



CNG Inspection Handbook

The strength of the CNG program comes from the diverse array of knowledgeable farmers who care about their farms, bio-regions and communities. Inspections vary according to the size and scale of the farm, the type of operation, the time of year and the experience of the farmer. What remains constant, however, is a core set of steps both the inspector and the producer can take to help ensure a high quality inspection.

We surveyed hundreds of CNG farmers, asking what makes for a successful inspection. This handbook is directly informed by those survey results and other 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 - when conducting an inspection - to review the practices of another producer's operation. And also - when receiving an inspection - to receive feedback and perspective from another producer about their own farm or apiary. In either case, knowledge will be shared in both directions during 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:

- Be certain you're eligible to complete this producer's inspection. For example, there are strict rules against trading inspections and repeatedly using the same inspector. Find all the details at [CNGfarming.org/inspection-forms](https://www.cngfarming.org/inspection-forms).
- 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 the 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 producer being inspected:

- Be sure this inspector will meet inspection guidelines. For example, there are strict rules against trading inspections and repeatedly using the same inspector. Find all the details at [CNGfarming.org/guidelines](https://www.cngfarming.org/guidelines). You can find eligible inspectors for your particular farm at <https://www.naturallygrown.org/farms-and-apiaries/>
- 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 a 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.

- Put some thought into the Sustainability Goals section and take some notes so you're prepared to discuss them at the end of the inspection when you might be running out of steam.

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? (They typically last at least one hour, frequently two hours and possibly more, depending on the complexity of the operation.)

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 if 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 and follow-up with the producer and with CNG if any inputs are not allowed, to ensure appropriate corrective action is taken.

Strategies for a Quality Inspection

- Communicate and regularly check in with each other. It's good to make the decision together to move from 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 respectful 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 topics 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?
 - Are there varieties you'd recommend they try to extend the season or better resist diseases?

Wrapping up the Inspection

- Try to leave at least 10-15 minutes for the Sustainability Goals section. It can feel like a lot to get through at the end of the inspection, but if the producer prepares ahead, this can be a valuable opportunity for “big picture” thinking with a peer.
- 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).
- Confirm how the inspector will return the report to CNG (scan/email, mail, or fax), and by when will they do it.

Things to Avoid

The following actions don't need too much explanation, but are good to be mindful of so you can be sure to avoid them. Once again, these are informed from a survey of hundreds of CNG farmers of what's most likely 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
- Being defensive and not open to new ideas when receiving an inspection
- Inspectors being judgemental, or making assumptions about the operation they are inspecting

Following Up After the Inspection

Once the inspection is complete, a few more steps need to be taken to make it official.

- Return Worksheets: The inspector must return all inspection worksheets to CNG so they can be reviewed by CNG staff. Find our contact information at the end of the worksheets, on the bottom of the page titled “Inspector Contact Information”.
- Corrective Actions: If the farmer's practices are not in alignment with CNG standards, or if the inspector is unsure, the inspector should make a note in the appropriate section of the inspection worksheet, and alert CNG about these concerns or uncertainties when returning the worksheets. In addition, they should either tell the farmer directly and respectfully, or request that CNG staff review the situation and follow-up with the farmer directly.
- Be Prompt: The producer is depending on the inspector to return the completed inspection worksheets promptly so they can complete their certification (or keep it up-to-date). Delaying their inspection report will delay when they receive their certificate or any CNG marketing materials they've ordered.

- CNG Staff Role: Note the inspector does not make the final determination about the farm's certification status. CNG staff will review the inspection report to confirm the List of Inputs and inspector's notes are in keeping with CNG standards.

Tips for Tricky Situations

Usually, inspections go smoothly. However, occasionally difficult situations occur. After polling experienced inspectors, most of these situations seem to occur around three general areas: communication challenges, organizational challenges, and self-conscious farmers. Here are some tips for avoiding or working through tricky situations:

Communication

- Keep communications between inspectors and inspected farmers congenial and collegial. As one farmer described it, strive for being "personal, professional, and understanding as a person and peer farmer."
- Approach the inspection from both sides as an opportunity to share and learn, not a chance to look for problems to cite. Work together to develop solutions to any challenges.
- A translator may be helpful if the two farmers do not speak the same language fluently.
- If a practice or input is questionable or concerning, agree to follow up afterwards, and continue with the inspection. Be sure to schedule the follow-up time before leaving the inspection!

Organization

- Be sure to complete the input sheet prior to the inspection. This is easy to accomplish ahead of time, but can consume a lot of time and lead to overlooked items if attempted in the heat of an inspection.
- The inspected farmer should have at least a rough idea of the sustainability goals before the inspector arrives. This conversation usually comes at the end of an inspection when both parties can be overwhelmed by information. However, if those goals are shared with the inspector in the beginning, opportunities to refine them often come throughout the inspection.
- Both parties should double-check the inspection forms prior to signing and the inspector leaving the farm. The inspector should submit the paperwork to CNG promptly!

Self-Conscious Farmers

This is most often a challenge during first inspections and for new farmers, who tend to be concerned or embarrassed by:

- Weeds
- Old equipment or inadequate infrastructure
- Being unsure if a practice is permitted
- Having a "stranger" visit the farm, which is often also the home

These concerns can usually be addressed by reassuring the farmer that the inspection is about learning together, and helping each other solve problems, rather than trying to “catch” the farmer in a violation. It can also be helpful to start with the area of the farm about which the farmer feels the best.

If your farm is being inspected, remember the inspector is (most frequently) a fellow farmer, who has faced the same challenges. It’s a great opportunity to learn from an empathetic person who truly understands your situation, and may have valuable experience to help you overcome your challenges. If you are inspecting, remember that the farm is frequently also the farmer’s home. Be respectful and careful balancing private family spaces vs. seeing the production areas of the farm you need to see.

As a final note, remember that conducting an inspection is part of the certification requirements for CNG. Inspecting is not a paid task. No money may be exchanged as part of the inspection.

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](#) - Each certification type has its own web page. You can easily find the link to each set of standards - including a list of Allowed, Prohibited and Restricted substances and practices - on these pages [Produce](#), [Livestock](#), [Apiary](#), [Mushroom](#) and [Aquaponics](#).