

Flooding and organic certification

Recent flooding in western Washington has brought up questions of how floods affect organic certification. The December 2007 floods affected 17 organic farms in southwest Washington. Some of these farms experienced devastating losses of livestock and equipment. Recovery efforts are underway but it will take a long time for these farms to fully recover from the flood.

WSDA Organic Inspectors have evaluated all of the farms and fields affected by the flood. Inspectors walked the fields to see where water levels were, if sediment was carried in and deposited, and if there were any signs of petrochemical residues or other contaminants. The initial assessment found silt, mud and woody debris but did not find any areas of concern from synthetic contaminants. Additional assessments and sampling will be conducted this spring. At this time the organic certification of these farms is in good standing and we have no evidence that the flood caused any contamination of the organic fields.

Affects of floods on organic crops in the field

Any crop that has come into contact with floodwater is considered “adulterated” by the US Food and Drug Administration and cannot be sold for human consumption. This applies to organic and conventional food crops as well as crops that are beneath the soil (e.g. carrots, potatoes). This winter's floods occurred after most of the crops had been harvested. Some organic growers had squash, kale, and carrots in flooded fields but overall the crop loss was minimal compared to their other losses.

Many organic farms are located in floodplains that are affected by seasonal flooding. In most cases, flooding is limited to low-lying areas and is localized in terms of its impact. However, during major floods enormous quantities of water wash soil, trees and vegetation from upstream areas. Synthetic contaminants such as diesel, gasoline, or pesticides may get washed into floodwaters and the concern is that these contaminants could be deposited on organic fields. In addition floodwaters may also contain manure from livestock operations or sewage from septic tanks or sewage treatment ponds that could pose a contamination risk.

Any areas of a farm where floodwater collected and deposited sediments would pose a greater risk of contamination; as opposed to flowing water which may be less likely to leave soluble prohibited substances. The time of year the flooding occurred as well as the length of time the floodwater was present on the organic fields is also be taken into account when evaluating risks of floodwater contaminants.

Affects of floods on organic livestock

Organic livestock affected by floodwaters must be under continual organic management. While organic livestock producers may not withhold treatment from an animal in order to preserve its organic status, any animals treated with antibiotics or other prohibited substances must be clearly identified and cannot be sold, labeled or represented as organically produced. Organic livestock producers may treat their animals with natural medications. In addition, all organic animals must be fed 100% organic feed. Resources are available at the WSDA Organic Food Program to assist organic livestock producers in locating organic feed to replace any feed losses as a result of flooding.