

Choosing a Certifying Agency

Choosing a certifier is just like choosing any other service provider. Do a little research up front to insure you get the most for your money. Here are a few criteria to use when evaluating which certifying agency is right for you.

Location

It is not necessary for the certifier to be located in NC. Any certifier accredited by the USDA can certify anywhere in the country. They may self-limit their range but they do not need to have an office in NC. The location of the inspectors they use is an issue. Some certifiers may require you to use inspectors that are not located near you. You will have to pay travel expenses, so this can have a major impact on cost. Ask the certifier who their inspectors are and how far they are from your farm.

Price

USDA does not regulate fees for certification. Some certifiers charge a flat rate based on acreage, some charge a base fee and then charge an assessment based on sales. Both fee structures are intended to make it scale specific so a small operation is not charged the same as a large operation. Shop around and see what works for you. Remember to factor in inspector costs.

Turnaround time

Budget a minimum of 3-4 months for the first time through the system. It can take as long as six months if your operation is complicated or there are other delays in the process. Ask the certifier what their average turnaround time is and be very thorough in your application/farm plan as this will reduce the need to collect additional information. It may also be helpful to ask the certifier if they have recommendations on the times of year when their load is lighter and they can move faster.

Service Area/ History/ Activism

Certifiers are accredited to perform certification services for the USDA for crops, livestock and handling. Some certifiers may not offer services in all of these areas. Some may be more oriented to the manufacturer market instead of the small farmer market. Make sure you are very clear about what products you want to have certified so you can insure the certifier can meet your needs. Some certifiers are just getting into organic certification and some have been at it for years. You may find this impacts the service you receive. Some certifiers are very active at the federal and state level by participating on committees and advisory boards. If this activism is important to you, you may want to support a certifier who participates in these activities.

End Product Issues

If the crop you are certifying will end up in a manufactured product, you may want to consider being certified by the same certifier as the final product. Technically, this should have no impact because in the eyes of USDA, all certifiers and certifications are equal, but it may make the sale and distribution of your product go smoother if they are the same.