

Dairy, Fresh Milk FAQ

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What is PCC's standard for milk?

PCC requires that all fresh milk be either certified organic or from cows (or goats) raised on non-GMO feed. Our standard also includes requirements for feed, handling, outdoor access, separation from young, and prohibits growth promoters (such as rBGH) to ensure our milk comes from cows and goats that are treated humanely and produce nutritious, high-quality milk. You can read the full fresh milk standard [here](#).

Why doesn't PCC have standards for other dairy items?

PCC's standards are continually evolving, and we've set stricter standards for fresh milk because the supply chain for fresh milk is shorter and easier to verify compared to other products. As with other goods, organic and animal welfare certifications can provide some important assurances for these more complex supply chains (which is why we provide as many organic yogurt, cheese, butter, and ice cream options as possible), but the marketplace for these products is limited and comes with a significant cost. We continue to search for more responsible producers and will continue to improve this category as we are able.

While we do not have detailed animal welfare requirements for these other dairy products, we give preference to vendors who do have better animal welfare practices, are certified organic, or Non-GMO Project Verified. We also require cheese, butter, and yogurt to be produced without the growth promoter rBGH.

Which certifications help ensure better animal welfare?

PCC supports third-party certifications that have rigorous and transparent standards, routine auditing, and accountability for suppliers who fail to meet their requirements. PCC is a strong advocate for USDA organic certification, because it is the only seal that is backed by a federal law and sets strong production standards. However, while organic provides [some assurances concerning animal welfare](#), such as requiring at least 120 days of free access to certified organic pasture per year for ruminants, it does have some gaps, both within the standard and through enforcement. Coupling organic certification with additional animal welfare certifications, such as [Animal Welfare Approved](#) from A Greener World or [Certified Humane](#), provides the best assurance of animal and environmental protections.

PCC also supports regenerative farming certifications that require organic as a baseline and then set stricter requirements around treatment of animals, such as [Regenerative Organic Certification](#) from the Rodale Institute and the [Real Organic Project](#) certification. The certifications noted here are just a few examples of the many that have been developed and there are resources available online to help consumers sort through all the labels and claims that can be found on meat and animal products. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) has developed a [meat, eggs, and dairy label guide](#) that provides information on common claims and ASPCA-recommended certifications and the Animal Welfare Institute has a [consumer guide that ranks labels and welfare claims](#) from best to worst. Additionally, Consumer Reports has a [Food Label Guide](#) that rates various labels and claims to help consumers identify which ones have little meaning behind them versus those with true guarantees.

Does the USDA organic certification guarantee better animal welfare?

While the organic label does [provide some improvements](#) around the treatment of animals compared to industrial, conventional production, it is not as protective of animal welfare as most consumers would like it to be. It requires outdoor access for animals, at least 120 days of pasture grazing for ruminants, and prohibits using certain substances like antibiotics and growth hormones that are associated with lower animal welfare. Some of the regulations, however, have been interpreted differently, such as the stipulation for “outdoor access,” resulting in some large producers doing the bare minimum to obtain organic certification. PCC and many others in the organic community have been pushing for better livestock protections and [advocating for the USDA](#) to implement a set of rules that would strengthen the animal welfare requirements under the organic label.

Why does PCC require organic certification or non-GMO feed verification for fresh milk?

PCC prioritizes organic certification for our fresh milk because organic production standards are better for animals, consumers, and the planet. For example, ruminant livestock are required to be on pasture for at least 120 days of the grazing season. Additionally, organic prohibits the use of hormones and antibiotics, which studies have shown can remain in the milk from those animals, posing a health risk to consumers.ⁱ Organic certification also prohibits the use of GMO feed.

If milk is not organic, PCC requires that it must come from animals raised on non-GMO verified feed. Producers must also, of course, still meet PCC’s standards for no antibiotics or hormones, access to outdoors, and more. We know that avoiding GMOs is a top priority for PCC shoppers, so requiring the certification provides an additional layer of protection to ensure our producers are meeting that requirement. While non-GMO feed doesn’t significantly impact animal welfare or determine a producer’s other practices, PCC believes it is important because a large percentage of [GMO cropland is produced to feed animals](#). Requiring non-GMO verified feed for the dairy animals producing fresh milk sold at PCC is another way we can avoid participating in the GMO supply chain.

Why is organic and pastured-raised milk more expensive than conventional?

Milk from animals raised in more sustainable and ethical environments, like the milk sold at PCC, more accurately reflects the costs of production. Conventional industrial livestock operations can produce less expensive milk by prioritizing quantity over quality of life for the animal and externalizing their costs—the cost of the product at the store might be lower, but the [long term costs](#) are significantly greater in terms of human health, animal welfare, public health (such as from waste fields that pollute the air and water and overuse of antibiotics that contributes to the development of antibiotic resistance), and greenhouse gas emissions. There are also higher costs associated with third-party certifications, like USDA organic, which are reflected in the cost at the shelf.

How do you ensure products sold meet your animal welfare standards?

PCC has a number of ways in which we ensure our suppliers meet our standards. First, we seek out potential vendors that align with our mission, vision, and values, including other cooperatives and producers that often establish and audit against their own set of strong animal welfare standards. Next, we request that they provide us information about their production practices by filling out a vendor checklist, which asks about outdoor access, stocking density, feed, antibiotic use, and more. For local vendors, in Washington state or Oregon, we try to arrange visits to tour farms and ranches whenever possible and permissible under public health circumstances. Lastly, we prioritize strong third-party certifications, such as organic, to ensure product claims and integrity.

Is your milk from grass-fed cows only?

PCC does not have a policy that requires cows to be only fed grass. Whenever possible, we prioritize pastured operations where cows eat grass, but also many other varieties of plants like clovers, legumes, and vetches. Some producers also supplement forage feed with certain grains to ensure cows are getting the proper nutrients they need throughout the seasons. At Organic Valley, which supplies PCC's Private Label milk, farmers work with a team of veterinarians to help identify the proper feed mix and that fluctuates based on the seasons and dietary needs of the cows. Organic certification also requires that ruminants spend a minimum of 120 days on pasture (weather permitting) and get at least 30% of their diet from dry matter on certified organic pastures. At PCC, for any non-organic milk, we also require any grains fed to cows to be certified non-GMO, to ensure that we are not selling milk from cows fed GMO soy or corn.

Is pastured or organic milk healthier?

The benefits of raising cows on pastures, where they can graze freely and express natural behaviors, has a clear benefit for the wellbeing and health of those animals. But those systems also benefit people, as studies have shown that milk from cows raised on pastures has a better nutritional profile, with more beneficial Omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids and conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) and lower levels of Omega-6 fatty acids and palmitic acids.ⁱⁱ Milk from organic, pasture-raised cows is also free of any intentionally added hormone or pesticide residues, which can be found in conventional milk.ⁱⁱⁱ

Why do some dairies PCC sells have low scores on The Cornucopia Institute's dairy scorecard?

For many reasons there can be different levels of adherence to the USDA organic rules. Some of these discrepancies are due to valid, differing interpretations of the rules or different climates and circumstances, but some are due to producers trying to do the bare minimum to achieve USDA organic certification or, even worse, because of fraudulent intent. The Cornucopia Institute's scorecard work attempts in many ways to provide a resource for consumers to distinguish organic products and producers that strive to meet both the letter of the USDA organic rules and the underlying organic philosophy of continuous improvement. However, much like any evaluation, there are certain biases and gaps that may result in disputed findings. For example, one critique of their scorecards, which we have expressed to them directly, is that producers who choose not to submit information are automatically given a low score. We encourage all our producers to fill out The Cornucopia Institute's scorecard surveys, as we do think they're helpful tools for consumers and an important driver of strong organic standards, but we also respect our producers' choice not to participate. From our experience, unwillingness to participate is not always a mark that a producer is trying to hide information or their practices. We will continue to work with The Cornucopia Institute in their effort to bring better transparency to the organic label, while also supporting our organic producers' decisions on what information they wish to share with outside organizations and the public.

ⁱ Jean A. Welsh et al., "Production-Related Contaminants (Pesticides, Antibiotics and Hormones) in Organic and Conventionally Produced Milk Samples Sold in the USA," *Public Health Nutrition* 22, no. 16 (November 2019): 2972–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S136898001900106X>.

ⁱⁱ Mohammad Alothman et al., "The 'Grass-Fed' Milk Story: Understanding the Impact of Pasture Feeding on the Composition and Quality of Bovine Milk," *Foods* 8, no. 8 (August 17, 2019): 350, <https://doi.org/10.3390/foods8080350>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jean A. Welsh et al., "Production-Related Contaminants (Pesticides, Antibiotics and Hormones) in Organic and Conventionally Produced Milk Samples Sold in the USA," *Public Health Nutrition* 22, no. 16 (November 2019): 2972–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S136898001900106X>.