Is Organic Always GMO Free?

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Organic is *Usually* GMO Free

Buying 100% Organic, Certified Organic, and USDA Organic-labeled products is usually the easiest way to identify and avoid genetically modified ingredients.

The United States and Canadian governments do NOT allow companies to label products "100% / Certified Organic" if they contain genetically modified foods.

To put it in more detail:

100% Organic: Must contain 100 percent organically produced ingredients (excluding water and salt). This is the only label that certifies a completely organic product AND completely GMO-free ingredients.

Certified Organic / USDA Organic: At least 95 percent of content is organic by weight (excluding water and salt). The <5% remaining ingredients must consist of substances approved on the USDA's National List. GMOs are NOT on this list, so USDA Organic products are also *usually* GMO-free. For verification, consult the following sources:

- The USDA's National Organic Program overview page
- The USDA's National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances
- The USDA's Organic 101 blog
- A 2011 USDA policy memo in response to confusion over GMOs in organics
- The National Organic Standards Board Policy and Procedures Manual

Made with Organic: Up to 70% of the ingredients are organic. These products can NOT carry a "USDA organic" label and are NOT typically GMO-free.

But lately, even organic products are at risk….

Why Say "Usually?"

If USDA certification requires at least 95% of content to be organic, and a GMO ingredient can't be included in that 5%, then USDA Organic is GMO-free, right? Not always. Depending on the product, sometimes there are tiny loopholes.

Says Barry Estabrook (author of Politics of the Plate) in this excellent article: "The casings for those tasty USDA Organic sausages can come from conventionally raised animals that have been fed antibiotics (or GMO-laden corn). The hops in your favorite organic beer can be sprayed with all manner of chemical pesticides and fertilizers."

The USDA's loophole list also includes two far more common ingredients: non-organic cornstarch (which in our opinion is long overdue for removal from the "acceptable" list, considering how many sources of organic cornstarch

are now readily available to commercial food manufacturers), and soy lecithin (though only one form of soy lecithin is allowed, and only when an organic option is not available).

The loophole list includes a few surprises too, such as the use of antibiotics on organic apples and pears, in order to prevent fire blight. Fortunately the National Organics Standards Board recently decided to disallow this practice effective October 2014.

How are these organic loopholes possible? Typically it's because there is no readily available, commercially manufactured organic option for that particular product or ingredient (though in the case of organic cornstarch, we beg to differ).

But sometimes there's another reason… says Barry: "The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), which has the power to determine what materials can — and cannot — be used in organic production, too often weakens regulations in the face of intense lobbying by corporations who are more interested in the higher profits conferred by the word "organic" than in strong and meaningful standards." And let's just remember how much Monsanto has invested in corporate lobbying dollars…

Getting discouraged yet? There's more…

Despite rigid organic certification procedures, organic certification is about the *process* of growing food, not about the actual resulting food. There is no testing process for organic ingredients, so there is a chance that GMO contamination could occur.

And sadly, GMO contamination can happen any number of natural ways: 1.) via cross-pollination between GMO and non-GMO crops, 2.) from trace amounts of GMO ingredients found in animal feed (as per the alfalfa/bluegrass section above), 3.) from seeds traveling by wind or by migratory birds that take root in the soil of an organic farm, and 4.) from ingredient suppliers that co-mingle various sources.

Just look at this recent response from the USDA regarding a series of questions raised by organic farmers after GMO alfalfa was approved. A similar situation is already happening in Australia— a farmer just lost his organic certification due to wind-borne contamination from a neighboring GMO crop.

Even more sobering is the potential contamination from genetically engineered Kentucky Bluegrass. This grass is used in animal forage — including grass-fed animals. Now that Kentucky Bluegrass been genetically engineered for RoundUp resistance, not only does it contain genetic material that is no longer natural, but it can be heavily sprayed with RoundUp to remove weeds. And because grass spreads rapidly, it's only a matter of time before this becomes the next superweed.

Last but not least, "contamination" can also happen when it takes nearly three years for a manufacturer who illegally uses the term "organic" in their labeling to be noticed, reported, investigated, and forced to amend their label. The oversight of organic manufacturers "falls far short of assuring standards are met."

Buying USDA Organic / GMO Free

As explained above, buying USDA Organic is by no means a failsafe. However at this point in time, USDA Organic remains one of the best and most easily-identifiable ways of assuring that you are eating GMO-free foods *most of the time.*

Want to take it one step further? Buy products that are *also* certified by the Non-GMO Project. The certification process behind this label is currently the *best* possible way of assuring that you are eating GMO-free food (though

bear in mind, not all of the products bearing the Non-GMO Project label are organic—for the best of both worlds, chose products that *also* include the USDA Organic label).

Sadly however, just like organic certification, the word “usually” once again comes into play: the Non-GMO Project’s website clearly states that its label does not guarantee a product is 100% GMO-free, because contamination is an ever-growing threat. So what does the label really mean?

GMO Free Certification Process

When you see the above label on a product, it means the producer took additional time, effort and money to go through a certification program similar to the one used to obtain organic certification, only it’s designed to focus on GMO-free processes.

Started initially by retailers, the Non-GMO Project’s Product Verification Program (PVP)‘s core requirements include “traceability, segregation, and testing at critical control points.” Compliant products bear the Non-GMO Project Seal shown above (explained in detail here), indicating that the product has been produced in accordance with the best practices of the Non-GMO Project Standard.

Read a great article about the reasons why this program was started, despite similar process testing procedures for organic products.

Other GMO Free Labels

When you see a “GMO free” label on an organic product, how does it compare to certified organic or certified Non-GMO Project standards? Hard to say.

Because there is no certification program associated with this label, it is simply the producer’s word that all fields, ingredients, processes, and storage avoid contact with, and contain no genetically modified ingredients.

This doesn’t mean this label isn’t valid; sometimes producers can’t afford the cost of becoming certified organic or certified through the Non-GMO Project, and thus use this label as a sign of good faith.

And because so many consumers don’t know that Certified Organic = GMO free (I didn’t, until I did the research), it can be a more obvious and affordable way of letting customers know.

No label in sight? Sometimes you need to read the fine print: some manufacturers don’t include a little GMO free icon, but they do include the words “we don’t use genetically engineered ingredients” (or similar wording) on the back of their labeling (hope you brought your reading glasses to the grocery store). 😀

Organic versus Certified Naturally Grown

When the USDA Organic program started in 2002, many small farms were forced to make a difficult choice: either pay high certification fees and complete mounds of paperwork to become “Certified Organic,” or give up using the word “organic” to describe their produce and/or livestock.

Believing that neither choice was very attractive, a group of farmers created Certified Naturally Grown (CNG), to provide an alternative way to assure their customers that they observed strict growing practices. Their methods include using natural biological cycles – incorporating a careful balance of micro-organisms, soil flora and fauna, natural pollinators, plants and animals – to create a sustainable farming system.

The resulting products meet and in some cases exceed the USDA standards but do not carry any of the official government approved organic seals. CNG now consists of more than 500 member farms in 47 states and growing.

Note: the majority of the CNG farm listings that I perused included the words “GMO free” in their product descriptions.

Other “Natural” Product Labeling Terms

Additional labeling terms – such as Natural, Cage Free, Free Range, Certified Humane (raised and handled), Vegetarian Diet, Fair Trade, and Locally Grown – have no direct relevance to whether a product is GMO free (genetically modified vegetables can and do get used in animal feed sometimes… particularly corn fed to pigs, cows and chickens).

For a helpful description about each of these, click here.

For a helpful ranking chart about egg labeling in particular, click here.

The Even Longer Story Behind GMOs and Organics
(includes excerpts from The Organic and Non GMO Report website)

To have a product certified as organic, a producer/manufacturer/farmer must undergo third party verification to ensure that the requirements of USDA National Organic Program are met. These requirements certify the *process* of growing the crop (they do not test the resulting crops/food). Processes that are reviewed include:

• All production methods — which must be free from most synthetic chemicals (e.g. pesticides, herbicides & fertilizers, antibiotics & hormones), genetically modified organisms, irradiation, and use of biosolids;

• All farmlands — which must be free from synthetic chemicals for generally 3 or more years;

• Storage procedures — producers must keep strict physical separation of organic products and non-certified products

• On-site inspections — producers are subject to initial (and sometimes subsequent) inspections.

Want to read an even more detailed description about organic certification? click here.

Organic certifiers want to ensure that GMOs are not used in organic products, but getting 100 percent verification that all substances are non-GMO may not be possible. Apparently the effort is significant, and requiring 100 percent verification could grind a processor's operation to a halt.

Due to a lack of guidance from US National Organic Program (NOP), organic certifiers have developed their own methods to address GMO challenges posed by non-organic ingredients (for that <5% of non-organic ingredients allowed in foods labeled organic).

Oregon Tilth Certified Organic and CCOF developed flowcharts or "decision trees" to evaluate the GM status of ingredients. Quality Assurance International (QAI) developed a GMO Declaration that it asks clients to submit to verify the non-GMO status of ingredients.

Says Gwendolyn Wyard, Oregon Tilth's processing program reviewer, "The problem is that "organic" is a process certification. We're asking whether they *use* GMOs, not whether there is GM DNA or protein in the final *product*."

Verifying the non-GM status of some ingredients can be challenging. For example, the supply of the ingredient tocopherol/Vitamin E has been controlled by one or two companies who collected soybean oil from many co-mingled sources. Oregon Tilth requires that tocopherols come from an identity preserved, non-GM source, but Quality Assurance International (QAI) does not require an IP (identity preserved) tocopherol, says Jessica Walden, QAI technical specialist.

Instead, QAI developed a “GMO Declaration” to address questions raised by the NOP’s rule on genetic engineering. The declaration describes QAI’s policy toward GMOs focusing on three categories:

When a product is a non-organic agricultural ingredient such as cornstarch, in order to qualify as non-GMO in “Organic” and “Made with Organic” categories, the original organism that produced the ingredient must be non-Genetically Modified. When a product is a non-organic non-agricultural ingredient, such as flavors and colors, the product must be free from Genetically Modified DNA or proteins. Lastly, if microorganisms such as citric acid are used, the microorganism must be a non-GMO.

On the declaration, the supplier must highlight measures taken to verify their non-GMO claim, such as traceability/identity preservation, GMO testing, and independent audits.

QAI’s GMO declaration has streamlined the response from suppliers for GMO documentation. Instead of receiving various GMO statements, QAI has its clients submit the GMO declaration.

Reading all of this, you gain a new respect for farmers who not only buck the industrial farming system by going organic, but by their perseverance in navigating the volumes and diverse methods of certification!

So what does this all boil down to, when you’re trying to choose a product?

Just this week I was looking for mayonnaise at my local natural foods co-op. They had a fairly broad selection of various organic mayonnaises from different manufacturers.

All of the mayo labels said “organic” somewhere on the label. Two of them said USDA Certified Organic. But only one had “GMO free” in addition to “organic” on the label. Coincidentally, it was the only mayonnaise that was not made from one the “Big Four” GMO crops (corn, soy, canola or cotton seed oil).

Does that mean it was the only mayo that was GMO free? No. The others were labeled organic, which technically means they couldn’t be GMO. Yet they didn’t have a “non-GMO” label, and they were sourced from crops with high incidences of GMO farming (soy and canola).

I tried consulting my two “non GMO shopping list” iphone apps, but none of the mayo brands on the shelf were mentioned (either as a pro or a con).

So I ended up playing it extra safe and buying the safflower-based mayo with the Non-GMO label.

What would you have done?