

CNG Inspection Handbook

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Like there is no one right way to run a farm, there is no one way to conduct an inspection for Certified Naturally Grown. The strength of the CNG program comes from the diverse array of farmers who are experts about their farm, bio-region and community. An inspection will be informed by a large number of things, many outside of the participant's control: the size and scale of the farm, the type of operation, the time of year or the experience of the farmer. However, there are quite a few steps both the inspector and the farmer/beekeeper can take that go a long way to ensuring a high quality inspection.

In 2019, we surveyed hundreds of CNG farmers, asking what makes for a successful inspection. This handbook is directly informed by those survey results as well as feedback from members of the CNG community.

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Core Elements of a Successful Inspection

Based on survey answers from farmers, here is what we found to be the core elements of a quality inspection:

Preparation: Being organized and prepared allows you to spend less time navigating the process and more time discussing farming practices.

Intentionality: We find that the best inspections hit a sweet spot in terms of time. They are thorough and intentional, yet move through the process efficiently.

Sharing of Knowledge: In CNG, farmers and beekeepers get the unique opportunity to see the ins and outs of another operation. Or on the other hand, get another set of eyes on their farm or apiary. Knowledge travels both ways in a successful inspection.

Collaboration: Peer to peer inspections work best when both parties are enthusiastic, involved and collaborate in the process. The connections made during an inspection can lead to enduring relationships that continue to bear fruit long after the inspection is complete.

And always remember the golden rule! Inspect another's farm the way you would like your farm to be inspected.

Suggested Practices for a Successful Inspection

Before the Inspection

For the Inspector:

- Review the CNG Profile of the farm or apiary you are about to inspect.
- If applicable, look over the farm or apiary's website.
- Acquaint yourself with the relevant paperwork, so you are familiar with the process by the time of the inspection.
- If you do not have working familiarity with the CNG standards, take a few minutes to read over and review them.
- Don't hesitate to reach out over phone or email with clarifying questions. For instance, you might want to ask what types of crops the farmer grows, so you know what to expect.

For the farmer/beekeeper:

- Complete the List of Inputs. This is a requirement, and the inspection cannot be completed without it. When possible, have inputs easily accessible and in consolidated area of the farm.
- Tidy up. It's much easier to inspect a clean, organized barn than a messy one.
- Have relevant records and receipts on hand.

For both: Be clear and communicative about planning the inspection. Growers are busy people, so please respect each other's time and commitment.

Beginning the Inspection

Make a plan together. Take a few minutes to sit down and make a schedule for the day. Depending on the layout of the farm, the inspection could flow in any number of ways. Here are some important questions to consider:

- What order will you view the farm? (ie Barn -> wash/pack -> fields -> compost)
- Do you want to fill out paperwork as you go or save it for the end?

- How much time do you want to spend on the inspection?

It can also help to make a rough schedule for the day. Here is an example schedule:

9 am - Introductions, initial planning, coffee
9:15 am - List of inputs and records
10 am - Tour of fields
11 am - Compost
11:10 am - Barn and storage
11:25 am - Wash/pack
11:30 am - Other questions, suggestions and conversation
11:45 am - Complete paperwork
12:15 pm - Three goals
12:30 pm - Wrap up and break for lunch

It is not imperative to actually stick to a schedule, but you may find that it is a good timekeeping tool. When on an inspection, you can (quite literally) get lost in the weeds of a topic. Having a rough outline for the day will give you a tool to conduct time checks so that you can give each area comprehensive attention while still moving efficiently throughout the day.

During the Inspection

Going over Inputs

- This can be a good topic to start out with to get out of the way early on.
- The easiest way to verify that a product is approved for CNG is it has been verified to be allowed on certified organic operations. The most common listing is OMRI (Organic Material Review Institute). Another program is run by WSDA.
- Otherwise, you will want to check individual ingredients listed and verify if they are natural or synthetic.
- It is fine to look up individual materials or inputs after the inspection when you have more time or easier access to the internet. Just be sure to communicate this during the inspection.

Strategies for a Quality Inspection

- Communicate and regularly check in with each other. It's good to make the decision together to move onto one section of the inspection to another. For example, if you have just completed the "Weeds" section of the inspection ask something like "Do you feel good about weeds, or do you want to focus on this topic for longer?"
- Let the paperwork be your guide, but not the totality of the inspection. Some of the richest moments in CNG come from fluid conversation between farmers. Don't be afraid to dig deeper into discussion topics that are proving fruitful.

- For the farmer/beekeeper - keep an open mind. It's not every day you get another set of eyes on your farm or apiary. It is easy to feel defensive when other people suggest new ideas. Remember that you do not have to implement any suggestions (other than corrective actions pertaining to CNG standards) and that this is a unique opportunity to get valuable insight into your day to day operations.
- For the inspector - be understanding and compassionate. Running a farm is more than someone's profession, but often the culmination of their life's work. Don't hesitate to offer insight and new ideas, but just be intentional about how you communicate them.
- Try to think of suggestions that could be implemented simply. Systemic changes like "converting to no-till" or "scrapping CSA and selling only at farmer's markets" are valuable food for thought, but nearly impossible to implement mid-season. Here are a few examples of questions to ask that can lead to financially valuable changes:
 - What is an inexpensive tool you have used that you do not see at the farm you are inspecting? Could it be of use?
 - Where do they buy amendments? How about supplies? And cover crop seeds? Are there any group buys that they could join in on?
 - Where do they source compost and mulch? Do you know a local source that you could suggest?
 - Are there any weeds, pests or diseases that are particularly troubling? Have you had success targeting them? If so, what did you do?

Wrapping up the Inspection

- Try to leave at least 10-15 minutes for goal setting. It can feel like a lot to get through at the end of the inspection, but it can be a really valuable exercise for "big picture" thinking about a farm or apiary.
- Identify next steps and make an action plan. What are loose ends that need to be tied before the inspection is complete? (ie looking further into a fertilizer product you have never heard of).

Things to Avoid

The following concepts don't need too much explanation. They are all fairly simple concepts that just take being mindful to avoid. Once again, these are informed from a survey of hundreds of CNG farmers as the most likely causes to negatively affect an inspection.

- Showing up late
- Showing up unprepared and unfamiliar with the process
- Rushing through the inspection
- Only focusing on the paperwork
- Defensive inspectees who are not open to listening to new ideas
- Inspectors acting judgmentally or making assumptions about the farm or apiary they are inspecting

Following Up After the Inspection

Section to be completed by other CNG staff

Troubleshooting Tricky Situations

Section to be informed by crowdsourcing information from technical leads so that it is based on actual situations that have happened.

Resources

[Organic Materials Review Institute](#) - Note: the most powerful tool in this listing is the search function. You can search either by product (ie Monterey) or ingredient (ie Bacillus thuringiensis).

[WSDA Organic Input List](#)

[CDFA Organic Input List](#)

CNG Standards

Allowed, Prohibited and Restricted