How to Pick a Certifier

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Choosing a certifier is just like choosing any other service provider. You will be the most satisfied if you do a little research up front to insure that you are getting the most for your money. We recommend using the following criteria to evaluate which certifier is right for you.

Location - First recognize that it is not necessary for the certifier to be located in your state. Any certifier accredited by the USDA’s National Organic program (NOP) can certify anywhere in the country. They may self-limit their range but they do not need to have an office in your state. The location of the inspectors they use is an issue. Some certifiers may require that you use inspectors that are not located near you. You will have to pay their travel expense, so this can have a major impact on your cost. Ask the certifier about how far the inspectors need to travel and what expenses you will be responsible for. You can reduce inspector costs by scheduling your certification to correspond with other farms in your area that the certifier works with.

Price – The USDA does not regulate fees for certification. Some certifiers charge a flat rate based on acreage, some charge a base fee and then charge an assessment based on sales. Both fee structures are intended to make the fee scale specific so a small operation is not charged the same as a large operation. The average total cost for a small farm should be between $500 and $1500 per year. A cost share is provided by the USDA and is administered by Departments of Agriculture in most States. Producers who complete the certification process can be reimbursed for 75% of the cost up to $750. Shop around and see what works for you. Remember to factor in inspector costs.

Turnaround time – You should budget a minimum of 3 to 4 months for the first time through the system. It can take as much as 6 months to a year if your operation is complicated or there are other delays in the process. Ask the certifier what their average turnaround time is and be very thorough in your application/farm plan as this will reduce the need to collect additional information. It may also be helpful to ask the certifier if they have times of year when they can move faster or if they have an expedited process if you are in a hurry.

Service Area/History/Activism – Certifiers are accredited to perform certification services for the USDA NOP for crops, livestock, and handling/processing. Some certifiers may not offer services in all of these areas. Some may be more oriented to the manufacturer client instead of the farmer client. Make sure you are very clear about what products you want to have certified so you can insure that the certifier can meet your needs. Some certifiers are just getting into organic certification and some have been at it for years. Some certifiers may have never certified in the region and don’t understand the conditions that farmers are operating in. You may find that this impacts the service you receive. Some certifiers, especially the older ones, are very active at the federal and state level by participating on committees and advisory boards. If this activism is important to you, you may want to support a certifier who participates in these activities.

End Product Issues - If the crop you are certifying will end up in a manufactured product, you may want to consider being certified by the same certifier as the final product. It may make the sale and distribution of your product go smoother if they are the same. For example, most of the organic dairies
in NC are certified by Oregon Tilth because they also certify Organic Valley, the cooperative coordinator and buyer of the milk. Another consideration is if your product will end up in the EU, Canada, Japan, or other foreign market. There may be a need to conform to additional standards and the certifier needs to have the capacity to certify your operation to that standard.

**Standards interpretation** - Though the National Organic Standards (NOS) are clear on most items, there are areas of continued controversy, confusion, and clarification, and some interpretation is required by certifiers for local variations and new conditions. It is always a good idea to check with certification agencies to get your questions answered, especially before purchasing or applying materials. They cannot consult on your farm plan but they can tell you what the standard is and how they interpret it.

The best thing to do is ask other growers about their experience. The USDA National Organic Program (NOP) maintains a list of certified operations at [http://apps.ams.usda.gov/nop/](http://apps.ams.usda.gov/nop/), which you can use to identify certified operations near you. Reach out to them to ask who they use and what they would recommend. You will most likely find that although it has been bumpy at times, the certifiers are willing to work with you and the experience has helped them be better farmers.