



USDA Amends Organic Livestock Regulations

Final ruling holds all organic livestock producers to same livestock-grazing standards, giving organic consumers peace of mind.

March 2, 2010

Through USDA-issued amendments to the National Organic Program, organic livestock producers will be required to allow their livestock to take in 30 percent dry matter from grazing pasture for at least 120 days during the grazing season. After a five-year process, the USDA issued its final ruling on amendments to National Organic Program regulations, which clarify the use of pasture in raising organic ruminant and slaughter livestock.

The final rule provides certainty to consumers that organic livestock production is a pasture-based system in which animals are actively grazing pasture during the grazing season. The majority of organic dairy and ruminant livestock producers are already grazing animals and maintaining pastures that meet the requirements of this rule. These standards contain clear requirements that will provide greater assurance that all producers are being held to the same standards.

"Clear and enforceable standards are essential to the health and success of the market for organic agriculture," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said.

The USDA received a substantial number of comments on provisions of the rule affecting finish feeding practices of slaughter livestock and extended the comment period for this provision for 60 days. Finish feeding is commonly used by cattle raisers to improve the grade of beef and involves feeding livestock grain

"It is difficult to decouple standards for milking cows from standards for finish feeding," Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan said. "Since finish feeding gets swept up into this dairy rulemaking, we are taking an extra step and inviting public comment on the finish feeding requirements. We want to be certain that our actions pertaining to finish feeding are aligned with organic principles."

This final rule is the culmination of a process that was initiated in 2005 when the National Organic Standards Board recommended that ruminant livestock obtain a minimum 30 percent dry matter intake for at least 120 days. The proposed rule, published on Oct. 28, 2008, received more than 26,000 comments from producers, retailers, handlers, certifying agents, consumers, trade associations, organic associations, animal welfare organizations, consumer groups, state and local government entities, and various industry groups.

The main components of the rule in organic livestock production say:

Livestock must graze pasture during the grazing season, which must be at least 120 days per year.

Livestock must obtain a minimum of 30 percent dry matter intake from grazing pasture during the grazing season.

Organic producers must have a pasture-management plan and manage pasture as a crop to meet the feed requirements for the grazing livestock and to protect soil and water quality.

Livestock are exempt from the 30-percent dry matter intake requirements during the finish feeding period, not to exceed 120 days. Livestock must have access to pasture during the finishing phase. The final rule becomes effective on June 17, 2010. Operations that are already certified organic will have one year to implement the provisions. Operations that obtain organic certification after the effective date will be expected to demonstrate full compliance.

Although this is a final rule, comments on the exceptions for finish feeding of ruminant slaughter stock may be submitted before April 19, 2010. This comment period pertains to the finish-feeding provisions only. The specific questions to consider and instructions for submitting comments are available through the National Organic Program.

The NOP also has copies of the final rule and additional information available.