

Organic Sheep Production – The Facts

By Kate Belbeck, Organic Farm Inspector

The term “organic” is becoming more mainstream with respect to food production, but what does organic really mean in sheep production? The answer to that question is ultimately certification. To run a truly organic sheep operation, one needs to be inspected, monitored and certified on an annual basis at minimum by an independent, unbiased certification body. Depending on each producers’ marketing arrangement, there are various Organic Standards to which one can be certified, each with their own set of slightly different rules and regulations depending on the country, and sometimes even the province, in which the organic products are to be sold.

Organic sheep production involves much more than just raising sheep and lambs without antibiotics or hormones. There are specific standards pertaining to all areas of production including the origins of the livestock, feeding, breeding, healthcare, living conditions, pest management and processing.

Flock Origin - The key starting point with organic sheep production is the flock origin. In particular, one has to take into account the suitability of the particular breed to the environment. However, even more important, is the selection of breeds or lines that show resistance to disease and parasite infestation. Quite often, these breeds are less common and may be harder to obtain.

Preferably, to start in organic sheep production, one should purchase animals from certified organic sources. However, when this is not possible, you can purchase non-bred ewe lambs and rams and transition them into the organic system. The meat from these starting animals cannot be sold as organic, however, once they are raised in the organic system for a period of one year, they may be sold as certified organic breeding stock. The offspring from these animals can also be sold as organic, both as breeding stock or meat, provided that their dam was raised under the organic standards from the beginning of the last third of the gestation period, or around 95 days of gestation.

Feeding - Organic sheep production requires that all animals be fed a ration suitable to the condition of the animal and the stage of development. This includes the lambs’ need for natural milk, and the sheep’s need for a substantial proportion of roughage in the diet, either by pasture grazing, hay or silage. In the event that silage is fed, hay must also be provided.

In addition, sheep rations must not contain medications or veterinary drugs including prophylactic antibiotics (growth promotants), mammalian or avian slaughter by-products, synthetic preservation or colouring agents, or synthetic appetite-enhancers or flavour-enhancers.

Above all, all feedstuffs, whether grain or forages, fed to organically raised sheep must be of a certified organic origin. For many producers that grow their own hay or grain, this could mean a 3-year transition period to turn a conventionally grown crop to an organic status. Vacant land that has had any type of chemical treatment such as weed sprays or fertilizers also need to undergo a transitional period.

Breeding - For sheep producers, the breeding standards in organic production are fairly easy to comply with. Organic production favours natural breeding, though artificial insemination is permitted. Embryo transfer is also permitted providing that it does not involve genetic engineering. Conversely, reproductive hormones used to trigger or synchronize estrus are not permitted.

Healthcare - There are many extensive regulations surrounding healthcare in organic livestock production. Essentially, it is the producers' responsibility to minimize the need for antibiotic or parasite treatments. This includes selecting appropriate breeds or strains of animals, supplying feed rations sufficient to meet the nutritional requirements of the animal, establishment of appropriate housing, pasture conditions, space allowances and sanitation practices, and minimizing stress.

Surgical procedures such as tail docking and castration are permitted if they are necessary to improve the health, welfare or hygiene of the animals providing they are performed at the youngest age possible.

Under the organic standards, it is required that animals showing detectable disease, lesions, lameness or injury receive prompt treatment. Treatment should never be withheld to preserve the animal's organic status. These animals will then have to be marketed separately, as non-organic.

It is important to note that in particular situations, vaccinations, parasiticides and other treatments are permitted, if approval is granted by the certification body prior to their use. The approvals are primarily given if these conditions are not manageable without treatment and pose a welfare risk to the livestock.

Living Conditions - The housing provided to sheep raised in an organic system must accommodate health and natural behavior. This includes access to the outdoors, shade, shelter, rotational pasture, fresh air and natural daylight. Sheep housing must also have appropriate resting and bedding areas, including non-slip floors that must not be fully slatted.

The space requirements for organically raised sheep are as follows:

- Indoor space – 1.5m² per head plus 0.35m² for each additional lamb
- Outdoor space – 2.5m² per head plus 0.5m² for each additional lamb

Pest Management - External pests, such as flies or rodents, should be managed first by preventative measures, ie. Removing the source of attraction. Secondly, mechanical,

physical and biological methods can be used. Chemical pest management such as fly sprays or chemical rodent poisons are generally not permitted.

Processing - The steps involved to being a successfully certified sheep operation are extensive and it is extremely unfortunate that one of the most difficult regulations for sheep producers in Ontario to follow is the processing regulation. In order for a producer to sell lamb (meat) as “certified organic”, it must be processed in a certified organic processing facility. At present, there is only one such facility in Ontario, located in Zurich. Until there are more avenues for organic producers in Ontario to have their lamb processed, it can only be marketed as “Certified Organically Grown” as opposed to truly “Certified Organic”. However, despite this current situation, is it not a wasted effort to raise sheep organically.

Overall, there is no simple answer to the question “What is organic?” when it comes to sheep production. There are far too many extensive regulations to cover in such a publication, and these regulations are very much dependent on the situation of each individual producer and their goals for their sheep operation. Products being sold in Ontario, in Quebec or in the United States have different regulations though the same general principles apply. Of the utmost importance though is certification. Certification is the assurance to the industry and the consumer that you are producing what you claim to be, in an appropriate and acceptable manner. Ultimately, if it’s not certified, it’s not organic.

For more information on the certification process and standards in Ontario, contact Pro-Cert Organic Systems Ltd. at 705-374-5602 or go to www.pro-cert.org.