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ABOUT ORGANICS IN ALBERTA



LET'S TALK ABOUT HUMANE ANIMAL HUSBANDRY PRACTICES

The Canadian Organic Trade Association estimates that in 2015, there were 618 organic livestock operations in Canada. People who have bought, or considered buying organic, may be curious about how the animals are treated on organic farms. Is it different from how animals are treated on conventional farming operations?

Animal husbandry practices (how animals are raised and live their lives) are an important part of organic livestock production, and not just because of organic regulations in Canada. Organic farming is a comprehensive approach to farming that focuses on the health of people, animals, and the environment. To that end, Canadian organic livestock farming maintains a strong focus on animal welfare.

HOW GREAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONVENTIONAL AND ORGANIC ANIMAL HUSBANDRY PRACTICES?

Both organic and conventional farmers are regulated in their humane animal husbandry practices. The difference between the two is that organic farmers have a few more rules that they must follow to maintain their certification. It's important to remember though that for any farmer, the well-being of animals is a top priority. When animals aren't kept safe and healthy, it impacts the farmers' livelihoods and this impacts their families.

At least one Alberta livestock farmer says the transition to organic livestock farming wasn't that difficult. Cathy Halonen's conventional cattle herd in Redwater, Alberta was kept in

conditions that mostly met the organic standards before her family made the transition to organic farming. This made it easier to convert her herd and pass organic inspections.

WHAT ARE THE RULES FOR ORGANIC LIVESTOCK?

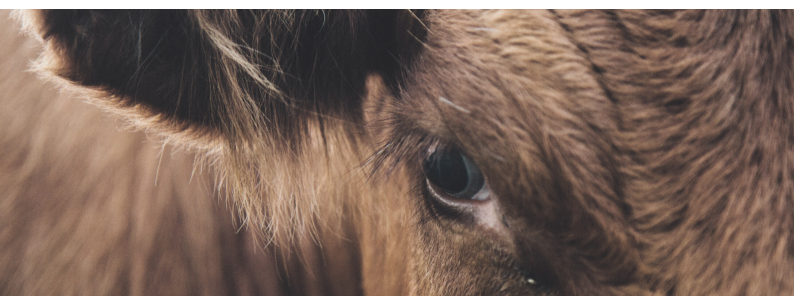
Organic livestock farmers follow the Canadian Organic Standards (COS), which helps farmers make decisions about how to keep their livestock healthy without the use of hormones and antibiotics. The COS also regulates humane animal husbandry practices. Essentially, this is a set of guidelines intended to ensure all organic animals are treated in a safe and humane way from birth to death.

Keep in mind that the standards for organic animals are exactly that: standards. Farmers are not told exactly how to handle their livestock in a step-by-step outline. In many cases, farmers may (and must) choose to meet the standards in different ways. For example, animals must have access to the outdoors but different types of livestock and species fare differently in extreme weather conditions. A cattle farmer may permit outdoor access in extremely hot weather while a poultry farmer may limit access for the safety of his/her animals.

Here are just a few of the regulations laid out by the Canadian Organic Standards:

Housing

- Animals may not be kept in the dark.
- When confined, animals must be able to turn 360 degrees.



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- Animals must have access to the outdoors throughout the year (whenever weather permits).
- Animals must have access to protection from outdoor elements, including rain, wind, and cold.
- Animals must have access to clean, fresh drinking water (which is tested for potential contaminants).

Breeding & Origins

For organic animals, breeding should be as natural as possible. Although some human intervention is allowable, it doesn't extend much further than artificial insemination. It's also important to keep breeding stress-free to promote healthy pregnancies and births. Regulations include:

- When performing artificial insemination, it must be conducted using non-stressful methods
- Farmers cannot use technology like embryo transfer or manipulation. Hormones and antibiotics cannot be applied to embryos.

Space Requirements

Animals on an organic farm must be allowed a certain amount of space on the land they're kept on. This prevents overcrowding and ensures there is enough food and grazing area for all animals. Space requirements are known as "stocking requirements" in the Canadian Organic Standards.

Reducing Stress

Just like in humans, stress-free animals are healthier animals. Reduction of stress can lead to fewer health issues, which in turn can lead to better-quality organic food. Regulations include:

- Force-feeding ducks and geese is prohibited.
- Pain control must be used for procedures like dehorning.

- Animals must be treated with antibiotics when sick if they do not respond to other natural treatment methods. They will no longer be considered organic after receiving the antibiotic treatment *except in the case of dairy cows, which can be treated up to twice in one year with antibiotics before their organic status is revoked. For more information check out our previous article 'Let's Talk about Antibiotics in Meat Dairy'.

Transportation

One of the greatest stressors for animals is travel. Subjecting them to long travel times can cause many health issues, which is never ideal for any animal. For this reason, transportation methods are highly regulated in organic husbandry practices in Canada. Regulations include: Livestock should be transported to the nearest available facility to reduce travel times to a minimum. Water must be provided when animals arrive. Trips over eight hours require that sufficient food and bedding be provided.

WHAT ABOUT SPECIAL CASES?

The standards for humane care practices for organic animals are designed to help farmers raise healthy animals. In some cases, that means being flexible enough that farmers can use their judgement and expertise for the betterment of their animals. For example, sick animals will require different care, which may include confinement or quarantine to limit the spread of the disease.

WAYS TO LEARN MORE

Do you want to learn more about what organically-grown means in Alberta? Would you value monthly updates on Alberta's local organic sector - including legislation, farming practices, GMO regulation, and more? Visit organicalberta.org/getthefacts and:

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