Introduction to Organic Farming
A Growing Opportunity for Pennsylvania Farmers

The philosophy and methods of organic farming have been practiced in the United States for over a century. In 2002, the National Organic Program (NOP), administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), was established to develop, implement, and administer standard production, handling, and labeling practices for organic agricultural products. The NOP also accredits domestic and foreign certifying agents who inspect organic production and handling operations to certify that they meet USDA standards. To legally market an agricultural product as organic, a farmer or processor with gross sales of more than $5,000 worth of organic products annually must first complete the NOP’s organic certification process to demonstrate that their practices meet the NOP regulations.

Organic farming systems rely on ecologically based practices, such as cultural and biological pest management, and virtually exclude the use of synthetic chemicals in crop and animal production. In addition, the use of antibiotics and hormones in livestock production is prohibited. Genetically modified crops such as those containing genes that confer resistance to certain herbicides or pests are not allowed. In organic farming systems, the fundamental components and natural processes of ecosystems, such as soil-organism activities, nutrient cycling, and species distribution and competition, are used to work directly and indirectly as farm management tools. For example, crops are rotated, planted, and harvesting dates are carefully planned, and habitat that supplies resources for beneficial organisms is provided. Weeds are managed with biological and species diversity and natural processes, such as mechanical practices such as mulching and cultivation or with cultural practices such as mulching. Soil fertility and crop nutrient needs are managed through crop rotations and cover crops and supplemented with manure, composts, crop waste material, and other allowed substances. 

Organic certification is designed to maintain the integrity of organically produced food by keeping it free of chemical and genetic contaminants throughout the process of production, harvest, storage, handling, and sale. Organic certification verifies that your production practices meet the regulations and can offer new marketing opportunities for your farm products. Consumer interest in organic food continues to increase, making organic farming a growing opportunity for many Pennsylvania farmers.
Organic farming can have advantages of many environmental situations, including clean air, clean water, community-supported agriculture, and better nutrition. Organic farmers can take advantage of many regions that are not as productive to produce organically. You should also consider where and how you will market your products. It depends directly on the consumers, or a processor, distributor, wholesaler, or retailer, and it will vary from one certifying agent to another. Certification is more thorough and costly than others to produce organically. Before becoming certified organic, it is important to understand the NOP regulations and required paperwork. It is also important to know that the certification process is not required for nontherapeutic antibiotics and growth hormones. Lbs. of allowed substances and clarifications of allowed substances are provided from certified organic producers. Organic status if your farm management practices comply with the regulations of the NOP/USDA. If you are not sure if your farm management practices comply with the regulations of the NOP/USDA, then the agency will inform you about your management practices. The inspector will examine your farm management practices and input records, facilities, and ask questions about your management practices. The inspector will look at either borders that protect your farm from chemical drift that may originate from nonorganic fields. If the inspector detects drift, he or she may request a submission of information that will determine if certification should be awarded. Your certifying agent will grant you certification if your farm management practices comply with the regulations of the NOP/USDA. More on NOP Regulations. The NOP guidelines and procedures are found in the following sections of the rule: §205.203 Soil Fertility Management: §205.206 Organic Status. If your farm management practices comply with the regulations of the NOP/USDA, the certifying agent will grant you certified USDA organic status if your farm management practices comply with the regulations of the NOP/USDA and you complete all the steps of the application process. Submit an Application Once you have transitioned to organic practices, the next step is to submit an application for certification to your certifying agent. The application process begins with an initial review of your application at any time before application deadline. The application process begins once your application forms are complete. The renewal process includes the original application process. The renewal process requires re-certification of your farm management practices and records. Your farm management practices are re-certified annually. The renewal process involves an inspection of your farm’s processing facilities and re-certification of your farm management practices and records.