

Final Report
Certification Body Forum Meeting and Workshop
18 February 2007
Nuremberg Germany

Introduction

At the Biofach Organic Trade Fair in Nuremberg, Germany, thirty-four organic certification agencies met to discuss methods for verifying conversion to organic crop production. Miles McEvoy, WSDA Organic Program Manager, facilitated the workshop which was sponsored by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). The workshop's purpose was to share information and develop common procedures to verify conversion requirements.

Welcoming note

Gerald Herrman, IFOAM President, gave a brief introduction about the history of the Organic Guarantee System Revision and the Certification Body Forum. The IFOAM Accreditation Program was established in 1989. In 1994 the first Certification Body was accredited. An evaluation of the IFOAM Organic Guarantee System revealed that it might be too exclusive. It also turned out that the communication between IFOAM and CB's (not only IFOAM ACBs) could be improved. These points were taken up in the mandate of the IFOAM GA for the revision of the Organic Guarantee System. The CB forum is a direct result to improve communication between IFOAM and the CB's and to enhance the cooperation between CBs. It is therefore directly connection to IFOAM's leading and assisting role as per the mission statement.

Introduction of participants and challenges for CB's

After the introduction the participants were asked to state the most important challenges for their CB's. The following challenges were reported. (Double quotes are summarized when appropriate.)

- A number of participants reported that the growth of the organic sector and increase in demand for certification puts a strain on the existing resources of the CB's. It is difficult to find qualified personnel to keep up with the growth of the sector.
- The growth of the organic market makes it more difficult to ensure that organic integrity is maintained. In order to cope with the growth the efficiency of the CB need to be improved.
- Several participants quoted that producers become organic because of subsidies not because they believe in organic. It is likely that those farmers only do the minimum in order to comply with the requirements. In Poland rich people even buy land only to take advantage of the subsidies.
- In Poland small farmers do not have any bookkeeping. It is difficult to assure that wild collection is only carried out on private and not state property.
- In some countries the growth of the organic sector as induced by subsidies is not accompanied by other support activities, e.g. training and extension.

- In Israel there is a lack of financial support for those converting to organic agriculture.
- It is difficult to run different programs, e.g. private and government programs, in parallel while at the same time maintaining the quality of the services.
- In Hungary the number of operators has increased while the area under organic management has decreased because big operators got involved in integrated pest management.
- CB's have difficulties understanding the differences between private and governmental certification schemes.
- The upcoming law in Israel is going to become a challenge for the IFOAM Accreditation Program and therefore those farmers certified within the program.
- Conversion, parallel and split production are a challenge as well as farms that focus on a limited variety of crops.
- Bureaucracy and the need to maintain several accreditations and the resulting costs are problems.
- The need to provide "one stop certification" is a challenge. Nowadays it is not enough to do only organic certification. A CB also needs to offer EUREP GAP, ISO, "bird friendly" and other types of certification in order to keep its organic clients. Co-operations with conventional CBs to address these problems becomes necessary.
- In Serbia the new organic law is not accompanied by by-laws. Therefore, producers cannot comply with law. Transition periods are needed because small farmers do not have any documentation about previous practices.
- There is a competitive problem between those CB's that interpret the USDA NoP regulation stricter than others. A race to the bottom occurs due to those CB's that interpret the regulation less strictly. This leads to a virtual erosion of the organic standard.
- It is difficult to balance the values of organic with requirements from governments.
- Multiple accreditations do not facilitate the export of Chinese products to Europe. A similar situation exists in Tanzania, where farmers need to be certified by foreign CB's in order to sell export their products.
- Consumers in China only have a limited knowledge about organic agriculture.
- Keeping up with changes in regulations in the own country and exporting countries is difficult.
- Data needs to be provided in order to convince conventional farmers to convert to organic.
- In Argentina the sector suffers from the absence of an internal market.
- There is a lack of market surveillance by authorities.
- In Uganda grower group certification is a challenge. Illiteracy of farmers makes it difficult to get them into certifiable systems. Also there are high costs involved in training farmers. Finally the costs of certification are a problem.
- Too many different certification programs are evolving. These confuse the consumer and increase the costs for the consumer.

Update from the IFOAM ACB's

Debbie Miller of the IFOAM ACB group invited all CB's to attend the following Workshops of the ACB's, scheduled to take place at the 1st weekend of June:

- WS – Fraud
- WS – Animal Welfare - Amino Acids
- WS – International Audits
- WS – Inspection and Certification of different schemes
- WS – Residue Resting.

Workshop on Verifying Conversion/Transition Times¹

Worldwide, the majority of organic standards require a 3 year conversion from conventional to organic production. Verification of the conversion period is best monitored through inspections during the conversion period.

Concerns about new land being brought immediately into organic production without adequate verification have been raised by certifiers, organic growers and handlers. European standards require monitoring during the conversion period though allow retroactive recognition under specific conditions. The USDA National Organic Program has expressed concern about the verification process for new sites coming into organic production. During a January 2007 NOP training they stated that certifiers must not rely solely on affidavits to verify organic standards. A tighter and more consistent process for verifying compliance with conversion requirements would improve organic integrity and the Organic Guarantee System.

Workshop's Purpose

The workshop's purpose was to identify agreements concerning what constitutes adequate verification, including adequate documentation and inspection criteria, for verifying transitional requirements. The workshop focused on conversion/transition for crop production. Livestock conversion was not considered.

Common language – definition of terms

In order to create a common understanding for the terms used in this document we have defined the following terms:

1. **Conversion period** – A term used under the European organic standards that specifies the time period between non-organic production and organic production. The conversion period starts on the day the applicant applies for certification (operator is submitted to inspection system) EEC 2092/91 Annex 1A. 1.1
2. **Transitional time** – Under US National Organic Standards the time period between the last use of a prohibited substance and organic status. 7CFR 205.202
3. **Retroactive recognition** – A term used to describe policies under EU conversion requirements that Certification Bodies (CB's) use for recognizing the conversion period prior to being monitored by the CB. Provides for acceptance of the conversion period outside of direct monitoring by the CB. EEC 2092/91 Annex 1A.1.2

¹ This section of the report was prepared by the facilitator Miles McEvoy.

Organic standards regarding Conversion period and transitional time

Four standards were reviewed including IFOAM Basic Standards, US National Organic Standards (7CFR part 205), European organic standards (EEC 2092/91) and Japanese organic standards (JAS organic law).

IFOAM Conversion period - IFOAM Basic Standards, 4.2

- Annuals – Conversion period of at least 12 months prior to the start of the production cycle.
- Perennials – Conversion period of 18 months prior to harvest.
- Pasture – Conversion period of 12 months prior to harvest or grazing.

US National Organic Standards

Transitional requirements

- 7 CFR § 205.202 No prohibited substances may be used for at least 3 years prior to harvest.
- The US NOP does not require inspection or monitoring during the transitional time period. Certifiers cannot require inspections during the transitional time period as a condition for certification.
- However, operations must have sufficient information to verify that the transitional requirements have been complied with. Certifiers can deny certification to land parcels that do not have sufficient records or other verifiable information to demonstrate compliance with the 3-year transitional requirement.
- Certifiers cannot certify land parcels that do not have adequate documentation to verify that transitional requirements have been met. An affidavit that claims that no prohibited substances have been applied may not be adequate documentation.

Japanese organic standards - Notification 59, Art. 4 –

- Perennials – Organic practices must be followed for 3 years before harvest.
- Annuals – Organic practices must be followed for 2 years before sowing or planting.
- Uncultivated land – no prohibited substances for 2 years and cultivated for at least one year.

European conversion requirements – EEC 2092/91, Annex 1A, 1.1 –

- Annual crops – minimum 2 years prior to sowing
- Grassland – minimum 2 years prior to use as forage or hay
- Perennial crops – minimum 3 years prior to first harvest.
- Conversion period starts at the date the producer notifies the CB and submits operation to inspection.

Details of Certifiers EU conversion period policies and NOP transitional requirements are in Appendix A

Common themes by CB's for conversion period

- Certifiers agreed that the conversion period begins on the application date when the operator notifies the certifier that the parcel is applying for organic certification.

- Annual inspections are necessary during conversion periods.
- Normal situation is that there is no retroactive recognition of conversion.
- Uncultivated land, fallow land and pasture are generally eligible for consideration for retroactive recognition.
- CB's have limited allowance for retroactive recognition of conversion period when land is actively cultivated.
- Documentation from reliable third parties (e.g. government programs, NGO's) is important supporting evidence for accepting retroactive recognition.

Internal vs. External criteria

- Internal criteria – Observations, documentation and other factors internal to the farming operation. Internal criteria include field observations, farm records and samples directly related to the farming operation.
- External criteria – Factors external to the farming operation. External criteria include general farming practices in the area, surrounding land use, and documentation available from authorities outside of the farming operation.

Conditions for approving retroactive recognition of conversion period

Evaluating conditions for retroactive recognition of conversion period. The workshop broke up into four groups to discuss conditions for allowing retroactive recognition. The four groups including:

1. Traditional agriculture
2. Fallow and uncultivated land
3. Conversion from conventional farming to organic in the US/Europe
4. Previously organic

Traditional Agriculture

Farming systems in developing countries often follow organic practices. These traditional systems often do not rely on synthetic fertilizers or pesticides. Verifying that the conversion period has been followed can be difficult. Some factors to consider:

- No documentation on traditional farms because they are not maintaining records
- Hard, objective evidence is needed to verify conversion period.
- It is important to understand the general regional/local practices
- An important factor to consider is how adaptable is the cropping system to organic production. Traditional varieties may be well adapted to organic production because they are adapted for low input systems. Some crops have high input needs or heavy pest pressure that would influence believability of information provided.
- In the middle of a high chemical growing region the risk is higher.
- Sampling is useful but not conclusive (e.g. nitrogen fertilizers, some pesticides-roundup)
- Go to local farm supply store – Are local growers using agchem inputs?
- It's a puzzle that you are trying to put together, all the different factors (internal, external)
- Do the various sources tell the same story – does it all fit together.

- Conclusion – Control body needs to have consistent minimum criteria that they use across the board to retroactively recognize conversion. Need to avoid arbitrary decision. It must be defensible by the outside authority
- Evaluate access to input market – Are synthetic fertilizers and pesticides available locally?
- How does the inspector evaluate the organic practices, involvement of farmer in knowledge of organic practices (assessment of inspector)

Factors for Retroactive Recognition

- Government Assessment
- Traditional Regional Growing Practices
- Access to input markets
- Location of the farm
- Sampling
- Type of product / regional features
- Type of soil
- Consultancy services
- Inspectors skills & approach

Evidence:

- Many kinds required. Assessment would be a combination of evidence. Coherence of information is important.
- Written or oral confirmation by regional authority
- Visual confirmation during inspection
- Visual or oral observations – all the dialogue and communication with farmers, farm workers, neighbors, input suppliers
- Pictures
- Gather objective evidence and how the evidence corroborates

Fallow and Uncultivated land

Some areas are expanding crop production into uncultivated land or land that has been fallow. Verification that these areas have not had any prohibited inputs can often be conducted by inspection of the land prior to cultivation. Has the land been fallow or uncultivated before – how do you prove this?

Documents and inspection evidence needed:

- Sampling (soil, plant)
- Prove for at least 3 years no prohibited materials applied
- Visual appraisal – inspector observations that the land has been uncultivated. Observing the vegetation, fauna, infrastructure.
- Interviews with neighbors and farm workers.
- Written declaration from operator
- Crop history or land history of the parcel
- Third party
- Pictures as evidence – need to be careful because photos can be altered

- Uncultivated land may be virgin land that may violate organic standards if it is cleared (e.g. rainforest)
- Written 3rd party declaration with evaluation of the reliability of the third party sources.
- Farm monitoring sheet (if they exist)
- Questionable practice – clearing virgin forest.

Conversion from conventional farming to organic farming in the US and Europe

Growers may convert existing orchards, vineyards or row crops to organic production. Conventional crops use a variety of synthetic fertilizers and pest control materials. Good records are often maintained for insecticides and fungicides however records of fertilizer, herbicide, crop production aids, and rodenticides are often incomplete. Retroactive acceptance not very frequent especially from a new applicant with no previous history.

Internal Factors

- Adequate Records / Documents
- Certification Records to other standards

External Factors

- Higher level environmental program (nature conserves)
- Regional Authority Verification
- External factor – evidence from CB
- Evidence from a environmental program

Inspection Evidence

- Inspection evidence including weed growth patterns, evidence of cultivation, purchased records, seed purchases, tags on seed packages, buffer areas, practices in area, pest control methods, on-site storage facilities, adequate tillage equipment.

Documentation

- Lab Results
- Seed Sourcing
- Land Records / Annual Input Records
- Field Registry

Previously organic

Small organic farms are not always certified organic. Sometimes these farms expand and request organic certification. Verifying that these farms have been following organic standards can be difficult if adequate records and evidence are not available.

- Need for hard objective evidence (including documentation)
- Sampling is a tool but not a necessarily conclusive, especially for fertilizers
- Project description / interview with producer & observation of farm practices
- Adaptability of species
- Risk assessment of the system

- Need awareness of local/regional sanitary program (e.g. malaria control)
 - Talking with neighbors
 - Visit local farm supply store
 - asking the same question different ways
- CB needs to set minimum criteria for decision

Conclusions

1. Certifiers agreed that the conversion period begins on the application date when the operator notifies the certifier that the parcel is applying for organic certification.
2. Annual inspections are necessary during conversion periods.
3. Normal situation is that there is no retroactive recognition of conversion.
4. Uncultivated land, fallow land and pasture are generally eligible for consideration for retroactive recognition.
5. CB's have limited allowance for retroactive recognition of conversion period when land is actively cultivated.
6. Documentation from reliable third parties (e.g. government programs, NGO's) is important supporting evidence for accepting retroactive recognition.
7. Verification relies on two elements –
 - documentation and
 - Inspection evidence.
8. Documentation has two sources –
 - Internal documentation presented by the farm including material application records, cropping history, yield and sales information, receipts for inputs.
 - External sources including information from government agencies, NGO's, processors, field people, field input supply companies.

Questions for inspectors to evaluate regarding conversion periods

- Is the grower knowledgeable or does he/she have experience with organic crop production?
- Are prohibited materials commonly used on neighboring crops in this area?
- Are prohibited materials available and present in this area?

Follow Up Decisions

The next CBF meeting will take place in conjunction with the Biofach 2008.

A steering committee member from Japan will be sought.

Based on the information provided in the WS evaluation the SC will set up another workshop at the next CBF meeting.

CBs were encouraged to also provide information in the future when asked to do so.

Participants list

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