

Guidelines for Dairy Farms Making the Transition to Certified Organic Milk Production

QMI Organic Inc.

The following guidelines are based on the CAN/CGSB-32.310 Organic Production Systems General Principles and Management Standards. For an official copy of the standard please contact the Canadian General Standards Board at 1-800-665-2472. You can also obtain a free electronic copy from their website: http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/cgsb/on_the_net/organic/index-e.html

Producers planning to make the transition to organic production need to consider many aspects of their operation. Timing for transition is an important factor to consider and it is recommended that interested producers create a transition plan which would include a timeline from the day that organic practices have been implemented to the day that the products from the farm would be considered certifiable. This can range from 1 year to 3 years depending upon what changes need to be made on the farm.

The first step for a transitioning dairy is to contact QMI's office and sign up as a transitioning farm. Every farm is different, so we encourage you to discuss your plans before beginning the transition to ensure everything is addressed.

A. Understanding the Organic Standard

The organic standard is very detailed in all aspects of production that need to be addressed in your organic plan. As a dairy operation your land must meet the requirements of the standard, along with the livestock management practices and some of the processing requirements must be met on-farm in regards to the milking parlor and milk house sanitation requirements.

B. Transitioning fields to organic production

In order to be certified organic, crops must be harvested at least three years after a prohibited pesticide, herbicide or chemical fertilizer application.

1. Buffer requirements

In cases where an adjoining farm is applying prohibited substances to their land (such as pesticides, herbicides, or synthetic fertilizers), an adequate barrier/distance between certified crops and the neighboring farm needs to be in place. Buffer zones need to be on average 25 feet depending on the boundary line between the two properties. If there is a healthy tree line or hedgerow, the distance may be reduced. In situations where the boundary line is open, a larger buffer zone may be required. Buffer zones need to be maintained for at least three years after the last application of prohibited pesticides

2. Soil Fertility

You must select and implement tillage and cultivation practices that maintain or improve the physical, chemical, and biological condition of the soil and minimize soil erosion.

Must include: diverse rotations, cover crops, manure, compost, plant residues, and applications of approved soil amendments.

3. Seeds

Organic seeds must be used if commercially available.

C. Dairy Herd Transition Requirements

Animals used to produce milk or milk products must have been under continuous organic management for a full year prior to these products being sold, labeled or represented as organic.

When an entire dairy herd is being converted to organic production, the operator shall provide a minimum of 80% organic feed in the first nine months and in the final three months only 100% organic feed must be provided to the animals. (See CAN/CGSB-32.310 6.3.1 for full details)

During the one year transition, producers must follow all the requirements of the standard including feed, health care, living conditions and record keeping.

1. Livestock Feed

Livestock must be fed a total feed ration that includes organically produced pasture and forage. All animals over 6 months of age shall have access to the outdoors and pasture. Antibiotics, GMO derived products and synthetic preservatives are not permitted in any feed or health care products. Be sure that any mineral supplements you use have been pre-approved by your certification agency, as there are many prohibited ingredients in commonly used products.

Young animals require natural milk.

2. Livestock Living Conditions

The producer of an organic livestock operation must establish and maintain livestock living conditions which accommodate the health and natural behavior of animals including:

- Access to the outdoors, shade, shelter, exercise areas, fresh air, and direct sunlight
- Access to pasture for ruminants: All animals over 6 months must be on pasture during the grazing season.
- Appropriate clean, dry bedding. *If typically consumed, it must be organic.*
- Shelter designed to allow for natural maintenance, comfort behaviors and opportunity for exercise while also allowing for good ventilation and air circulation.

The producer may provide temporary confinement for an animal because of inclement weather, the animal's stage of production, conditions under which the health and safety of the animal could be jeopardized, or risk to soil or water quality.

Manure must be managed in a manner that does not contribute to contamination of crops, soil or water, by plant nutrients, heavy metals, or pathogenic organisms and optimizes the recycling of nutrients.

3. Health Care Plan

Dairy farmers wishing to transition their operations to organic must comply with the organic standard for 12 months prior to shipping their milk organically. This means that all synthetic medications are prohibited for use in organic livestock production unless they are specifically allowed within the standard.

The producer must establish and maintain preventative livestock health care practices, including:

- Selection of species and types of livestock with regard to suitability for site-specific conditions and resistance to prevalent diseases and parasites.
- Provision of feed ration sufficient to meet nutritional requirements, including vitamins, minerals, protein and/or amino acids, fatty acids, energy sources, and fiber.
- Appropriate housing, pasture conditions and sanitation practices
- Conditions which allow for exercise, freedom of movement and reduction of stress
- Administration of vaccines and veterinary biologics
- Performance of physical alterations as needed to promote the animal's welfare and in a manner that minimizes pain and stress
 - Dehorning of livestock is allowed
 - Tail docking in not allowed

4. Antibiotic Usage

Use of antibiotics is restricted. As a last resort its usage is permitted in emergencies.

- Milk withdrawal time of at least 14 days or two times the specific medication's withdrawal period, whichever is longer
- Must be documented in herd health records
- No more that two treatments (of combined parasiticides and antibiotics) per year. Dairy animals that require more than two treatments shall undergo a 12-month transition period.
- Animals with chronic conditions require repeated treatments shall be removed from the herd.

5. Parasiticide Usage

Use of parasiticides is allowed only in health care emergencies and justification must include the results of fecal tests and written permission of the certification body is required. There are other specific restrictions noted in the organic standard.

D. Record Keeping

All organic stock must be clearly identifiable, typically with ear tags or tattoos. Organic livestock producers must maintain a clear and verifiable audit trail for all organic products produced. Below is a list of records typically maintained:

- All medications administered (dates, dosages, and sources)
- All feed bought and fed (receipts, sources, organic certificates)
- All feed supplements used (receipts, sources, dates and quantities given to livestock)
- Purchase and sales records for livestock and livestock products (dates, weights, description, etc...)
- All materials used in the on-site production of crops for feed (receipts, source, date, quantity applied)
- Other more general records would include: herd health records, milk recording, sanitation and purge records, monitoring results (SCC, SPC, etc...)

E. Summary of Requirements

Conditions	Requirements
Feed	First 9 months of the transition year, provide a minimum of 80% feed that is either organic or raised from land included in the organic system plan and that is managed organically. Final 3 months of the transition year, only organic feed is allowed.
Antibiotics	Restricted – 14 day withdrawal or twice the labeled withdrawal time, whichever is greater. Only in emergency situations, not allowed as a regular health care practice.
Hormones	Restricted. Only for therapeutic reasons under vet. supervision not to stimulate or retard growth or production. Not allowed to trigger or synchronize estrus.
Sanitation Practices	Teat dips, milking sanitation chemicals allowed. See permitted substance list. However, equipment must be double rinsed with clear (tested) water prior to milking.
Vaccinations	All vaccinations for endemic disease are approved.
Living Conditions	Bred and milking herd: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires free daily access (weather permitting) to organic pasture during growing season • Grazing land must be certified organic Livestock Stocking rates: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific indoor and outdoor stocking rates published in the standard
Animals	Herd must undergo 12 month transition period. Replacements – from non-certified sources must undergo a 12 month transition period. Bulls – no requirements (organic preferred) Embryo transplanted animals prohibited

* Adapted from B.C. Dairy Talk Agdex#410 2000-01