Organic Certification in Australia](http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/farm/organic)
www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/farm/organic

The certification process

If you answer 'yes' to all the questions posed in the self-assessment flow chart (Figure 1) then there is a good chance that you may already qualify for certification. Figure 2 illustrates the certification process.

Remember: prior to applying for certification you should obtain a copy of the certifiers' standards and a certification information kit. Compare the standards with how your farm currently operates and look for possible differences. Check with the certifier about any points that are not clear and proceed to develop and implement your OMP.

Levels in the certification process

Full certification is generally granted following three consecutive years of management which comply with organic standards. Producers must be under an accredited certification system for a minimum period of 12 months prior to receiving any certification level.

There are generally three levels referred to when applying for organic certification. Some certifiers' standards refer to 'pre-certification' (also known as 'pre-conversion'), 'in-conversion' and 'organic' levels. Organic standards must be adhered to during *all* levels, each level usually a reflection of the length of time or degree to which an organic system has been implemented. Adherence to the 'in-conversion' and 'organic' phases entitles you to market and label your product accordingly. No label is issued during 'pre-certification'.

How to apply

Once you have decided to proceed with certification, send in the completed application form with the fee. The certifier will then ask you to

complete a statutory declaration which describes the products that you wish to have certified and the management practices currently used on the farm.

The inspection process

Once you have applied to the certifier and they determine that an organic system is possible (based on the information provided in your statutory declaration), then an inspector will contact you to arrange a suitable inspection time.

This inspection usually takes 2–4 hours but may take longer, especially on large properties. The inspector will go through your application and statutory declaration with you and ask questions. You and the inspector together inspect the farm, machinery and livestock. The inspector may take soil or product samples to determine if there are any chemical residues. Problem areas could include old dip sites and grain storages.

The inspector then makes an overall assessment of the property and your management. The inspector's report and recommendation are reviewed by a certification review committee. You may be asked for more information, or require further inspections and tests for chemical residues. If successful, your farm will be approved for 'pre-certification'. The pre-certification phase demonstrates to the certifier your ability to manage your enterprise organically.

Following pre-certification, another inspection takes place and if you have met organic standard requirements, a certificate of certification is granted and you will be required to enter into a licensing agreement with the certifier. From initial application to certification will take 12 months. You are now at the stage of certification that is commonly referred to as the 'in-conversion' level.

A further two years 'in-conversion' is generally required before 'organic' level is issued by the certifier.

Re-inspections. Once certified, re-inspections of your farm will be carried out annually. Random (unscheduled) inspections are also carried out as part of the certifier's responsibility to meet AQIS requirements.

How much will certification cost?

A number of fees are associated with becoming certified. The amount and type of charges imposed depend on the certification organisation. In general, allow \$2000 in the first year for joining fees, inspections and soil and produce tests. Typical fees may include:

- A non-compulsory membership fee of around \$100.

- A non-refundable application fee (around \$550–\$680). This may also cover 12 months associate membership which is not compulsory, but often encouraged by certifiers.
- Some certifiers offer a small grower scheme, where individuals¹ or in some cases groups² of small producers may apply for certification at a reduced rate. Fees are around \$420 (for group members) to \$590 (for individuals).
- an inspection charge (depends on locality and time taken; allow around \$1000–\$1200).
- soil /produce chemical residue test (depending on what is being tested \$70–\$200).
- Additional charges may also apply, for example, obtaining copies of standards, fast tracking applications.
- Additional fees apply for export accreditation, depending on markets accessed. For example, to export to the US the producer must be accredited under the US National Organic Program DA. Australian certifiers undertake accreditation on your behalf with fees ranging from \$475 to \$680, renewable annually.
- Some certifiers are also accredited to certify producers to comply with quality assurance schemes such as Freshcare® and a fee schedule has been developed which combines both organic and Freshcare certification.

Once certified annual fees are payable and these could include:

- An annual audit fee (depends on locality and time taken; allow around \$1000).
- A levy which some certifiers impose based on the sales of organic produce. This is generally around 1% of gross organic sales per annum and is only imposed once the gross sale of organic produce exceeds a certain amount. A cap is placed on the amount that can be levied.

What do I have to do to stay certified?

To comply with and retain organic accreditation, organic standards must be followed. Any breach of the standard, such as the use of a prohibited substance, will result in temporary, or for continued non-compliance, permanent de-certification. Under organic standards inputs such as fertilisers or substances for pest and disease control, are

¹ Small producer: Turnover of organic sales below \$40Kpa – \$75Kpa depending on Certifier;

² Group of small producers: A functioning group of at least 5 small producers all within a 50 km radius organised by a Coordinator

classified according to 'permitted', 'restricted', or 'non-allowable' use. Most certifiers have lists of permitted inputs. Producers may apply to have inputs assessed for compliance and this may attract a fee.

Regardless of the type of input, its use *must* be recorded in the farm diary. If, for any reason, a non-allowable input is used then this use must be recorded and the certifier contacted *immediately*. Produce will not be permitted to be sold as organic until the certifier is satisfied that organic management has been re-applied.

Keeping records. On-going certification will require keeping good records. During inspections you must present these records to the inspector. This helps to verify that you have been managing in accordance with the standard. The adoption of a system to monitor and manage risk, such as HACCP, whilst not compulsory, is recommended.

Other useful information

Who are the certifiers?

There are presently seven industry organisations accredited to certify organic produce for export; their contact details are listed in the publication [AQIS Approved Australian organic certification organisations](#).

For information about export requirements on organic or any other produce visit the AQIS website www.daff.gov.au/aqis/export/organic-bio-dynamic

Further reading

Organic Industry Export Consultative Committee (OIECC), 2009. [National Standard for Organic and Bio-Dynamic Produce, Edition 3.4, July 2009](#). Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service. GPO Box 858. Canberra, ACT, 2601.

Australian Standard® AS 6000–2009 *Organic and biodynamic products*. Standards Australia GPO Box 476, Sydney, NSW 2001. <https://infostore.saiglobal.com/store/Details.aspx?ProductID=1140829>

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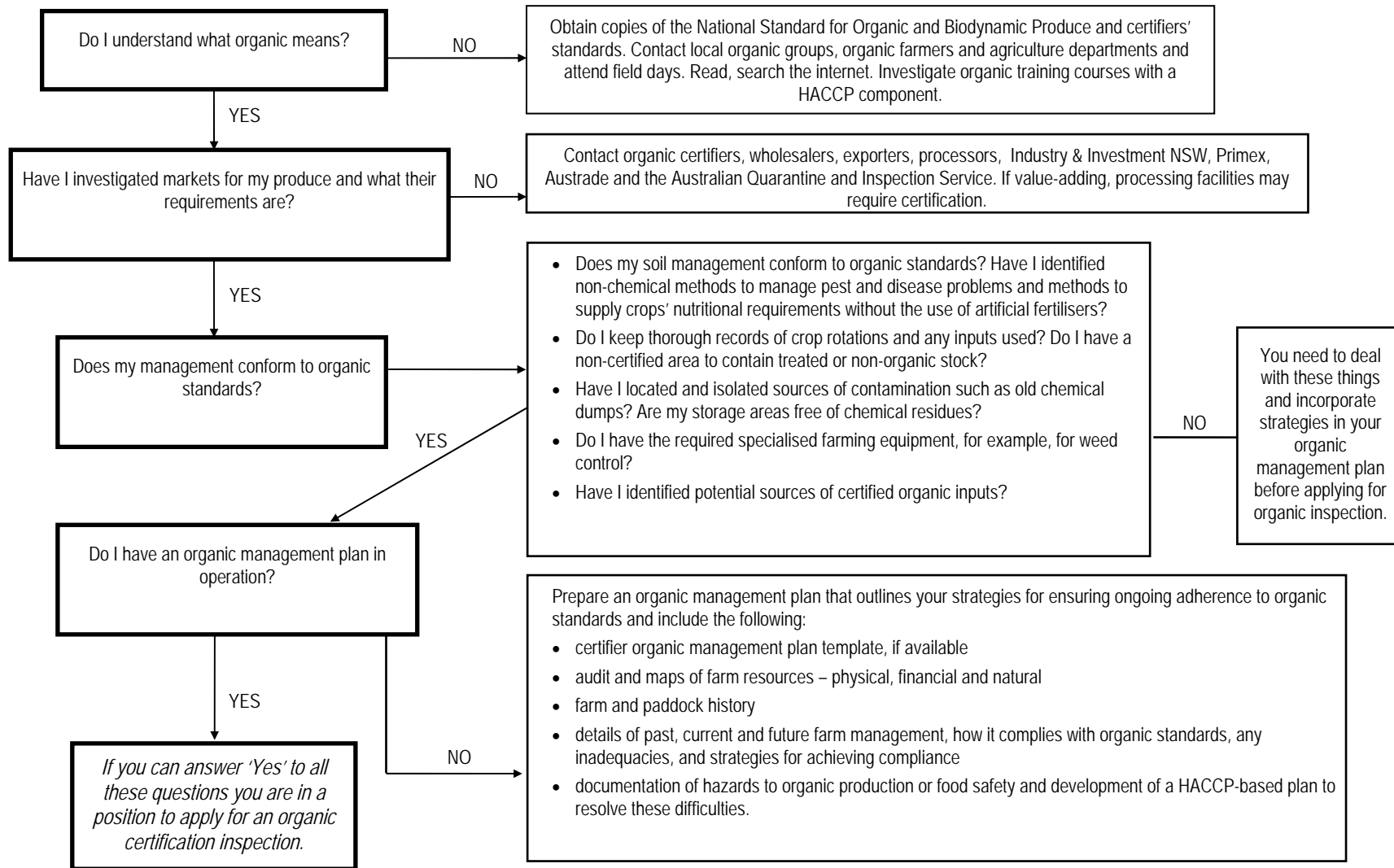
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Figure 1. Am I ready to apply for organic certification?



Note: HACCP = Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points.

Figure 2. The certification process

