

National Organic Program (NOP) – Changes to Animal Welfare Standards for Organic Livestock

Issue

The Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is preparing a proposed rule to amend the USDA organic regulations to establish additional animal welfare standards for organic livestock production.

Background

The Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) authorizes AMS to regulate organic claims on agricultural products. The USDA organic regulations already include standards for crops, livestock, wild crop harvesting, and handling (processing). The new regulations would clarify the existing livestock health care practice standards and living condition requirements, as well as add new transportation and slaughter practice standards under the USDA organic regulations.

This action is necessary to address multiple recommendations provided to USDA by the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB). Between 2002 and 2011, the NOSB passed six recommendations to amend the USDA organic regulations for livestock production to add specificity about animal welfare practices. The NOSB, citing the body of research and information on animal management which had accumulated since the establishment of the National Organic Program, intended for the USDA organic regulations to reflect developments in this area. In addition, the NOSB observed animal welfare initiatives in the nonorganic livestock sector and sought to strengthen the association of organic production with animal welfare practices.

This action would add provisions to the USDA organic regulations to clarify livestock living conditions (for example, outdoor access, housing environment and stocking densities), health care practices (including physical alterations, administering medical treatment, and euthanasia), and animal handling during transport and slaughter.

The bulk of the proposed rule contains provisions that reflect current practices among organic livestock producers and handlers. The proposal adds specific examples or details to advance the intent of the existing regulations. For example, under the current USDA organic regulations, physical alterations which promote animal welfare are allowed and must be conducted in a manner that minimizes pain and stress. This proposed action would specify which physical alterations are not permitted. These additional details will assist producers with production decisions, guide certification decisions and provide increased transparency to consumers about organic production practices.

Possible Benefits to Tribes

Tribes engaged in organic livestock production may benefit from clear guidance that will be provided in the revised regulations. The additional details and examples provided in the proposed rule will ensure consistent application of the standards for large and small producers alike.

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