

replaces OMAFRA Factsheet #11-043, *An Overview of Organic Pork Production*

Organic Pork Production in Ontario

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INTRODUCTION

The principle goal of organic production is to develop enterprises that are sustainable and harmonious with the environment [1]. Organic production is a holistic system designed to optimize the productivity and fitness of diverse communities within the agro-ecosystem, including soil organisms, plants, livestock and people [1].

Organic food is still a niche category in Canada, representing approximately 3.2% of the total Canadian food dollar spent on food products [2]. However, this is growing at a fast pace, both in Canada and in other parts of the world. The value of organic food products sold in Canada through all retail channels was estimated at \$2 billion in 2008. In 2020, Canadian consumers spent an estimated \$6.9 billion annually on organic products. This is up from 2.6% and \$5.4 billion in 2017 [2].

One of the driving forces behind the growth of the organic food market is increased public concern over the safety and quality of foods produced from conventional food production systems. Organic foods are perceived by some consumers as being safer for consumption, better in nutrition and healthier than foods produced by conventional

production. Among the other reasons given for buying organic are:

- organic food production is better for the environment
- organic food tastes better
- consumers want to try new products

While most of these claims remain to be proven, more consumers are purchasing organic foods.

The market and demand for organic pork in Canada are also growing, providing opportunities for the pork industry. Purchases of organic meat and poultry grew from 26% in 2016 to 32% in 2020 — the largest increase of any product category [2].

ORGANIC PORK PRODUCTION IN ONTARIO

It is estimated that there are about 45 certified organic pork producers in Ontario with a total annual production of approximately 24,000 market hogs. Certified organic hogs produced in Ontario are marketed to processors in Ontario, Quebec and the U.S. Current information shows that, in Ontario, certified organic pork operations range in size from 5 to 300+ sows for farrow-to-finish operations.



Figure 1. Canada organic logo. Courtesy of Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

ORGANIC PORK STANDARDS

Through a consultative process with industry stakeholders, the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) has developed Canadian standards for organic agriculture. Aligned with organic standards published in the U.S. and Europe, *Organic Production Systems — General Principles and Management Standards* includes guidelines for organic pork producers and provides the basis for organic certification. In December 2006, the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) first published these regulations. The current version is available from the [Government of Canada](http://www.governmentofcanada.ca) website.

In June 2011, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) began enforcing the standards. A Canadian Organic Office has been established, and the CFIA provides oversight to the process of certifying organic farms and products across the country. Certified products may carry the official Canada Organic logo on their labels (Figure 1).

ORGANIC PORK CERTIFICATION

To be able to label and market pork as organic, nationally or internationally, producers must have their operation certified by a certifying body. Not all certifying bodies provide certification services to pork producers.

Some certifying bodies are associated with or accredited by other international organic certifying

bodies or organizations. Under the regulations, all accredited certifying bodies must adhere to the Canadian organic standard as the minimum requirement for all organic certification agencies in Canada.

Contact a certifying body for further information on production standards, program requirements and marketing of the products before starting the transition to organic pork production. A listing of some of the agencies that conduct certification of organic foods in Ontario as well as some organizations associated with organic food can be found at ontario.ca/organic.

ORGANIC PORK FARM INSPECTIONS

All certification bodies require an inspection of a farm in the year prior to achieving certification status in addition to annual or semi-annual inspections in following years. Like the Canadian Quality Assurance (CQA) or Canadian Pork Excellence Program, organic pork production requires producers to document all production activities and keep detailed records to prove that they are following specific standards and rules.

TRANSITION PERIOD TO ORGANIC

The transition period — the time required to switch an operation from conventional pork production to organic pork production — can be as short as 12 months and as long as 3 years, depending on whether the producer will be growing the organic feed as well. Transition time is a major hurdle for converting conventional pork production to organic pork production, because hogs can't be marketed as organic during this period, even though they must be raised according to the organic production standards.

GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ORGANIC PORK PRODUCTION

Living and Housing Conditions

Generally, all facilities used to raise pigs must meet the animals' normal socialization, feeding and living requirements. This includes providing sufficient space (Table 1) and regular access to outdoors, sunlight and fresh air, as permitted by weather conditions. A certified organic operation cannot house pigs on 100% slatted floors, in dry sow stalls or in farrowing crates and must provide dry bedding materials such as straw or wood shavings — from organic sources, if available.

Table 1. Organic pig stocking rates

	Indoor Space	Outdoor Runs and Pens
Sows and piglets (up to 40 days old)	7.5 m ² for each sow and litter	Not required
Growing pigs		
a. up to 30 kg	0.6 m ² /head	0.4 m ² /head
b. 30–50 kg	0.8 m ² /head	0.6 m ² /head
c. 50–85 kg	1.1 m ² /head	0.8 m ² /head
d. >85 kg	1.3 m ² /head	1.0 m ² /head
Sows in group pens	3 m ² /head	3 m ² /head
Boars in individual pens	9 m ² /head	9 m ² /head

Source: *Organic Production Systems — General Principles and Management Standards*. Canadian General Standards Board. Government of Canada. CAN/CGSB-32.310-2020 Corrigendum No.1, March 2021

Pigs raised under the organic standards must have access to outdoor exercise areas, shade, shelter, fresh air and natural daylight suitable to the species, its stage of production, the climate and the environment (Figure 2).

Outdoor areas may include woodlands, other natural environments, soil or concrete exercise areas. Access to pasture is recommended but not mandatory, however, any pasture the pigs use must be managed to avoid soil degradation, long-term damage to the vegetation or water contamination.

Any outdoor areas should be properly fenced and secure. For more information on fencing for outdoor pig production, see the OMAFRA factsheet [Fencing for Outdoor Pig Production – Protecting Your Livestock and the Environment](#).

The operator of an organic livestock operation may provide temporary confinement for livestock owing to one of the following:

- inclement weather
- conditions where the health, safety or well-being of the animal could be jeopardized, given its stage of production
- risks relating to soil, water or plant quality



Figure 2. Outdoor areas should be properly fenced. Courtesy of 3Gen Organics.

Breeds and Breeding

Take the following into account when selecting breeds of pigs for organic production systems:

- adaptation of livestock to local conditions
- vitality and resistance of livestock to disease
- absence of disease and health problems specific to breeds

Natural breeding (breeding gilts or sows using boars) is preferred, although artificial insemination (AI) is permitted under organic standards. Embryo transplants and breeding techniques using genetic engineering or related technology are not allowed. The use of injectable reproductive hormones to trigger and synchronize estrus is also prohibited from use.

Pig Sources

To meet current organic standards, pigs must be:

- born from certified organic production units, or
- have been born from parents raised under the organic production standards, and
- raised in an organic production system throughout their lives

An exception is pigs used for meat: they must be under continuous organic management from the beginning of the last third of the gestation period (38 days) of the sows.



Figure 3. Indoor sow barn. Courtesy of 3Gen Organics.

Additionally, breeding stock must come from organic operations (Figure 3). If organic breeding stock is not available, non-gestating gilts and breeding boars from a non-organic operation may be integrated into the organic system. However, these breeding animals must be raised as organic for 12 months or more in order to be resold as organic breeding stock.

Animal Health

Disease prevention is the first line of defence in an organic animal health strategy. Good animal husbandry practices, including appropriate choice of breeds, housing conditions, space allowance, sanitation practices and prompt treatment will result in a high level of animal health. Vaccinations are only allowed when the targeted diseases are communicable and cannot be controlled by other means. When pigs become sick or injured in spite of preventive measures, they must be treated and isolated.

Due to the requirement for outdoor access, organic pork operations must have a comprehensive plan to minimize parasite problems. The plan must include preventive measures such as outdoor access management and fecal monitoring, as well as emergency measures in the event of a parasite outbreak. Should preventive measures fail, organic pork producers may use parasiticides not listed in the *Organic Production Systems — Permitted Substances Lists* [3] provided that:

- observation of the livestock or fecal sample analysis indicate infection with parasites

- the producer has received written instructions from a veterinarian recommending the product and method for parasite control
- treatment withdrawal times shall be twice the label requirement or 14 days, whichever is longer
- there shall be only one treatment for slaughter animals under 1 year old, and
- the producer provides a written action plan (including timing), describing amendments to the parasite control plan that will avoid similar emergencies in the future

Treatment of pigs with specific targeted medicines is allowed and recommended. These medicines are subject to the standards and approval of the certifying body. However, the use of synthetic antibiotics is prohibited for animals designated for organic pork. The producer must record all treatments, such as animal identification numbers, substance name, dosage, dates and duration of the treatment and the results, in detail.

The standards permit castration and other surgical treatments, such as tagging, of the pigs at the youngest age possible to avoid any undue animal suffering. The standards prohibit tail-docking and cutting of teeth unless required for herd safety and health.

When preventive practices and veterinary biologics are inadequate to prevent or treat sickness, the well-being of the animal must be protected. All appropriate medications, including the use of drugs that are not acceptable to organic production, must be used. Pigs treated with prohibited substances, such as synthetic antibiotics, at any stage of the production must be removed from organic herds or permanently identified and cannot be marketed as organic pork. Treating pregnant sows with medications or veterinary biologics within the first two-thirds of pregnancy may be allowed, however, the meat from these treated animals cannot be marketed as organic nor can the sows be sold as organic breeding stock.

Feed and Water

Organic feed shall consist of substances that are necessary and essential for maintaining the pigs' health, well-being and vitality and meet the

physiological and behavioural needs of the pigs. This includes the need for roughage and fresh/dried fodder or silage in the daily ration. All feed ingredients used must be certified as being produced, handled and processed in accordance with the standards specified by the certifying body. Pig diets must not include feed medications, growth promoters, lactation promoters, synthetic appetite enhancers, animal by-products, preservation agents, colouring agents and genetically engineered or modified organisms (GMOs) or their by-products. For information on substances permitted in organic pig diets, check the [Organic Production Systems — Permitted Substances Lists \[3\]](#).

Transport and Handling

Producers must handle pigs humanely and responsibly according to provincial and federal laws, regulations or guidelines and the requirements set by the certifying body. Pigs should be transported and handled to minimize stress, injury and suffering. This can be accomplished by using direct, short transportation routes and providing bedding and suitable shelter against inclement weather conditions. The use of electrical stimulation or calming drugs is prohibited. Pigs too ill to be transported are to be humanely euthanized on-farm.

Other Requirements

There are other requirements included in organic standards guidelines, such as manure management, pest management and parasite control that should also be considered.

SUMMARY

Consumer demand for organic pork is rising. Some pork producers may wish to capture part of this niche market. The information on organic pork requirements presented here is only a general overview. For detailed information, see *Canada's Organic Production Systems — General Principles and Management Standards [3]* or

contact a certifying body that meets your needs for production and marketing. Organic pork production takes time, hard work, and facility and management changes to meet all the requirements. Thoroughly research the requirements for organic pork production to determine whether this type of production system is appropriate for your operation. Organic production is not for all pork producers.

ENDNOTES

1. 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.
2. Canada Organic Trade Association Press release October 5, 2020.
3. Government of Canada. Organic Production Systems: permitted substances lists. 2020. (CAN/CGSB-32.311-2020).

REFERENCES

- Canada Organic Regime operating manual. 2019. <https://inspection.canada.ca/organic-products/operating-manual/eng/1389199079075/1554143470958>.
- Government of Canada. Organic Products. 2021. <https://inspection.canada.ca/organic-products/eng/1526652186199/1526652186496>.

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