

Organic Integrity

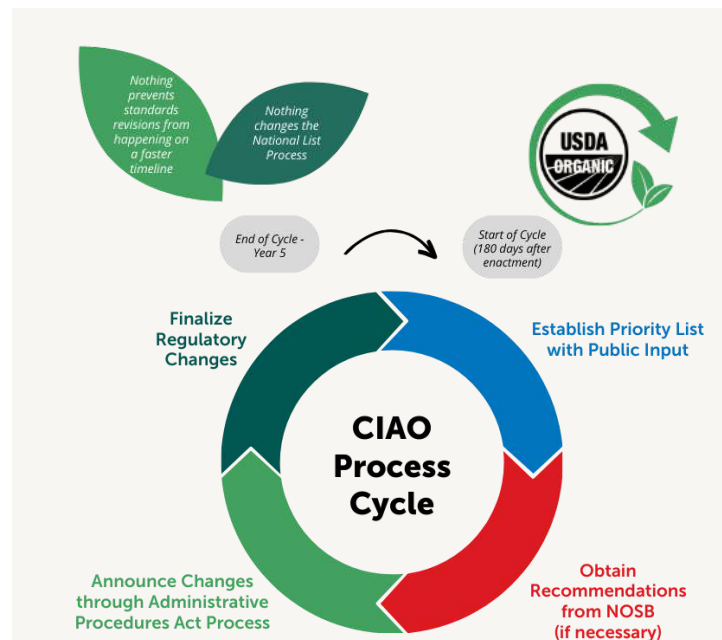
Continuous Improvement and Accountability in Organic

Continuous improvement is a fundamental principle of the USDA organic label. The Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) aims to set national standards and ensure that organically produced goods adhere to a consistent criterion. However, the current federal regulatory system has fallen behind the fast growing organic industry. In the last 20 years, USDA has completed rulemaking on only 5 out of 19 topics, and 80% of those required a lawsuit or Office of Inspector and congressional intervention. To maintain consumer confidence in organic products, we must have robust and regularly updated standards that incorporate the latest environmental and ecological insights, consumer preferences, and innovative organic practices.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN ORGANIC STANDARDS (CIAO) ACT | H.R. 5973

By incorporating elements of a process already outlined in OFPA to revise the permissible substance use, the CIAO Act aims to improve regulatory actions through a transparent and predictable two-step process:

- The National Organic Program (NOP) solicits input from the public on updates and changes to the organic standards. Then, in consultation with the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), the agency moves forward with setting the priorities, obtaining recommendations from the NOSB, and finally, implementing a notice and comment rulemaking effectuating those changes.
- CIAO establishes a five year working period for the USDA to consider stakeholder input and engage in the process established. The NOP will consider the best available information in determining revisions and changes to organic standards.



Considers best available information, including environmental and ecological data, consumer and market data, current organic production and handling practices, current organic research, and scientific data.

THE PROBLEM

Several existing programs support organic agriculture, transition, and research, but they do not adequately meet the unique needs of transitioning organic producers, especially from underserved populations. Organic certification costs and processes are ongoing barriers, and most producers have limited access to organic-specific technical assistance or mentorship, especially in regions with smaller organic sectors.

Variable incomes and thin margins make any risk – including exploring new markets or testing new practices – difficult to bear, and limited resource, socially disadvantaged, beginning, and smaller scale farmers and ranchers face unique barriers. As agriculture adapts to changing market conditions and weather patterns, producers need expanded market options and new resources to successfully transition to and maintain organic farming and ranching systems.



THE SOLUTION

Public investments in organic should be commensurate with the sector's growing share of the market. As a critical step, the National Organic Certification Cost-Share Program should be updated to include flexible organic transition support, technical assistance, and public reporting on program outcomes, building on networks and programs developed through USDA's Organic Transition Initiative:

Organic Certification Cost-Share

- Cost-share payments cover up to \$1500 in certification costs
- Discretion to ensure certification costs are not a barrier for underserved producers and regions with limited organic production where costs may be higher

Organic Transition And Resilience Funds

- Support for NGOs to build capacity to support organic transition, particularly for smaller scale and socially disadvantaged producers and underserved regions
- Pass through funding for producers to offset transition costs and reduce barriers to transition
- Investments in regional supply chains, including scale-appropriate equipment and infrastructure
- Farmer-to-farmer mentorship and expanded skills for agricultural advisors
- Expansion of organic farming systems with cover cropping, composting, crop rotation, biological pest management, and protection of natural resources

Organic-Relevant Technical Assistance

- Resources for capacity and partnerships at public institutions and NGOs to deliver organic-relevant, regionally appropriate technical assistance, including education and market development