

Organic Sheep Production in Ontario

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INTRODUCTION

Organic sheep production is a system of farm design and management practices for producing meat and milk products without the use of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers or antibiotics. For some producers, organic sheep production can be a good fit. There are many factors to consider before making the transition to organic sheep production, including current and future demand, standards, certification requirements, production costs and lifestyle goals.

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.

ORGANIC SHEEP CERTIFICATION

For ovine products to be sold as organic, producers must be certified as organic. Basic certification requirements include:

- managing crop and pasture land without the use of synthetic fertilizers, genetically engineered (modified) organisms (GMOs), fungicides, herbicides or insecticides for 3 consecutive years
- maintaining accurate records for crop production practices, including machinery usage and cleaning, rented land and storage
- providing a comprehensive history of all land to be certified
- feeding 100% organic rations (with certain exceptions, such as minerals and essential ingredients that cannot be sourced as organic) to all animals in the flock
- avoiding the use of antibiotics or synthetic hormones (under the supervision of a veterinarian, antibiotic use is permitted twice a year per ewe but the withdrawal period must be extended); vaccination, vitamins and electrolytes are allowed.
- providing access to certified organic grazing land throughout the growing season, weather permitting. During the grazing season, pasture must provide at least 30% of the total forage dry matter intake. The animal should have access to the outside throughout the year.

Before transitioning to organic production, contact an accredited certifying body and obtain the current certification requirements.

The period of time it takes to switch a sheep operation from conventional production to organic production is called the transition period. How long this takes depends on factors such as flock size, the size of the land base and previous farming practices. Complete organic certification generally requires a mandatory year of transition for the flock and pasture — the farm is operated as an organic operation for 1 full year before it is certified. During the transition time, the flock is kept according to organic production standards, but the products produced from this flock (meat and milk) cannot be marketed as organic until the farm receives certification. In addition, the hay, pasture and other fields for feed crops must have been managed as organic for a minimum of 3 years on top of the mandatory 1 year of transition time.

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 (Figure 1) must hire an accredited certification body^[2] to review their system and provide inspector oversight.



Figure 1. Being able to display the Canada Organic logo provides more opportunities for organic producers. (Courtesy of Canadian Food Inspection Agency)

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.

PRODUCTION STANDARDS

For sheep products 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 Accepted Practices

- 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, for example, 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 Practices

- Feed or feed additives or supplements that contain substances not in accordance with the organic feed standards are prohibited.
- Feeding medications or veterinary drugs, including hormones and prophylactic antibiotics, to promote growth is prohibited.
- Feeds chemically extracted or defatted with a prohibited substance are not allowed.
- Mammalian or avian slaughter byproducts may not be fed to sheep.
- Use of synthetic preservation agents, colouring agents, appetite enhancers or flavour enhancers is prohibited.

BREEDING

- Use natural methods of breeding; artificial insemination is permitted.
- Do not use reproductive hormones to trigger or synchronize estrus.

PRODUCTION AND HEALTH PRACTICES

- Ear tagging, branding and castration (including banding) are permitted.
- Tail docking of lambs is permitted but shall be carried out in a manner that minimizes pain, stress and suffering.
- 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 is 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.

PARASITE CONTROL

Organic sheep operations shall have a comprehensive plan to minimize parasite problems. The plan shall include preventive measures, such as genetic selection, pasture management, fecal monitoring and assessments of tissue at slaughter, and emergency measures in the event of a parasite outbreak. Hygienic cleaning and disinfection methods for barns, such as power washing, steam washing, floor burning and lime washing, shall be included in the plan as well as down time (i.e., when the barn is vacant).

By way of an exception, if preventive measures fail due to, for example, climatic conditions or other uncontrollable factors, the operator may use parasiticides that are not listed in Table 5.3 of CAN/CGSB-32.311-2020, provided that:

- observation of the animal, fecal test results or assessment of tissue indicate that animal is infected with parasites
- the operator provides a written action plan, with a timeline, describing how they will amend their parasite control plan to avoid similar emergencies
- the operator has written instructions from a veterinarian indicating the product and method to be used, including provisions to avoid developing parasite resistance, such as rotation of parasiticides
- withdrawal times are twice the label requirement or 14 days, whichever is longer

If these conditions are met, the following restrictions apply:

- The exception cannot be granted for a group of animals or an entire production unit for more than 2 years in a row for the same problem.
- A ewe may receive only one treatment of parasiticides during gestation.

- Meat animals less than 12 months old shall receive, at most, one parasiticide treatment. Meat animals 12 months of age or older that receive more than two parasiticide treatments in their lifespan shall lose their organic status.
- Dairy animals that receive more than two treatments in a 12-month period, whether of parasiticides, antibiotics or one of each, shall lose their organic status and go through a 12-month transition period.
- Dairy cull animals that receive more than two treatments with parasiticides over their lifespan shall never be considered organic for meat.
- Dairy cull animals that receive antibiotics shall never be considered organic for meat.

IS ORGANIC PRODUCTION FOR YOU?

Becoming a certified organic sheep 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, challenges 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 sales 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.

REFERENCES

1. Government of Canada. Organic Products. 2021. <https://inspection.canada.ca/organicproducts/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)

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/

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
www.ontario.ca/organic

Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada
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

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