Certifications: Marketing Benefits for your Farm Business

Why would farmers want to pursue certifications?

There are many claims attached to products- how do consumers know which ones are valid and which ones are “greenwashing”, claims that do not mean anything but are meant to appeal to consumers? Voluntary independent third party certification allows products to address consumer concerns. It assures quality, prevents fraud, and promotes sales.

Benefits to become certified include validation and more universal recognition of your efforts, and authentication of your claims. You may use a certification label as a marketing strategy to appeal to a certain market segment. Your products may also claim a higher price. Some farmers may choose to get their products certified to publicly share their values. Costs of certification include the time and money spent to adhere to the requirements, the fees associated with applying for certification, and fees and time towards re-certification.

The market segment to which most certifications will appeal is referred to as LOHAS -Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability, a market segment focused on health and fitness, the environment, personal development, sustainable living, and social justice. This market segment represents about 1 in 4 Americans, and has been growing steadily. Motivations among consumers include:

- health
- environment
- animal welfare
- social justice

Consumers may be willing to pay more to support their values, while others may choose one product over another based on their personal value but only if they cost the same. For more information on this market segment, visit www.lohas.com.

What are 3rd party certifications, and how do they work?

Third party certifications require an effort to learn about and then an agreement to adhere to a set of standards developed by independent organizations. Third party organizations do not have a financial stake in the business and require paperwork (reporting) to show adherence to the certification standards. It is important to allow the farming operation to be audited (inspected) by the third party organization. If the farming operation is deemed to meet the standards, then the farm business is allowed to advertise the certification. Third party certifications may require payment of application, inspection, and/or certification fees. There may also be a requirement to report and host continued audits regularly, typically annually. This proves that a continued effort to meet standards, and to keep careful records showing how the farm business is meeting standards is ongoing. Each certifying organization may have different methods and timelines, fees, and frequency of audits. Certifying organizations that do not have a financial stake in the business will be viewed as more credible by consumers, though there are some “second” party certifications developed by industry representatives.
Some organizations even go as far to work with or become certified themselves by entities that specialize in ensuring certifications are unbiased and independent, such as the International Standards Organization (ISO) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). This is an important consideration for a farming operation as choosing a certification standard and the certifying organization represents a considerable investment of time and effort.

**Understanding terms used on product labels**

While it may be tempting to use terms that may appeal to LOHAS but do not have an authorized definition or third party auditing and certifications, an informed consumer will be able to see beyond unsubstantiated claims. Some terms may be defined and/or regulated by government agencies, such as USDA, while others have no official definition but are used broadly in an attempt to appeal to consumer values. For example, the term “natural” is currently neither defined nor regulated by the USDA, yet many products use this claim. Another example is the term “free range”. While the USDA does define “free-range” in regards to poultry products, there are no regulations that prevent or restrict the use of the term on products. Certification provides a way for the farmer to show that they are indeed using specific practices, and are not trying to fool consumers into buying their product based on false or unsubstantiated claims (often referred to as “greenwashing”).

**What types of certifications are available?**

Agricultural certifications range from global to regional, addressing environmental, health and safety, and/or social justice objectives. An overview of several, though not all, available certifications are provided here, grouped by what values they seek to protect. There are a growing number of certifications available. Certifying organizations provide varying levels of assistance and outreach for marketing their certifications to consumers and educating consumers about what their standards mean. Almost all list certified producers, sometimes retailers and restaurants, which carry certified products on their websites. Some may go further, for example providing smartphone apps for locating restaurants that carry certified products. Some practice advocacy and lobbying to support their values. Farmers should spend some time thinking about the values they feel strongly enough about supporting, learning about their targeted clientele, and then carefully reviewing certifying organizations’ standards to determine which certifications meet their goals and may be beneficial for the business to pursue. Listed below are some agencies to consider and the implications of earning them. It is encouraged you follow the website URL we have listed to learn more about each one.

**Environmental and food safety certifications:**

**Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP)**

Certifying organization: USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, Fruit and Vegetable Program, Specialty Crops Inspection (SCI) Division

What does it mean? A voluntary audit that focuses on best agricultural practices to verify that fruits and vegetables are produced, packed, handled, and stored in the safest manner possible to minimize risks of microbial food safety hazards. Those who receive acceptable audits are listed in a searchable database on the USDA website.

USDA Organic

Certifying organization: USDA, though a private, foreign, or State entity that has been accredited by the USDA handles the certification process. These entities are called certifying agents and are located throughout the United States and around the world.

What does it mean? That a farm or operation uses organic practices to produce crops or livestock as required by the USDA. Crops, livestock, processed products, and wild crops may be certified. Certification allows the farm to sell, label, and represent products as organic. The term “organic” is regulated by the federal government, and an organization could be fined if they use it without becoming certified.

How to get certified? The farm follows the required organic practices by the USDA, including no application of prohibited substances for three years, submits an application to a certified agent, submits to an inspection, and completes annual recertification requirements. USDA Organic Certification Cost-Share Programs can help producers recoup some of the costs of certification after it is acquired. Visit [http://www.ams.usda.gov/](http://www.ams.usda.gov/) and click on “National Organic Program”.

Certified Naturally Grown

Certifying organization: Certified Naturally Grown (CNG) is a non-profit organization offering certification tailored for small-scale, direct-market farmers and beekeepers using methods they call natural, which are very similar to methods required for organic certification.

What does it mean? An alternate certification to USDA Organic, it requires a farm or operation to use practices similar to USDA organic, with some additional practices. The website advertises that it is similar but requires less cost and paperwork. Produce, apiaries, and livestock are eligible for certification. (Note- the National Organic Program does not certify apiaries)

How to get certified? The program includes an online application process, annual farm inspections by peer farmers, random pesticide residue testing, and an annual membership fee. Some record keeping is required. CNG has a scholarship fund for new farmers who become certified. [http://www.naturallygrown.org/](http://www.naturallygrown.org/)

Certified Sustainable Seafood

Certifying organization: Marine Stewardship Council

What does it mean? A global certification, wild caught seafood with this label was fished using methods deemed sustainable by the MSC. Wild caught fisheries that voluntarily meet the MSC standard and go through the certification process are eligible to mark their catch with the MSC’s blue ecolabel. Some farm-raised fisheries are eligible for certification as well if there is a link between the farmed stock and wild stock.

How to get certified? Visit [www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org), select a certifying organization, and appoint a program manager within the fishery. There is a pre-assessment to guide the fishery on how to meet the standard, and then a full 7-step assessment process.
Animal welfare certifications:

There are many different certifications available for showing that an operation uses certain levels of care and handling of animals. Animal welfare is a sensitive issue for both consumers and producers, and there are many views on what constitutes humane animal treatment. Farmers should review these organizations’ standards very carefully to determine which certification meets their values.

**American Humane Certified:**

Certifying organization: American Humane Association

What does it mean? The American Humane Association has developed sets of standards for animals that provide meat, poultry and dairy products, and for various poultry production types (cage-free, free-range/pasture, hatching, etc.). Classroom and in-barn training programs are also offered.

How to get certified? The program requires an online application, and a site audit by an independent third party auditor. Audit results are reviewed and measures for meeting shortcomings are determined. Audits then occur annually to maintain certification. Visit www.humaneheartland.org/

**Animal Welfare Approved:**

Certifying organization: Animal Welfare Approved

What does it mean? A certification for meat, poultry and dairy products that come from farm animals raised by independent family farms that meet both animal welfare and environmental standards. Certification requires that animals are raised on pasture or range. An additional Wildlife Friendly certification is also available. They provide fact sheets, newsletters, and answer technical questions by email. The U.S. Humane Society recognizes this certification as having the highest animal welfare standards.

How to get certified? The program requires an online application, a site audit of the farm and slaughtering facility used by the farm, then annual audits (or additional audits if determined needed). Visit http://animalwelfareapproved.org/

**Certified Humane:**

Certifying organization: Humane Farm Animal Care (HFAC)

What does it mean? A certification for meat, poultry and dairy products that come from farm animals that meet animal welfare standards that include no cages, crates, or tie stalls. The program appears to have a strong marketing component.

How to get certified? The program requires an application, a site audit by an auditor, and annual follow-up audits. Some funds may be available for smaller farms to pay the required inspection fees. A producer must contact HFAC by email or phone to obtain application materials for initial certification. Visit http://certifiedhumane.org/ to read the current program policy. Email info@certifiedhumane.org
Cage Free - United Egg Producers Certified

Certifying organization: United Egg Producers, which is a cooperative of egg farmers in the U.S.

What does it mean? This is a “second party” certification, meaning that standards are set by industry peers rather than a “third party”, or impartial organization. The certification means that the farm is meeting standards set by the United Egg Producers. Poultry are uncaged inside barns, no outdoor access is required. Each hen must be provided at least 1 square foot (144 square inches) of floor space, with some perching and nesting requirements. They also have a certification for regular production, which provides standards for caged hens.

How to get certified? The farmer submits an application, hosts an audit, and then recertifies annually. Visit http://www.uepcertified.com/

Local/regional branding:

Got to Be NC / Goodness Grows in North Carolina (GGINC) label

Certifying organization: Division of Marketing for the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services

What does it mean? Qualifying farms and producers can apply for membership and the ability to use the label. In addition to being grown and produced in North Carolina, there are some other qualifying criteria depending on the product.

How to get certified? Visit www.gottobenc.com/become-a-member/membership-criteria/ for criteria and an application.

Religious certification:

Some religious organizations encourage or require participants to adhere to certain standards.

Halal

Certifying organization: Multiple organizations

What does it mean? Halal refers to foods that are permissible for Muslims to eat or drink under Islamic Shari’ah. The criteria specify what foods are allowed, and how the food must be prepared. The foods addressed are mostly types of meat. The method of slaughter is prescribed- the animal must be slaughtered by cutting the throat with a single stroke without cutting the spinal cord, by a Muslim, Christian or Jewish person, with some schools of thought requiring a type of prayer at the time of slaughter. Halal does not imply that socially or environmentally protective or humane practices were followed.

How to get certified? Farms are not certified, though slaughterhouses and food production facilities can become certified. A web search can turn up a variety of Halal certification organizations.
Kosher

Certifying organization: Multiple organizations

What does it mean? Kosher refers to a set of intricate biblical laws that detail the types of food that a Jewish person may eat and the ways in which it may be prepared. To be certified Kosher, all ingredients in every product—and the process of preparing the product—must be certified for kosher-compliance too. The method of slaughter is prescribed—a land animal or bird must be slaughtered by cutting the throat with a single stroke without cutting the spinal cord. Kosher does not imply that socially or environmentally protective or humane practices were followed, though some Kosher Certification organizations do address environmentally protective and/or humane practices within their standards.

How to get certified? Farms are not typically certified, though slaughterhouses and food production facilities can become certified. A web search can turn up a variety of Kosher certification organizations, with the most common one likely being the Orthodox Union.

Social justice certifications

Certifications specifically addressing social concerns are not common in the U.S. The most widely recognized certification is Fair Trade certification, but this certification targets farms and producers in developing countries. Information about it follows.

Fair Trade USA:

Certifying organization: FLO-CERT

What does it mean? Fair Trade USA sells licenses to businesses that produce or retail products that are Fair Trade Certified. Farmers and producers in developing countries participate in the Fair Trade Certification, are justly compensated for their products, and are encouraged to use sustainable practices.

How to get certified? Currently, farms in the U.S. are not certified Fair Trade, rather, businesses that want to sell Fair Trade items or produce products using Fair Trade ingredients and advertise this can purchase licenses. Using the Fair Trade label requires registering with Fair Trade USA. Visit fairtradeusa.org for more information.

Sustainability Certifications

Sustainability can be defined in many ways, as there is no one officially recognized or legally enforced term. Generally sustainability refers to whole systems approaches that address environmental, social, and economic concerns while ensuring resources for future generations.
**Biodynamic®**

Certifying organization: Demeter Association, Inc.

What does it mean? The term Biodynamic® is trademarked and can legally only be used by certified farms. The Farm Standard reflects the Biodynamic principle of the farm as a living organism: self-contained, self-sustaining, following the cycles of nature. The standard requires following the same standards as the National Organic Program and then goes further - it refers to soil fertility management, crop protection, greenhouse management, animal welfare, the use of the preparations, water conservation, and biodiversity (at least ten percent of the total farm acreage must be set-aside as a biodiversity preserve).

How to get certified? A farm adheres to the Demeter Farm Standard for a minimum of three years if conventionally farmed, or a minimum of one year if organically farmed. The entire farm must be certified, not just a portion of land within the farm. The farmer requests a certification pack, submits the application and fees, hosts a farm visit, follows up on recommendations, then if certified must submit renewal packets and host farm visits annually. Visit [http://www.demeter-usa.org/](http://www.demeter-usa.org/)

**Food Alliance Certified**

Certifying organization: The Food Alliance

What does it mean? The Food Alliance seeks to address consumer concerns about traceability, social and environmental practices. It certifies products, producers, and handlers. Sustainability standards cover GMOs, fair and safe labor, humane animal treatment, and environmental practices.


**US Sustainable Agriculture Standard (LEO-4000)**

Certifying organization: The Leonardo Academy is developing this certification, which had not yet been completed at publication time. Leonardo Academy is a member of the American National Standards Institution (ANSI), an internationally recognized organization that coordinates the development and use of voluntary consensus standards in the United States.

What does it mean? The initiative seeks to develop a comprehensive, continuous improvement framework and common set of economic, environmental and social metrics by which to determine whether an agricultural crop has been produced and handled in a sustainable manner.

How to get certified? The program has not been finalized yet. The producer will create a Producer Sustainability Plan that documents the criteria and indicators used for evaluating the producer’s sustainability. The producer will be able to qualify for one of four tiers based on how well they are meeting criteria. [http://www.leonardoacademy.org/services/standards/agstandard.html](http://www.leonardoacademy.org/services/standards/agstandard.html)
References:

Include the websites provided for each of the certifying organizations above, and

The University of Vermont Advanced Certificate in Sustainable Innovation program materials.

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