

Organic Beef Production in Ontario

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, some Ontario beef producers established production systems designed to add value to their products by marketing beef with specific attributes (or product branding) that may command a premium or ensure market share.

These systems include producing meat from animals raised with one or more of the following criteria. The animals:

- did not receive antibiotics
- did not receive exogenous hormonal implants
- were fed a feedlot diet of predominantly corn
- were fed a feedlot diet that is predominately forage
- had unlimited access to the outdoors
- were finished on pasture
- were not fed any animal by-products
- were not fed any chemical feed additives
- were raised according to organic standards

In addition, some production systems have been described as “natural,” “pasture-raised” or “farm-raised.”

One challenge in these systems is to preserve the identity and integrity of the product throughout the production system. Since beef production

tends to be composed of many independently owned and managed segments within a single supply chain, integration across supply chains is a challenge. Specific criteria required to meet these various branding initiatives have been developed and implemented by various groups. This has led to confusion among consumers about what is meant by the terms used in product descriptions.

Organic production organizations have developed criteria that describe both unacceptable and accepted practices for organic production systems. A consensus version of these criteria has become accepted at the national level through the adoption of a federally regulated certification system for organic production, including beef.

ORGANIC PRODUCTION DEFINED

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency administers legislation that regulates certified organic agricultural production in Canada. [1] This legislation defines production practices that are acceptable in an organic system. Products that meet all of the applicable national organic standards may be eligible for certification by an approved third party certification body, and sold as “Certified Organic.” The regulations came into effect on June 30, 2009.

CERTIFICATION

Canadian producers or processors who wish to produce, process and/or market agricultural products or foods as “Certified Organic” and identify them with the Canada Organic label must hire an accredited certification body [2] to review their system and provide inspector oversight.

Specific production practices must be followed to qualify for Canadian certification. More detailed information can be found in the Canadian Organic Standards, which includes two documents:

- *Organic Production Systems: General Principles and Management Standards* (CAN/CGSB-32.310 - 2020)
 - [Organic Production Systems: Permitted Substances Lists](#) (CAN/CGSB-32.311 - 2020)
- Links to both documents can be found at www.inspection.gc.ca



Figure 1. The Canada Organic Logo provides more opportunities for organic producers.
(Courtesy of Canadian Food Inspection Agency)

PRODUCTION STANDARDS

For beef to be marketed as Certified Organic, specific production standards for feeds and feeding, breeding, production and health practices must be met. [3]

Feeds and feeding

- Animals must be fed a balanced ration to meet the animals’ nutritional requirements essential to maintain health and wellbeing.
- Animals must be provided with organic feed. Organic feed crops must be produced in accordance with the organic standards and regulations.
- Young animals must be fed natural milk with some exceptions permitted as part of a veterinary-approved plan of disease eradication.
- Animals are to have access to pasture, weather permitting. Mature ruminants should get a minimum of 30% of their forage dry matter intake during this period from pasture.
- At least 60% of dry matter in daily rations shall consist of: hay, fodder that is fresh or dried, or ensiled forage (e.g., fermented grass, legumes and corn plants).
- An increased grain ration is permitted to ensure that nutritional requirements are met during uncommonly cold periods or when forage quality is compromised due to extraordinary weather events.
- When silages are fed, at least 15% of the total dry matter in daily rations shall consist of long-fibre forage, that is, greater than 10 cm (4 in.) stem length.
- When ensiled corn is fed, unless there is analysis to the contrary, it shall be considered 40% grain/60% forage. The proportion of grain in ensiled corn shall be included in the percentage of grains in the ration.

Prohibited

- feed or feed additives or supplements that contain substances not in accordance with the Organic Feed Standards
- feed medications or veterinary drugs, including hormones and prophylactic antibiotics to promote growth
- feeds chemically extracted or defatted with a prohibited substance
- mammalian or avian slaughter by-products
- synthetic preservation agents, colouring agents, appetite enhancers or flavour enhancers
- feed formulas containing manure or other animal waste

Breeding

- Use natural methods of breeding; artificial insemination is permitted.
- Do not use reproductive hormones to trigger or synchronize estrus.
- Do not use embryo transfer techniques or breeding techniques using genetic engineering or related techniques.

Production and health practices

- Ear tagging, branding and castration (including banding) are permitted.
- Tail docking of cattle is prohibited unless necessary for veterinary treatment of injured animals.
- Vaccines are permitted when it has been documented that the disease can be transmitted to other livestock on the premises and cannot be combated by other means.
- Use of pharmaceuticals, antibiotics, hormones and steroids for preventive treatments are prohibited.
- Hormonal treatments are to be used only for therapeutic reasons and under veterinary supervision. The meat from these animals must not be sold as organic meat.
- Veterinary products are permitted as a last resort, following the rules found in *Organic Production Systems — Permitted Substances Lists* (CAN/CGSB-32.311-2020) [4]
- If permitted treatments are unlikely to treat an illness or injury, veterinary drugs or antibiotics may be administered under supervision of a veterinarian; however this meat cannot be sold as organic.
- Animals must have access to the outdoors suitable to the animal's stage of production, climate and environment.

IS ORGANIC PRODUCTION FOR YOU?

Becoming a certified organic beef producer brings potential rewards along with challenges. The certified organic designation provides the opportunity to market a differentiated product that meets published standards and is backed by third-party certification. Producers may be able to link up with an already established production chain that preserves product identity to the consumer level. Consumers may be willing to pay a premium for the product.

Challenges to becoming an organic producer may include higher production costs, sourcing organic feed, pasture and crop management, managing animal health and incurring a 2–3-year phase-in period to convert crop production to organic methods. Below are some questions to consider.

- Is there access to a suitable outlet where the organic product will command a premium?
- What changes are required to convert the current production system?
- What extra costs or reductions in productivity will these changes entail?

Then compare the potential benefits, costs and risks associated with changing over to organic production.

RESOURCES FOR ORGANIC PRODUCTION

Canadian Food Inspection Agency
www.inspection.gc.ca

Canadian Organic Growers
www.cog.ca/

Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario
www.efao.ca/

Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada
<https://www.dal.ca/faculty/agriculture/oacc/en-home.html>

Organic Council of Ontario
www.organiccouncil.ca

Organic Federation of Canada
www.organicfederation.ca/index.html

REFERENCES

1. Government of Canada. Organic Products. 2021. <https://inspection.canada.ca/organic-products/eng/1526652186199/1526652186496>
2. Government of Canada. Canadian Organic Standards. 2020. <https://inspection.canada.ca/organic-products/standards/eng/1300368619837/1300368673172>
3. Government of Canada. Organic Production Systems: general principles and management standards. 2020. http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2020/ongc-cgsb/P29-32-310-2020-eng.pdf
4. Government of Canada. Organic Production Systems: permitted substances lists. 2020. (CAN/CGSB-32.311-2020)

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