

The 2026 Canadian Organic Standards

Animal welfare at all stages of organic management

The Organic Federation of Canada (OFC) presents the second in a series of articles introducing the 2026 Canadian Organic Standards.

The first article, ‘Why soil matters’, [is available here](#).

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Transitioning livestock

The demand for organic livestock is greater than the supply

The standards governing the transition of animals to organic farming

The ideal situation is for livestock to be bred and born on the organic farm where they will live. When organic producers need to buy livestock, they should purchase animals that have been raised organically.



Unfortunately, this isn't always possible because the demand for organic livestock is greater than the supply. Consequently, if "suitable organic breeding stock is not commercially available," according to 6.2.1.3 of the Canadian Organic Standards (COS), organic producers can bring non-organic animals into the operation but the requirements are complex.

With cropland, a three-year transition period is required between the last use of a prohibited substance and when the land can produce organic crops. With livestock, a transition period is also required but it is much more complicated. The time period varies depending on many factors including the type of livestock and the type of livestock product. For example, if a beef cow receives antibiotics, it can never be used for organic meat. However, if a dairy cow receives one treatment of antibiotics in the case of an emergency, her milk can be sold as organic after a period of time (at least 30 days after the last day of a course of treatment, or a withholding period that is twice the label requirement, whichever is longer). But if she receives a second treatment, she needs to go through a 12-month transition period. If she still needs treatment for the same problem a third time in three years, she will lose her organic status forever and must be removed from the organic herd.

Another factor in determining organic status of livestock is gestation. An organic farmer can buy non-organic livestock and their young might be considered organic - but that depends on what trimester she entered organic production.

The issue of transitioning organic livestock is challenging. The clauses referring to the Origin of livestock (6.2) and transitioning whole herds or flocks (6.3) have been re-written for clarity. The meaning, for the most part, has not changed since the 2020 COS, however the text has been clarified and reorganized.

Alternating animals in and out of organic production

Losing organic status: forever or just for a while? Although the intent of the standard has always been to prevent operators from alternating livestock in and out of organic production, this has now been clarified. Subclause 6.2.1.2 clearly states that if an organic animal is removed from an organic operation and managed non-organically, it will not be permitted to re-enter organic production.



For example, a dairy calf born on an organic operation cannot be fed conventional milk and then transitioned back to organic status.

Sales receipts and other livestock records are needed to track animals, including their destination upon leaving an organic operation.

It is still, however, permissible for animals to undergo a transition period after treatment with a veterinary drug in some circumstances (6.6.10).

Search for organic breeding stock

When organic farmers need to purchase breeding stock, their first step is to look for certified organic breeding stock. They must keep records of that search. Similar to how organic market gardeners can buy non-organic seeds of certain varieties if no organic seeds are available, organic livestock farmers can buy non-organic breeding stock if there is no organic stock available of the particular breed or genetics they need (but see restrictions in 6.2.1.3).

A change to the COS is the requirement that before buying non-organic breeding stock, a producer must have a written record of the efforts made to find organic breeding stock to show that the breeding stock in question is not commercially available.

Commercial availability is not well defined in a livestock context, but in the interests of animal welfare, it should include the notion of proximity. For example, transporting organic heifers over several days from Quebec to Alberta would be stressful for the animals; this would justify sourcing

non-organic animals from within the province. From an animal welfare perspective, if transit time is more than 12 hours, producers should be allowed to purchase local non-organic stock.

province. En tenant compte du bien-être animal, les producteurs devraient être autorisés à acheter du cheptel non biologique local si la durée du transport dépasse 12 heures.

Ruminant farmers are encouraged to raise their own replacement stock

Genetic diversity is required to maintain healthy herds and flocks of livestock. Consequently, farmers need to periodically introduce new genetics. Ideally, as described above, they would buy certified organic breeding animals, however this isn't always possible.

On the other hand, once organic farmers have established their herds or flocks, they shouldn't rely on constantly transitioning non-organic breeding stock. The 2026 COS (6.2.1.4) now states that "Organic ruminant producers shall produce sufficient suitable replacement stock within the organic operation. When suitable replacement stock cannot be produced on the operation in sufficient numbers, purchase of replacement stock may be supplemental (less than 50%) to on-farm production of ruminant breeding stock."

This is accompanied by a note that states ***"It is expected that breeding stock replacement rates in organic farms be low and breeding stock lifespans be long and healthy. If a significant portion of the breeding stock on an operation requires replacement each year, operators are encouraged to review their organic management practices and investigate potential changes to improve sustainability and increase breeding stock longevity."***

This only applies to ruminants because most poultry and swine producers currently do not raise their own breeding stock and instead rely on non-organic breeding stock to produce hybrid offspring.

Integrating non-organic breeding stock

When non-organic breeding stock are brought onto the farm, will their offspring be considered organic? The answer depends on the type of animal and the state of gestation or lactation. This hasn't changed substantially however the 2026 standards clarify the answers.

If the offspring are not organic when they arrive on the farm, they can become breeding stock or go through transition to produce milk, but their meat will never be organic.

Dairy animals: If non-organic dairy animals are purchased, they can only be integrated into the organic operation if they are not pregnant and not lactating when they arrive on the farm. Their milk will be considered organic once they have been on the farm for 12 months. (6.2.1.3 and 6.2.2.2)

Ruminants/swine: If the non-organic animal is lactating, the nursing offspring will not be organic.

Ruminants: If the non-organic animal is gestating (pregnant) upon arrival on the organic farm, once born, the offspring will not be organic.

Swine: If the non-organic animal is gestating (pregnant) upon arrival on the organic farm, once born, the offspring will not be organic. However, the 2026 COS makes it clear that there is an exception for gilts (a female pig that has not yet had a litter), which can enter organic management up until the last third of gestation and the offspring will be organic.

Poultry: The offspring of non-organic breeding stock that hatch on an organic farm are considered organic.

Note that there is an exception to all these rules: 6.2.1.3 b) states “ in case of catastrophic events, such as a barn fire or disease leading to repopulation, non-organic breeding stock (excluding poultry) may be brought onto an organic operation before the last third of gestation if suitable organic animals are not commercially available (as defined in Clause 3).”

If a breeding animal originates on a non-organic farm, the meat from that animal can never be organic. Previously, such animals could not be transferred to another organic farm’s breeding program or dairy herd (COS 2020 6.2.4 b). Now, these animals can be used as breeding stock on another organic farm if the seller provides documentation of the history. (This is to ensure that the meat from that animal isn’t sold as organic.)

Methods for transitioning non-organic animals vary between species

The specific details of transition vary between species, gestation stage and use of the animal. For example, day-old chicks can transition into organic production right away, whereas non-organic ruminants can never be used for organic meat production.

In fact, poultry can *only* enter organic production by being hatched on an organic farm or as non-organic day-old chicks. When purchasing day-old chicks, the operator is responsible to ensure the chicks have not been given any medications except vaccines and have not been hatched from eggs treated with antibiotics. Operators will need to communicate with the hatchery or supplier to obtain written confirmation.

A few changes made to the COS are outlined here.

Transitioning a herd and land simultaneously

Section 6.3 describes the requirements when a whole livestock operation or livestock production unit is being transitioned to organic production. This clause only applies when an entire herd or flock is being converted for the first time and does not apply to individual replacement females or single animals that are brought onto the farm. In the 2020 COS, some sections of 6.3 referred only to dairy herds, but as of 2026, they refer to any livestock production unit in transition.



Dairy, beef, sheep, goat and pig operations can be transitioned (not poultry; this is laid out in 6.2.2). The dams on the farm at the start of a whole-operation transition can never be sold or processed as organic meat animals. However, as long as they are managed according to the timeline given in 6.3, their offspring will be organic.

The requirements for the transition of whole herds or flocks are divided into three time periods: the moment of certification, three months before, and 12 months before (6.3.1, 6.3.2 and 6.3.3 respectively).

Land that will be used to grow feed or forage, for pastures and for outdoor access must be free of prohibited substances for 36 months and be managed according to the standard for at least 12 months, as well as meeting the other requirements of 5.1.

The allowance for 20% non-organic feed for transitioning breeding stock during the first nine months of the transition year now applies to any transitioning herd or flock (not only dairy). Detailed records of feed sources, quantities and the dates when non-organic sources were fed will be necessary to verify the actual percentage of conventional feed used.

Using feed and forage during transition

During the transition of a livestock production unit, the standards have allowed producers to use feed and forage produced during the last year of transition (sometimes called T3 feed) to feed the transitioning animals. (Note “T3 feed” refers to the third year of the transition of the cropland or forage land, not to the transition timeline of the animals.)

This clause makes it possible for all parts of a production unit in transition to reach organic status at the same time, instead of waiting until all forage crops are certified before starting the transition of the dairy or beef herd or sheep flock. Without this allowance, transition time would increase by 12 or more months depending on the date of the hay harvest.

For example, this allows feed harvested from fields in the 3rd year of transition to be considered organic when fed to the dairy cows on the same farm during their 12-month transition period. However, this feed cannot be used as organic feed on another farm, nor can 3rd-year transitional feed be purchased from another farm and fed as organic.

The 2026 wording makes it clear that the T3 feed or forage, when stored, is still considered organic and can be used on the operation for 36 months once the herd transition is completed.



Note that it is not possible to produce organic milk or meat from livestock before the land has organic status. Offspring of meat animals will only be considered organic if they were born after the land transition is complete.

Animal health and welfare

Animal welfare is a key component of organic livestock production

Raising organic livestock is much more than providing animals with organic feed and not relying on veterinary drugs. Animal welfare is a key component of organic livestock care, and this is reflected in the Canadian Organic Standards (COS).



The 2026 COS places even more emphasis on animal welfare, particularly when it comes to handling and moving animals.

Preventing disease, developing a strong immune system, and promoting wellness

The Canadian Organic Standards focus on the prevention of animal health problems. The COS outline the combination of management practices necessary to prevent disease, develop a strong immune system, and promote wellness. A balanced diet, adequate housing with ample space, gentle handling and careful observation all contribute to good health.

If there are health problems, it is up to the producer to look at all aspects of the operation to determine the contributing factors and develop a plan to prevent and/or solve the problems.

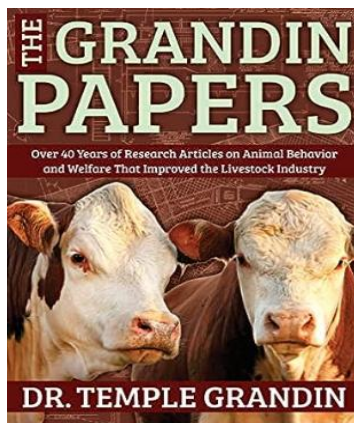
Four changes in the 2026 COS strengthen these principles. Producers must:

1. check (monitor) animals daily for health and welfare. The only exceptions to this are if the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Farm Animals for the type of animal has a less frequent requirement for checks, or if the animal is on extensive rangeland (subclause 6.1.7).
2. monitor livestock Body Condition Scores and make changes if the animals are too thin (subclause 6.6.1 g).
3. have a working relationship with an animal health expert (subclause 6.6.1 h).
4. have a working relationship with an animal nutrition expert (subclause 6.4.3).

Handling livestock

Low-stress handling methods

In the 2020 COS, the livestock handling section had less than two lines of text (6.5.1). It has now been expanded. There is a highlight on low-stress handling that puts a focus on animal welfare and wellbeing.



People who handle animals on certified operations must now be trained in low-stress handling methods. As well, handling areas must have good traction underfoot and a lack of visual distractions to ensure smooth animal movement (6.5.2 and 6.5.3). The new text prohibits moving or pulling animals by their fleece or hair, or by their tails, skin, ears or limbs (6.5.6).

The recommendations of [Temple Grandin](#) are the gold standard for low-stress handling facilities and methods. Producers are encouraged to consult her website, books and publications for more information.

Herding animals

The flight zone: respect the animals' 'personal' space

For animals that can be moved by herding, which includes ruminants, pigs and turkeys, the 2026 COS introduces the concept of working with an animal's flight zone. It also describes the other safe and calm options that can be used when more encouragement is needed:

6.5.4 When moving animals, operators and staff shall use the following techniques in order of preference:

- a. working with an animal's flight zone;
- b. visual aids, such as alternative driving aids (e.g., flags or sticks with plastic ribbons); or
- c. gentle use of paddles or boards.

This clause is supplemented by a new definition in Clause 3: **flight zone**

“the distance at which an animal moves away from another animal or human. The size of the flight zone reflects the species, the animal's age and past experiences, and the relationship between the animal and the handler.”

Picking up animals

Lifting birds and small animals



The COS provides guidance on how to pick up animals when they need to be moved. This applies to poultry, rabbits and sometimes small lambs, kids and piglets. When carrying small mammals, operators must keep their body supported in an upright position.

For poultry, the ideal situation is that they remain upright and supported by the breast or lifted by both legs.

However, to accommodate large-scale situations, allowance is given for lifting them by one leg or both wings (6.5.6). When professionals are catching birds in a full barn of 10,000 chickens, they move quickly (which also means that the bird is not held for very long) and are audited to ensure that birds are not harmed during the process. There is also a tradeoff of catching the birds more slowly (which using two legs would require), in that they would then wait longer on the truck to depart, putting their welfare at risk in another way.

Electric prods

The electric prod as a safety measure

The issue of electric prods came up during the review of the COS. Some members of the organic community believe that electric prods should be completely prohibited, but some organic farmers revealed that an electric prod can be a lifesaving measure in certain situations.

Consequently, the 2026 COS does not prohibit electric prods completely.

In cases where human or animal safety is at risk, such as when a large animal becomes stuck in a handling facility, using the electric prod may be permitted.

There are three additional requirements to justify the use of an electric prod:

1. it must be a last resort,
2. the animal must have a clear path to move, and
3. the requirements of the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Farm Animals for that type of livestock must be followed.

Therefore, if operators keep an electric prod on hand, they should be familiar with the Code of Practice requirements as well. All the Codes can be found on the [National Farm Animal Care Council's website](#). Also, whenever an electric prod is used on an organic farm, it must be documented and action taken to avoid its future use.

Transportation of animals

Transporting animals more comfortably

Moving animals between farms or, more commonly, on their way to slaughter, has to be managed carefully to avoid animal suffering. This is why transportation is regulated federally for all animals in Canada by way of the Health of Animals Regulations (HAR), Part XII. The 2026 COS was updated to be in line with the HAR.

The guidelines in the HAR are based on how long animals have been without food, water and rest, so these factors have to be carefully documented.



Another factor from the HAR that was incorporated into the COS is how sick animals can be transported. In the 2026 COS, “sick” animals are now divided into “compromised” animals and “unfit” animals. These terms are intended to help operators judge whether an animal can be transported. “Unfit” animals are in very bad condition, for example they are reluctant or unable to walk or have a severe infection, and must not be transported except to access vet care (6.5.12).

The 2026 COS also advises that “all persons involved in transport participate in training to ensure competency in essential skills such as animal handling and knowledge of animal transport regulations” (6.5.13 Note 1).

Housing animals

Animal welfare is a top concern when housing animals. The 2026 COS has strengthened the housing requirements to enhance the welfare of organic livestock.

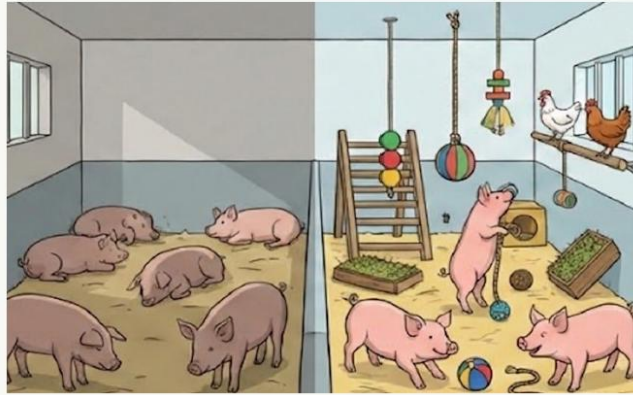
Environmental enrichment

Preventing boredom in animals during the long winter months

A fundamental principle of animal welfare is ensuring that livestock can exhibit natural behaviours. When animals are outside, this usually isn’t a problem. For example, chickens can peck at insects, sheep can rub against trees, and pigs can wallow in the mud. But when animals have to be kept inside, such as during our long winters, it becomes more difficult for them to exercise and express a variety of behaviours.



When animals are, essentially, bored and can't behave naturally, they sometimes develop unhealthy, often aggressive, habits. For example, chickens might peck the feathers of other birds and this can lead to cannibalism within a flock. Pigs might bite the tails and ears of their companions. This is one reason why organic livestock producers create a more complex indoor habitat through environmental enrichment.



The 2026 COS (6.7.3) requires that environmental enrichment be provided for all types of livestock when they are housed indoors. "For dairy cows in tie stalls (are permitted under 6.12.1), enrichment shall be provided during the exercise period if not provided in each stall. Enrichment does not include functional equipment or other objects or materials required by this standard."

The COS provides examples of environmental enrichments suitable for different types of livestock.

Type of Livestock: Examples of suitable enrichments

Poultry	Hanging peck objects, ramps, tunnels, straw/hay bales, pecking block products
Pigs	Suspended chew toys, chains, rubber hoses, rubber toys, cloth strips, hanging knotted cotton ropes, scratch pads, straw/hay bales
Cattle	Brushes, hanging ropes or chains, straw/hay bales
Sheep and goats	Brushes, platforms, opportunities for climbing and hiding, brush or branches, straw/hay bales

Farrowing sows

The farrowing crate isn't the problem – it's how it is used



Privacy at farrowing (when a pig gives birth) is important; it reduces stress and allows piglets and sows to become accustomed to each other. However the conventional practice of having sows confined to farrowing pens for days at a time is considered inhumane. The 2026 COS have clarified and strengthened the standards around farrowing.

Stall designs which permit sows to come and go at will are allowed.

Confinement is allowed during periods of high levels of aggression, for example, during estrus, to prevent injury which might occur in a group setting. Additional restraint is allowed when piglets are very young and in danger of being crushed.

The 2026 COS prohibits the practice of restraining the sow for up to 3 days for piglet protection (6.15.4). Instead, the sow can be restrained for a maximum of 4 hours. The producer must be present when the sow is restrained (i.e., direct supervision) and the sow must be released as soon as possible. Four hours is enough time to (1) protect the piglets in the situation of a nervous sow during farrowing (this addresses the risks of crushing or cannibalism), (2) allow the producer to clean the pen of an aggressive sow regularly and safely, and (3) work with the piglets (for example, when castrating).

The producer could use any type of enclosure to restrain the sow in the conditions described above. The mention of farrowing crates was removed in 2026 because they are prohibited already by the minimum pen size dictated in Table 7. Some farms have farrowing crate-style enclosures with a side wall that can be opened and closed within the larger farrowing pens. These were being used for temporary restraint in exceptional circumstances or for short periods of time. Therefore, the crate was acting as a handling system rather than a housing system. In summary, it is not the farrowing crate as a piece of equipment that needs to be prohibited, but how it is used.

The length of the suckling period will determine the maximum time allowed for individual housing. It is better for the piglets to be in the same familiar environment until they are separated from the sow but that does not preclude a group of sows and piglets being housed together if piglets are about the same age.



Ruminants

The Canadian Organic Standards (COS) puts emphasis on ensuring that ruminants, or herbivores (cattle, sheep and goats):

- 1) are outside, and
- 2) meet much of their nutritional needs from grazed pasture.

Recent changes to the COS clarify and strengthen these requirements. A number of key changes have been listed below.

There have also been some changes in how young ruminants must be managed, by requiring gradual weaning and increasing the level of social interaction to improve the wellbeing of young dairy animals.

Defining ‘grazing season’

In the 2026 COS, the definition of “grazing season” has been refreshed to specify when herbivores should meet at least 30% of their forage needs by grazing (6.1.3):

Grazing season: *The period of time when pasture is available for grazing due to local seasonal climate, available moisture, soil condition, availability of forage and other land access constraints. Grazing season dates may vary because of seasonal variations or extreme weather events and may*

not be continuous. The grazing season may be extended, for example by grazing stockpiled pasture or annual crops, as outlined in the operation's organic system plan.

The new definition allows for a break in the grazing season if forage availability dips, for example, during a drought.

The new definition also works hand-in-hand with the requirement to record the details regarding access to pasture and any indoor confinement (6.1.3, 6.7.2 and 6.11.1). This includes recording:

- when animals are grazing and when they are not,
- rotation details relating to each paddock or pasture - entry and exit dates, size of area and number of animals, and
- dates of and reasons for indoor confinement.

Operators must also document the measures taken to reduce indoor confinement (6.7.2).

The COS emphasizes that outdoor access, for example in an outdoor exercise yard, should be provided for cattle, sheep and goats even when conditions don't allow for grazing. This is why there are requirements to document grazing and indoor confinement - if neither of those is occurring, the animals should have daily outdoor access.

Whether or not grazing and outdoor access are appropriate in different weather conditions depends on the type of livestock, the stage of production and the potential for degradation of the pasture or range. Reasons that animals can be kept indoors include (6.7.2):

- a. inclement weather
- b. conditions in which livestock health or safety is jeopardized, given the stage of production; and
- c. conditions in which soil, water or plant quality would be compromised.

The amount of forage grazed varies during the grazing season

In keeping with their natural behaviour, herbivores must be allowed to graze when forage is available.

The COS (6.1.3 a)) requires that, during the grazing season, a minimum 30% of the forage requirement must come from grazing and that a minimum of $\frac{1}{3}$ of an acre of pasture be available per animal unit (6.1.3 e).

The 2026 COS clarifies how the 30% should be calculated: it is 30% of the *daily dry matter (DM) intake from forage*.



During the grazing season, pasture should supply the majority of dry matter intake for beef cattle and sheep, far exceeding the minimum of 30% of forage intake. The COS expresses this by saying that in periods of high forage growth, the expectation is to exceed 30% of the daily forage requirement for all classes of grazing herbivore (6.1.3 b).

There is now an allowance to bridge the grazing season by providing less than 30% of the daily forage intake from grazing during the transition into and out of grazing (6.1.3. c). This allows dairy cows to avoid an abrupt change in diet, which could affect milk production. For other livestock types, the goal is to encourage grazing even when the contribution of grazed forage is under 30%, early or late in the season.

Letting dairy cows outside in the winter

During the COS review, there were opposing viewpoints within the sector about whether livestock, particularly dairy cows, need to get outside daily throughout the winter. Some wished to loosen the requirements and allow dairy cows to stay inside every day during the winter. The reasons? To protect cows from the danger of slipping on ice or contaminating frozen outdoor areas with manure. Others wished for on-farm improvements to be made that would allow livestock access to the outdoors throughout the winter at least on days when conditions are suitable.



The result is a new requirement to document any restriction of outdoor access specifically for cattle, sheep and goats (6.11.1). This clause is up for review in five years. The idea is that by documenting the reasons and frequency with which these animals are being kept indoors, more information will be available in five years to know if outdoor access in the winter should be further encouraged or not.

Water for cows on pasture



6.12.7

During the grazing season,
dairy cows on pasture
shall have access
to a water source
within 200 m.

There is a new clause that requires access to water within 200 m while on pasture (6.12.7). This is in response to shifting strategies of dairy cow management, namely robotic milking systems and the shift from tie-stall to free-stall barns, which encourage cows to stay inside. The goal is to encourage cows to spend more time on pasture, in accordance with the intent of the organic standards.

Feeding organic animals after a catastrophic event

Organic livestock eat organic feed and forage. But what happens when, due to drought, there is no organic silage available? Or, what happens after the nightmare scenario when a barn burns down and the winter's worth of feed and hay is lost in the flames? And, what happens when a pandemic interrupts international trade leaving farmers and feed suppliers unsure of when the next imports will arrive?

The COS balances a need for compassion for the farmers facing disastrous conditions, and a need to maintain organic integrity.

A change in the 2026 COS clarifies that the use of non-organic feed or forage in a catastrophic event or forage shortage, done according to the standards, will not affect the organic status of an animal for milk or meat (6.4.8).

When a forage shortage occurs, it must be documented by the operator in order for non-organic forage to be used. Other steps that are recommended, but not required by the standards include the forage shortage being confirmed by a regional authority and for the certifying body to be notified. The appropriate regional authority can include a crop insurance organization, a provincial forage specialist, or a conservation authority.

The new wording clarifies that the first group of animals that can be fed non-organic forage are the non-lactating females. If this is not sufficient to alleviate the shortage, non-organic forage can then be fed to the whole herd or flock, contributing up to 25% of the total forage fed.

There is a sequence of preference for the non-organic forage fed (6.4.8.2 a):

- a) non-organic forage from land in transition
- b) non-organic forage grown without the use of prohibited substances
- c) non-organic forage grown without the use of prohibited substances for at least 60 days prior to harvest
- d) non-organic forage provided it is not a genetically engineered crop.

An expert in meeting nutritional fiber needs

There has long been a requirement in the COS for ruminants to be fed at least 15% long-fibre forage when their ration includes silage as a forage source. In the 2026 COS review, this requirement was removed.



The reason for the original requirement was to ensure good rumen function, which requires a certain amount of effective fibre. However, the measurement of forage quality and effective fibre has evolved and stem length is no longer the main criteria - it is more complex than can be judged with the eye.

Because of this complexity, there is a new requirement for producers to have access to nutrition advice. To demonstrate access to nutrition advice, producers must maintain a relationship with a nutritionist or other expert who can advise on the nutritional needs of the herd or flock (6.4.3). This applies to all livestock, but will particularly help ensure that ruminants are getting the correct amount and quality of fibre.

If the producer is a nutritionist themselves, they do not need to consult someone else. Also, note that “an experienced peer” can be an expert in this matter.

Caring for young ruminants

A gradual weaning to respect animal nature

The 2026 COS introduces new requirements to reduce stress during weaning (6.4.4).

With this change, gradual weaning will be a way for organic producers (of non-dairy ruminants) to differentiate themselves from conventional producers.

6.4.4 g) Ruminants shall be weaned gradually to minimize stress;

1. dam-raised calves, lambs, and kids shall be weaned by limiting dam contact or nursing using strategies such as fenceline weaning, nose paddle/two-stage weaning, or natural weaning; and
2. calves, lambs, and kids that are separated from their dams shortly after birth and fed milk (hand-raised) shall be weaned from milk gradually by reducing the quantity or frequency of milk feeding over at least five days;

Note: Research on the benefits and methods of gradual weaning in non-ruminants is still growing, and operators are encouraged to monitor developments in this area.



Reducing milk feeding over time rather than cutting it off abruptly has significant benefits to the welfare and health of young ruminants and is in line with organic principles. This change would require young ruminants for both dairy and meat production to be weaned from milk gradually. This is a relatively new requirement in the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle and is not regularly used for other types of livestock. For some beef, lamb and non-dairy goat producers, this change will require a change in management, but there are different options available to fit different systems.

Meat animals gradually move from milk to solid food, as the offspring are with the dam for much longer than for dairy animals. But abrupt separation from the dam is still very stressful even though the nutritional transition is gradual. A survey of beef producers in Canada in 2022-2023 found that 51% are using traditional weaning while 32% using fenceline weaning and 12% used nose paddles, so these methods are already coming into use

Housing the calves while promoting play and social interaction

Cows are herd animals and calves benefit from social interaction. Research shows that calves in pairs or groups engage more in play and other healthy behaviours compared to calves kept individually in hutches. This increase in activity improves bone and muscle growth, and is associated with less unhealthy behaviour (e.g., abnormal licking of objects). Just allowing calves to see each other or touch heads provides some benefits compared to complete isolation, but not nearly as much as if they have “full-body social contact with their companion.”

Before 2026, it was necessary to have weaned calves in group housing. Now, unweaned calves must also be paired or group housed. This form of housing prepares the calf for life in a herd. The benefits are best realized when calves are grouped starting when they are no more than 2-3 weeks of age. The Code of Practice will require this form of housing for all dairy farms starting in 2031.



The new requirement in 6.12.5 has caveats, however.

- The requirement only applies to “calves that are healthy, thriving, and compatible in age, size, and drinking speed” to avoid unhealthy competition between calves of different ages. If calves can’t be paired up, they can be temporarily housed in individual pens and hutches but these must be designed and located so that each calf has physical contact with other calves.
- Calves that are sick may be housed individually temporarily to avoid spreading disease.
- Operators have up until December 2027 to update their infrastructure.

Physical alterations

Applying the least painful and most effective practices

Humane treatment of livestock is one of the foundations of organic livestock production. Organic farmers aim to provide their animals with a good quality of life, as well as high quality organic feed. The farmers try to avoid painful situations and reduce suffering as much as possible.

Unfortunately, as with humans, sometimes painful practices are necessary to avoid long-term suffering. For example, castration is often required with herd animals to avoid accidental breeding of young females and inbreeding. In developing the 2026 Canadian Organic Standards (COS), the Livestock Working Group paid particular attention to the clause about physical alterations (e.g., beak treatment, tail docking, disbudding, dehorning, etc.). For each practice, the group questioned whether the alteration is essential or in what circumstances can it be justified. Based on academic research and input from farmers, the group identified what appears to be the least painful and most effective practices.

The details regarding physical alterations are listed below (6.6.4).

Canadian Organic Standards 2026	Guide to the Canadian Organic Standards
6.6.4 For all livestock, physical alterations are prohibited unless they are essential for animal health, welfare or hygiene; for identification; or for safety reasons; and are listed below in 6.6.4. Operators shall take steps to avoid physical alterations and should work towards phasing out routine alterations, other than for identification as required by law. All physical alterations are subject to the following:	
6.6.4.1 Except for poultry, regardless of age or method, anesthetics and non-steroid anti-inflammatory analgesics shall be used in consultation with a veterinarian to provide sufficient pain control; sedatives should be considered to further minimize stress.	By default, alterations are prohibited and should be avoided whenever possible. However, in certain situations, avoiding the physical alteration would result in inferior welfare outcomes for the animals. For all alterations, pain control must be used, the practitioner must be trained, and tools must be well-maintained and clean.
6.6.4.2 Physical alterations should be done at as young an age as possible. Other than for poultry, they shall be done after the first 24 hours of life.	In general, younger animals recover more quickly from physical alterations than older animals.
6.6.4.3 Physical alterations must be performed by, or under the direct supervision of, competent personnel using proper, clean, sanitized, and well-maintained tools, and accepted techniques.	

6.6.4.4 Tagging for identification is permitted when required by law. One additional ear tag, or tail web tag (for goats) is permitted.	For example, animals can be identified using ear tags with numbers, ear tattoos, or RFID tags (ear tags containing a microchip and antenna).
6.6.4.5 Physical alterations permitted by livestock type are listed in 6.6.4.7. Physical alterations not listed are permitted by exception if they are required to protect the health or welfare of the animal and if they are done by a licensed veterinarian. They shall be on an individual basis rather than for a group of animals. Exceptional events that require physical alterations shall be documented and corrective action shall be taken to avoid recurrence.	6.6.4.5 is for exceptions that are not listed below. These are one-off situations where a vet is needed. Examples are dehorning or castration of an older animal with a health issue that made it impossible to respect the age limit for these practices.
6.6.4.6 The following physical alterations are prohibited even under veterinary supervision: caustic paste disbudding, castration of cull boars, spaying of female beef cattle, and preventative tail docking of cattle.	Disbudding with caustic paste was added to the list of prohibited practices in 2026 because research shows it is very painful. Also, there are reasonable alternative methods for disbudding, and they are listed in 6.6.4.7 by species.
6.6.4.7 Specifications by species:	
a) Poultry:	Beak treatment is a routine practice in commercial production of laying hens and turkeys. At the hatchery, the beaks of chicks and poults less than a day old are blunted using infra-red energy. This form of beak treatment has replaced the more invasive process of beak trimming and many large-scale poultry producers consider that beak treatment is essential to avoid outbreaks of feather pecking and cannibalism. Beak treatment is a routine practice in commercial production of laying hens and turkeys. At the hatchery, the beaks of chicks and poults less than a day old are blunted using infra-red energy. This form of beak treatment has replaced the more invasive process of beak trimming and

1) Infrared beak treatment is permitted for one-day-old laying hens.

many large-scale poultry producers consider that beak treatment is essential to avoid outbreaks of feather pecking and cannibalism.

The research suggests that if beak treatment is banned and no other changes are made, animal welfare suffers because of the increase in feather pecking and cannibalism. However, many studies have demonstrated that feather pecking, and cannibalism can be reduced or eliminated by other modifications to the birds' living conditions, for example, by providing roughage, reducing flock size, changing lighting, providing enrichments, etc.

The challenge facing organic egg producers is that even if farmers want to have hens with intact beaks, they likely can't get them. The vast majority of large-scale organic egg producers buy day-old chicks from hatcheries and these have all received beak treatments.

In Europe, however, there is a growing movement to prohibit all forms of beak treatment. This is accompanied by improved living conditions of the birds and support from poultry breeders who are developing less aggressive breeds. Unfortunately, these breeds are not currently available in Canada. Because this situation might change in the next several years, the clause allowing beak treatment will be reviewed in 2030.

Unlike physical alterations in other livestock, pain control is not required for poultry as there are no approved drugs in these classes for food-producing birds at this time. The proposed changes include two definitions to help clarify the distinction between beak trimming and beak treatment.

2) Infrared beak treatment and spur removal are permitted for one-day-old turkeys.

Beak Treatment: Blunting of the beak using a non-invasive procedure (i.e. infra-red).

	Beak Trimming: Removal of a portion of the beak, usually by hot blade, an instrument that simultaneously cuts and cauterizes. Beak trimming is only allowed for chicks ten-days-old or younger “when infrared beak treatment failed or in flocks where infrared beak treatment is not available. Beak trimming shall be done in a way that no more than one-third of the upper beak is removed, as measured from the tip to the entrance of the nostrils.” However, if there is an outbreak of cannibalism, beak trimming can be permitted, by exception, on older birds under veterinary supervision. If beak trimming is used, it shall be documented. Due to rapid development in research and practices regarding feather pecking and cannibalism, this standard will be reviewed in 2030. Analgesics and anesthetics are not required for poultry as there are no approved drugs in these classes for food-producing birds at this time.
3) Beak trimming is allowed by exception until birds are ten days old in situations when infrared beak treatment has failed or in flocks where infrared beak treatment is not available. Beak trimming shall be done in a way that no more than one third of the upper beak is removed, as measured from the tip to the entrance of the nostrils. In case of cannibalism outbreak, beak trimming is allowed after ten days of age under veterinary supervision. If beak trimming is used, it shall be documented.	Beak trimming is only permitted if outbreaks of cannibalism occur and cannot be addressed with other methods. Documentation of such an outbreak, the methods used to treat it and how the operator intends to prevent it in the future are required. Beak trimming would also be allowed if a flock does not have access to infrared beak treatment or the treatment failed. These situations will be part of the review of this clause in 2030.
See definitions of beak treatment and beak trimming in Clause 3. Note: This clause (6.6.4.7 a)) will be reviewed in 2030.	Use of peepers/binders to prevent or control cannibalism is prohibited if pins are used because this is an unnecessary physical alteration. Without pins, they would still be considered an animal welfare issue.

b) Pigs:	Trimming of needle teeth in pigs is not considered absolutely necessary and should never be carried out as a matter of course. Trimming of needle teeth is only permitted by a vet under 6.6.4.5, as it is not mentioned in 6.6.4.7. Litters need to be monitored carefully; there are more likely to be problems with large litters where competition is more intense.
1) Castration is permitted for piglets under ten days of age.	For pigs, castration is needed to avoid boar taint in the meat. In 2026, the age limit for castration of piglets has been lowered from 14 days to 10 days. Castration is painful for piglets at any age and this brings the Standards in line with practices required in the <i>Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Pigs</i> regarding use of pain control, and brings the Organic Standards to a level above the Code of Practice by requiring castration to be completed by ten days. Immuno-castration products, which use the pig's own immune system to control substances that cause boar taint, are not permitted.
2) Tail docking is permitted only if a documented outbreak of cannibalism occurs and the issue cannot be addressed by other methods. The docked tail shall be at least 2.5 cm in length and the operator shall follow the method outlined in written instructions by a veterinarian.	Tail docking is only permitted in exceptional circumstances as described in 6.6.4.7 but can be performed by the operator. Tail biting is related to welfare deficiencies such as overcrowded pens without bedding. It can be prevented by providing an appropriate and comfortable environment that allows for natural behaviours. An appropriate setting allows nosing, chewing and rooting in straw, for example, rather than having the pigs redirect this behaviour towards companions in an aggressive manner.

c) Cattle

1) Disbudding by hot iron is permitted for calves under two months of age.

In certain types of animals, horns can be hazardous to fellow animals, human handlers, and the horned animal itself. The situation varies between species. For example, having beef cattle with horns is a common practice but if ranchers don't want that, they can choose polled breeds.

When it comes to **dairy cows and goats**, however, the situation is different. Disbudding dairy calves and goat kids is the norm because a horned milking animal can be dangerous to handle. Even the gentlest cow can inflict serious injury to a person by accident.

With dairy breeds, it can be a challenge to find semen from polled dairy sires. In terms of goats, all goat breeds have horns (although there are rare cases of certain individual goats, and possibly bloodlines, without horns). The nature of goats, however, can be particularly problematic: an inquisitive and playful animal can become a danger when horns are involved. Although some farmers (including biodynamic farmers) have goats with horns, other goat farmers have found that horned goats have injured other goats, as well as humans.

The 2026 COS does not permit the painful process of dehorning animals (removing horns after the horn bud has attached to the skull) but does allow disbudding, which is defined as "a procedure that removes the horn bud (from which the horn grows) before it attaches to the skull, which usually occurs at 2 months in cattle and at 21 days of age in goats." The process is only allowed on goat kids under 21 days of age and only if a hot iron is used. The more painful process of using caustic acid is prohibited. Dehorning is not permitted except by a veterinarian as covered under 6.6.4.5.

Note that a definition for disbudding has been added to Clause 3.

2) Clamp castration and rubber ring castration are permitted for calves under two months of age.	In many types of livestock production, almost all male animals are castrated - only a small minority of male animals are kept intact (not castrated) so that they can be used for breeding stock. This practice is required to prevent unwanted breeding, such breeding females when they are too young and inbreeding. Castration also can reduce aggressive behaviour, such as fighting between bucks or ram lambs chasing ewes to the point of exhaustion, and between the male animals and human handlers. Lastly, castration is sometimes practiced to improve the quality of the meat. Meat from intact boars and goat bucks, for example, can have an off flavor. As with other physical alterations, pain control is required for castration. The proposed changes to the COS also put age limits on the practice. Younger animals recover more quickly than older animals. Castration is generally permitted with specific methods that are least painful for the animal as per the research. An age limit for castration is provided for each type of livestock. Castration above these age limits would only be permitted by a veterinarian under 6.6.4.5. Castration allows male and female meat animals to be kept together in the same herd or flock without early pregnancies, aggressive behaviour and harassment of the females. For some livestock types, operator safety is improved by having as few as possible intact males.
3) Tail docking of cattle is permitted only when necessary to treat injured animals.	Tail docking is only permitted in exceptional circumstances as described in 6.6.4.7 but can be performed by the operator. Tail docking of dairy cattle in the case of a severe injury to the tail falls under this category (6.6.4.7 c) 3)). It is a time-sensitive procedure that needs quick action by the operator to address bleeding, and pain control is required.

4) Branding is prohibited unless required by law. If required by law, freeze branding with pain control shall be used, and the operator shall provide documentation showing that it is required by law.	Branding is a painful practice and alternatives exist (tagging). There are certain situations, like community pastures or rangeland, where animals must be branded. In those situations, the operator must provide documentation showing that it is required by law and freeze branding, the less painful option, must be used. For freeze branding, a branding iron is chilled in liquid nitrogen or dry ice and alcohol. The extreme cold kills the skin cells responsible for pigmentation in the hair follicles leaving a white pattern on the skin. This is painful but the pain can be minimized by veterinary-approved pharmaceuticals.
d) Sheep:	
1) Clamp castration is permitted for lambs under two months of age and rubber ring castration for lambs under seven days of age.	See 6.6.4.7 c2).
2) Tail docking is permitted for lambs under seven days of age, with the following methods in order of preference (the least painful technique is listed first): i. hot iron, ii. rubber ring in conjunction with a clamp, or iii. rubber ring.	Tail docking refers to the practice of shortening the tail of an animal. The practice is most commonly used on lambs to prevent the build-up of manure on their long, woolly tails. (Docking isn't required for sheep breeds that have short tails or hair rather than wool.) Docking can reduce the incidence of fly-strike, a horrific and potentially deadly condition in which maggots accumulate in the manure on the lamb's tail and eventually consume the flesh of the lamb itself. Given this scenario, organic farmers can dock the tails of sheep but with the following caveats: "Tail docking is permitted for lambs under seven days of age, with the following methods in order of preference (the least painful technique is listed first): hot iron, rubber band and clamp, or rubber band." This clause

3) Docked tails must cover the vulva in ewes and the equivalent length in rams. Tails must be docked no shorter than the distal end of the caudal fold.	reflects the latest the scientific literature regarding which methods are the least painful.
e) Goats:	
1) Disbudding by hot iron is permitted for kids under 21 days of age.	See 6.6.4.7 c1).
2) Clamp castration is permitted for kids under two months of age and rubber ring castration is permitted for kids under 14 days of age.	See 6.6.4.7 c2).
Note: The National Farm Animal Care Council's <i>Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Sheep</i> and <i>Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Beef</i> (see 2.4) are under revision at the time of publishing the 2026 Canadian Organic Standard. Operators are expected to keep up to date with current Codes of Practice, as this standard is expected to meet or exceed the current published Codes of Practice at their time of implementation.	