



Alternatives to Organic Certification for Native Farmers

A better fit for some Native farmers.

Although organic certification by independent agencies has existed for over two decades, many farmers and ranchers from Native communities do not participate in organic certification programs. Probable reasons include cost of and access to certification, and the cultural appropriateness of organic standards and documentation.

Being recognized as an organic farmer improves the marketability of your products; however, many traditional, small-scale, and family farmers are alienated by the certification process. In addition to being a difficult process for many producers, USDA organic standards do not refer to the importance of living wages, family farms, rural communities, local markets, or farmer-to-farmer education. As a result, some producers have pursued other ways of communicating their production practices to buyers.



ALTERNATIVES TO ORGANIC CERTIFICATION FOR NATIVE FARMERS & RANCHERS

- DIRECT MARKETING
- TRANSPARENT LABELING
- PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS

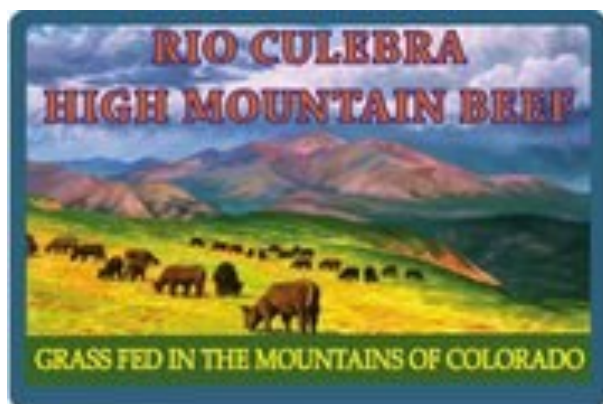
DIRECT MARKETING

One simple alternative to organic certification is where the producer sells directly to the consumer and communicates how the products are grown. This is common in farmers markets, CSAs, restaurant sales, and other direct-marketing venues. It can even include farm visits where the potential buyer can see and discuss production practices.



TRANSPARENT LABELING

Transparent labeling can be used for foods that are produced naturally and organically, but are not certified. There is no certification involved in transparent labeling, but the producer must be able to legally demonstrate the claims on the label. This type of label depends on the integrity of the producers and developing consumer trust in the brand.



Transparent labeling is most effective in local communities or regions where consumers already support organic and natural production and can visit the farms. An example is the Rio Culebra Agricultural Cooperative in San Luis, Colorado. Labels for their “High Mountain Beef” and “Chicos del Horno” brands detail the methods of production, location, who grew the food, and even the processing. The brands convey that the products are produced by traditional methods that maintain a community land base, system of irrigation, and clean environment.

PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS

Participatory Guarantee Systems provide an alternative to organic certification that is also based on recognized and publicly available standards for organic production. These systems are created by the farmers and the consumers they serve and provide peer appraisal and support at the local level, often with associated marketing mechanisms that involve the producers and consumers. Trust is created through transparency and peer reviews. Simply stated, standards are set and enforced by the producers and consumers involved, rather



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than by “third-parties.” In addition to basic organic standards, social justice practices are often part of the Participatory Guarantee System standards.



These systems developed in association with Fair Trade initiatives in response to corporate retailers driving organic certification system development rather than concerns for the environment, human health, and livelihoods of traditional farmers. Appropriate Participatory Guarantee Systems are specific to individual communities, geographic regions, cultural environments, and markets. They also involve less administration and lower costs than third-party certification.

ORGANIC AGRICULTURE AND PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS: Marketing and Support for Traditional Farmers

Participatory Guarantee Systems are a good option for traditional, small-scale, direct-market farmers because they tend to support food security and food sovereignty, as well as a fair price. While the market potential for organic and traditional foods is immense, Participatory Guarantee Systems provide a mechanism for smaller producers, with less volume and more varied crops, to sell those crops as verifiably organic. This helps develop local markets for organically produced food. Producers can also use Participatory Guarantee Systems as a credible and affordable method of organic quality assurance if they want to expand into regional and national markets.

Certified Naturally Grown is based on the Participatory Guarantee System model of certification. The Certified Naturally Grown Guarantee encourages farmers to market food locally. It requires members to adopt stricter standards than the National Organic Program and to inspect each other’s farms to enforce compliance.



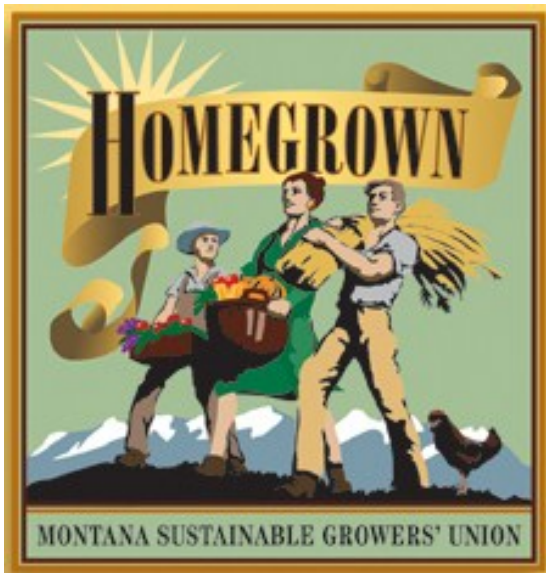
FOOD ALLIANCE CERTIFIED

An alternative third-party certification system, the Food Alliance Certified label identifies food grown by small to mid-sized, local farmers and ranchers that practice environmentally friendly and socially responsible agricultural practices. It is a good alternative for traditional farmers transitioning to a new market or developing a label with claims and a brand. A free online evaluation tool available on their website can help a farmer decide if this is a viable option for them.



EXAMPLE: THE MONTANA SUSTAINABLE GROWERS UNION "HOMEGROWN" LABEL

Clark Fork Organics was certified organic for fourteen years when they decided not to re-certify their farm under the National Organic Program. They joined eleven other western Montana farms to establish the Montana Sustainable Growers Union. The group collectively dropped organic certification and replaced it with their own local organic guarantee—the "Homegrown" label. The group has a ten-point pledge for the label that covers everything from crop rotation to a ban on absentee ownership. The Homegrown label differs from Certified Naturally Grown because it is local rather than national in scope. Its members farm within seventy-five miles of Missoula and pledge to sell as much as possible locally (western Montana) and cooperate with each other as a farmer-to-farmer support network.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Find online resources for this tool, as well as additional tool booklets on other community food topics, under "Food System Tools" at www.healthycommunityfoodsystems.org or www.HCFS.org

