Did you know . . .

Products with less than 95 percent organic content cannot use the USDA organic seal.

If the organic content of the product is at least 70 percent and none of the remaining ingredients were produced using prohibited methods, the phrase “made with organic ingredients” can be used.

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Q & A About Organic Certification and GMOs

Organic certification is the process of verifying that a food or other agricultural item has been grown, processed and handled from field to table without the use of most traditional pesticides, synthetic chemicals, irradiation, sewage sludge or bioengineering.

What are GMOs?
The term “genetically modified organism” or GMO refers to a plant or animal whose genes have been altered. Bioengineering involves merging DNA from different species in a way that would not occur through natural or traditional crossbreeding methods.

Are GMOs allowed in organic products?
In the U.S., organic regulations require that organic products be grown, processed and handled from farm to shelf in accordance with USDA National Organic Program (NOP) regulations. These rules strictly prohibit the use of genetic engineering or GMOs in conjunction with organic foods.

This means an organic farmer can’t plant GMO seeds, an organic cow can’t eat GMO alfalfa or corn, and organic product handlers and packagers can’t use any GMO ingredients in their products.

Can GMOs ever find their way into organic products?
While organic regulations specifically prohibit the use of GMOs in conjunction with organic food, it is possible for an organic crop to be exposed to GMOs from drift (such as wind pollination, birds or bees) or other natural forces beyond the control of the organic farmer. To help limit the impact of non-organic farming practices, organic regulations require organic farmers to develop an organic system plan to prevent contamination.

For example, many organic farmers create buffer zones between their own farms and neighboring farms that use conventional farming methods. Other organic operations choose to plant their seeds early or late to avoid the chance that organic and GMO crops will flower at the same time (leading to cross-pollination). Some will harvest crops prior to flowering or sign cooperative agreements with neighboring farms to avoid planting GMO crops next to organic ones. Even shared farming or processing equipment can be an issue and must be thoroughly cleaned to prevent unintended exposure to GMOs or prohibited substances.

On-site inspections of all organic operations must be conducted by an accredited certifying agent annually to verify that organic farmers and processors have implemented and are following their organic system plan. Additionally, certifying agents conduct residue testing to determine if these preventive practices are adequate to avoid contact with substances such as prohibited pesticides, antibiotics and GMOs.

Ultimately, organic regulations require that farmers and processors not only show that they aren’t using GMOs, but that they are protecting their products from contact with GMOs and other prohibited substances from farm to table.

Who is the Non-GMO Project?
The Non-GMO Project (www.nongmoproject.org) is a separate certification that you may find of interest. They work not only with organic farmers to ensure that organic products are protected, but also manufacturers of conventional products that do not use GMOs.