

Non-GMO Requirements under the National Organic Program

Organic Trade Association (OTA) Q&A

Q: What are GMOs?

A: Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), are defined in the organic regulations as a “variety of methods used to genetically modify organisms or influence their growth and development by means that are not possible under natural conditions or processes and are not considered compatible with organic production.” Traditional plant breeding is acceptable, and *is not* considered genetic modification. (7 CFR 205.1)

Q: Are GMOs allowed in organic certified products?

A: No. GMOs are strictly prohibited from use in any organic products regulated under the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) National Organic Program (NOP). The prohibition on GMOs extends to all organic label categories (“100% Organic,” “Organic,” and “Made with Organic”) and all organic and non-organic ingredients contained in the products, including minor ingredients such as flavors, yeast and cornstarch. The use of GMOs is prohibited during the production (farming) AND handling (processing) of certified organic products. A rigorous certification process enforced by the USDA is in place.

Q: What is the best GMO claim to make on an NOP certified product label?

A: Organic certification and "certified organic" statements are sufficient to substantiate a claim that a certified organic food is non-GMO and/or was not produced using genetic engineering, and therefore additional labeling is not necessary. However, many operators choose to make additional non-GMO claims.

The phrase “non-GMO” when used on NOP-certified product labels is understood to mean that the product was produced without the use of genetic engineering. This is consistent with the organic regulations. “Non-GMO” is an accurate statement because it declares a product is produced without the use of GMOs. Unlike the term “GMO-free,” the term “non-GMO” does not necessarily claim that the product is 100% free of GMOs.

Q: How does the National Organic Program (NOP) verify that products are non-GMO?

A: NOP-certified organic farmers must not use genetically modified seed, and they must have procedures in place that prevent GMO drift from adjacent farms. NOP-certified organic handlers (processors) must have practices in place to separate organic seed, feed, crops, ingredients and finished products from non-organic (potentially GMO) forms during post-harvest activities, processing, storage and shipping. A third-party USDA-accredited certifying agent inspects a certified operation at least once a year.

The inspection process is designed to determine whether the certified operator is complying with the organic regulations. This includes verifying whether the certified operation is adequately preventing exposure to GMOs. If GMOs are suspected or detected, certifiers are required by law to conduct an investigation to determine if a violation of organic production or handling standards occurred.

Q: Is testing required under the organic standards?

A: Testing is conducted as part of required periodic residue testing for established in the law and regulations and may include testing for GMOs. It is also conducted when contact with GMOs is suspected and when a certifier or NOP receives a complaint.

Q: How does testing verify the non-GMO status of NOP certified products?

A: Certifying agents conduct periodic residue testing on at least 5% of their certified operations to determine if prevention practices are adequate to avoid contact with prohibited substances such as pesticides, antibiotics, and GMOs. This type of testing is used to determine whether certified operators have adequate exposure prevention measures in place for prohibited substances.

Q: What happens when GMO contact is detected?

A: Certifiers must issue non-compliance notices to organic operations that fail to take adequate measures to avoid exposure to GMOs. Because this is a federally regulated program, people found to be in violation of the organic standards face more than de-certification. Financial penalties can also be applied. If products are found to contain GMOs, the regulations require an investigation and corrective action.

Q: In addition to GMOs being prohibited, what are the other benefits of buying organic?

A: **Environmental stewardship.** The organic regulations promote the health of the environment because certified operators are required to build healthy soils, promote biodiversity and foster recycling of resources.
Healthy food, health people. Organic food is produced without the use of toxic and pervasive pesticides, petroleum-based fertilizers, and sewage sludge. Studies also show that organic foods have more beneficial nutrients, such as antioxidants, than their conventionally grown counterparts.
Animal health and welfare standards. Animals raised organically must not be treated with antibiotics, growth hormones, or other artificial drugs. Animals must also be fed organic feed only and receive fresh air and outdoor access!
Clean and transparent label. Processed organic products are manufactured under strict certification standards and must not contain artificial preservatives, colors and flavors. Synthetic additives are prohibited unless approved through a rigorous and public [National List Review Process](#) and their use is very limited. Ionizing radiation is strictly prohibited.

Organic = non-GMO...and so much more!! For more information, visit:

Only Organic—Organic Benefits: <http://www.onlyorganic.org/get-facts/>

Organic. It's Worth It: <http://images.magnetmail.net/images/clients/OTA/attach/OrganicItsWorthIt.pdf>.

Benefits of Organic Help Guide: http://helpguide.org/life/organic_foods_pesticides_gmo.htm