

## **Group Certification – NOSB draft recommendation to be released in October**

Over the past few months the Certification and Accreditation Committee (CAC) of the US National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) has been drafting a recommendation concerning group certification. The USDA has assigned their stakeholder advisory body, National Organic Standards Board, to develop a new recommendation on group certification. Currently the 2002 NOSB recommendation on group certification is allowed as a guidance document for accredited certifying agents (ACA) but the CAC was mandated to update and/or clarify the 2002 NOSB recommendation in order to address the issues related to oversight and inspection of grower groups that resulted from the non-compliance decision of a grower group certification earlier this year. The CAC will complete their work early in October and their recommendation will be posted in the US Federal Register for a 30-day comment period ending just prior to the November 27-29, 2007 NOSB meeting. A vote by the NOSB on the group certification recommendation is expected at the meeting.

An IFOAM team has been in continuous contact and discussion with those who have been drafting the CAC recommendation and Mark Bradley of the USDA National Organic Program. The discussions were to inform and educate the CAC and NOP about IFOAM's group certification policy and guidance documents.

There are differing opinions on the issue of group certification and enforcement of NOP regulations among those drafting a recommendation – both on the OTA task force and the CAC. One of the controversies has been whether a set percentage of farms must be inspected each year in a rotation to ensure that all farms in a group are inspected within a specific time period. Another controversy has been whether the recommendation on group certification should include handlers and retailers who have multiple sites and facilities under one organic system plan. There are those who prefer a prescriptive approach while others prefer that the recommendation be based on strict oversight through and of internal quality systems.

It is difficult to predict what will be contained in the CAC recommendation but IFOAM is ready to develop a response and then to organize a member call to action as needed to influence the outcome of the NOSB vote. IFOAM will also seek to find common ground with advocacy and industry groups that have interest in the outcome of the group certification under the US National Organic Program. Be prepared to respond rapidly to IFOAM alerts on this important issue.