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Tipsheet: Organic Cattle, Sheep, and Goats for Meat Production

Depending on your production and marketing methods and your customers, it may be to your advantage to raise and sell organic livestock. This tipsheet highlights what is involved in producing ruminant animals organically for meat, and it will help you decide whether transitioning to organic is worthwhile for your operation. See the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Organic Program (NOP) website: www.ams.usda.gov/nop for the complete regulations for certified organic production.

Considerations

- Do your customers demand organic certification?
- Do you have access to certified organic stock or do you plan to raise your own?
- Do you have adequate pasture and a source of organic feed?
- Do you have an organic processor in your area?
- Can you raise your livestock in compliance with organic regulations regarding access to the outdoors and health care?
- Is the premium you will receive for organic meat enough to cover the higher input and processing costs?

Photo: Robyn Metzger, NCAT

Requirements

The following are some, although not all, of the basic requirements of organic certification:

- Agricultural ingredients in feed, including pasture, must be 100% certified organic.
- Animals must graze on pasture at least 120 days per year, and animals must have a minimum of 30% dry matter intake from grazing pasture during the grazing season. See the ATTRA publication *Pasture for Organic Ruminant Livestock: Understanding and Implementing the NOP Pasture Rule* for information.
- Ruminant livestock that are finished for slaughter are exempt from the minimum requirement of 30% dry matter intake from grazing pasture during the grazing season for a feeding period of no more than 120 days or one-fifth of the animal's life, whichever is shorter. The livestock still must have access to pasture during the grazing season, however.
- Use of most synthetic medicines and/or hormones is prohibited. See the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances for information about materials and the purposes for which they may be used. www.ams.usda.gov/NOPNationalList

- Organic stock must be maintained under organic management from at least the last trimester before birth (e.g., does and ewes must be managed organically for more than 50 days before organic kids and lambs are born; cows must be managed organically for more than three months).
- Meat must be processed in a certified organic facility and must not be irradiated.

Photo: Robyn Metzger, NCAT

For more detailed information on organic livestock production see ATTRA's *Guide for Organic Livestock Producers* https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=154.

Some farms' current production practices may be very close to meeting the USDA organic regulations. But for most, changes will be necessary in both production and recordkeeping to comply with the regulations. Will those changes be worth it? Consider the following questions:

- What price do you currently receive for your product?
- Is there local demand for organic products? If not, you will need to develop a local market or develop one at a distance and ship your product. Remember, market development costs time, energy, and money.
- What price could you receive for organic beef, goat meat, lamb, or wool? USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) Market News provides free, near real-time agricultural market information. www.ams.usda.gov/marketnews
- What do you currently pay for hay or grain to supplement your animals?
- What would you have to pay for organic hay or grain? How dependable is the local supply? Can you offset the increase in the price for organic feed with sales of certified organic animals or products?
- How important is organic certification to your customers? Is it sufficient for them to know you as the producer and understand that you use humane and sustainable practices, or do they need to see verification of organic standards?

Processing

If you are selling meat, answer the following questions:

- Is there a certified organic processor in your area? This is necessary if you are selling organic meat.
- If there is currently no organic processor in your area, can you persuade a local processor to do the paperwork and follow the regulations? Note that if you are selling a whole animal, a custom processor can do the work. But if you plan to sell cuts or sell to a restaurant or store, your processor must be USDA inspected or State inspected.
- What extra processing costs will be charged for organic processing?

In order to sell organic meat, it must be processed in a certified organic processing facility. There are different levels of processing, and access to them will affect how you can market your animals.

- Federal- or USDA-Inspected Plants—Federal plants can process meat for nationwide sale.
- State-Inspected Plants—Only about half of the states have a State Inspection Program. State-inspected plants can process any meat, but it is stamped for sale only within that state.
- Custom Exempt Plants—A custom plant processes for individual use. The meat must be stamped "not for sale."
- Mobile Processing Unit—A truck- or trailer-mounted facility that is transported to the processing site. Some are state or federally inspected. See http://is.gd/XBTjvH
- On-Farm Slaughter (exempt from inspection)—Animals are processed by the owner for individual use (regulations vary by state).

Meat processing regulations are explained in more detail at: www.extension.org/pages/17170/meat-processing-rules-regulations

Minnesota Department of Agriculture has a helpful publication explaining organic meat and poultry processing, including case studies. Find it at www.mda.state.mn.us/food/organic/production.aspx.

A concise article about organic meat processing is found at www.extension.org/pages/19710/.

Answer the following questions if you are selling a live animal:

- Who is your buyer? It's best to have more than one option.
- What is the demand? How many animals can you sell per year, and is it a steady market?

If production costs will be feasible and the market is not a problem, consider whether you can you raise your animals under organic health-management practices.

Health

Organic health care is based on preventing illness through good management. However, when illnesses do arise, you must remember that conventional treatments such as antibiotics are not approved for organic production. You will have to find alternative treatments. If they are not effective, you must use the conventional treatment for humane reasons and remove the treated animal from organic status. Other tipsheets in this series address organic health care guidance:

Organic Approach to Animal Health

Treatment of Sick or Injured Organic Livestock

The ATTRA publication *Guide for Organic Livestock Producers* also explains more about the health care requirements of organic production.

Photo: Robyn Metzger, NCAT

In humid climates, goats and sheep may have serious trouble with internal parasites. Internal parasites can be devastating to the health of the animal, causing loss of productivity and sometimes death. Under the USDA organic regulations, use of approved synthetic dewormers is restricted for breeding and milking stock—they may not be used on lactating beef cows, does, or ewes; beef cows, does and ewes in the last trimester of pregnancy; or any animals routinely. Their use is also prohibited for organic slaughter stock. If infection is severe, you should use the most effective treatment, including synthetic dewormers if necessary. Animals treated with synthetic dewormers that are on the National List are no longer eligible for organic meat or fiber production. Such treated animals are eligible for organic milk production after a withdrawal period. Animals treated with synthetic dewormers not on the National List may no longer produce organic milk, meat, or fiber. However, they do not have to be removed from the herd as they may be used as breeder stock. Organic production may not be a viable option for producers who raise goats or sheep in climates that are extremely conducive to internal parasite infections. See *Organic Management of Internal and External Parasites*.

For more information, read the ATTRA publication *Managing Internal Parasites in Sheep and Goats*. It is available online at https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=215.

Conclusion

If you've answered all the questions above, you now have an idea of the suitability of organic production for your business. Visit organic producers and consult the resources listed below to move forward in producing organic livestock for meat.

Resources

ATTRA Publications
www.attra.ncat.org

Guide for Organic Livestock Producers
Organic and Grass-fed Beef Cattle Production
Meat Goats: Sustainable Production

Sustainable Sheep Production
Pastures: Going Organic

Langston University article "Organic Meat Goat Production."
www.luresext.edu/goats/training/organic.html
The principles in the article apply easily to sheep and to cattle.

Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES)
www.mosesorganic.org
MOSES provides a guidebook, an upper-Midwest organic resource directory, and fact sheets, including Transitioning to Organic Beef Production, Transitioning to Organic Sheep and Goat Meat Production, *and* Pasture and Living Conditions for Organic Ruminant Animals *free on its website.*

eOrganic
www.extension.org
eOrganic offers many organic production resources such as articles and videos. A broad list of webinars and articles is available at www.extension.org/pages/25242/webinars-by-eorganic.

USDA Organic Regulations 7 CFR 205
www.ams.usda.gov/nop

USDA National Organic Program Handbook
www.ams.usda.gov/NOPProgramHandbook
Click on the Table of Contents to browse many relevant titles of documents that educate and support organic producers. For example, the following are some of the many documents found in the Handbook:

- *Dry Matter Intake Information for Access to Pasture (Series)*
- *Evaluating Allowed Ingredients and Sources of Vitamins and Minerals for Organic Livestock Feed*
- *Guide for Organic Livestock Producers*
- *Livestock Documentation Forms*

USDA National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances
www.ams.usda.gov/NOPNationalList

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