

Questions and Answers on the IFOAM Benchmark for Standards

Note: This document will be expanded during the comment period, in response to new questions that arise from IFOAM members and other stakeholders.

Question: What will happen to the current IFOAM Basic Standards?

Answer: When the IFOAM Benchmark for Standards is approved by IFOAM members, it will replace the IFOAM Basic Standards version 2005 within the Organic Guarantee System. However, the new Benchmark continues some aspects of the version 2005. The overall organization of the document remains the same. And the sub-topics within the chapters are retained, although they are now structured differently. A large part of the IFOAM Basic Standards consist of Recommendations, which are not enforceable in the OGS, and are oriented toward a “best practice” approach to organic production and processing. The IFOAM General Assembly of 2005 mandated that IFOAM establish a Best Practice program, and it is envisioned that the Recommendations from the IBS 2005 will play a role, as yet undefined, in future work on Best Practices.

Question: Does the new IFOAM Benchmark for Standards address any new areas or add any new content?

Answer: One of the guidelines for formulation of the new IBS was to avoid adding new content. But as with any revision of a norm over time, there was a need to address a changed environment and developing areas. Therefore, there are some new requirements in the IFOAM Benchmark. In 2002 the IFOAM General Assembly mandated the development of Biodiversity standards in the IBS. A long process was undertaken to develop a first draft, which was sent for comment in late 2004. The GA mandate to revise the Organic Guarantee System impacted the timeline and content of the biodiversity standards. However, the new Benchmark, Chapter 2, contains additional requirements on biodiversity. The Standards Committee also assessed that Chapter 7 on processing, particularly in the area of textiles, should be improved to protect organic integrity: and therefore new requirements are added to that chapter. One aim of the consultation is to identify if new requirements fulfill the role of the new IBS as a basic benchmark, so comments on new content are invited.

Question: How does the new Benchmark for Standards affect IFOAM’s ability to advocate on governmental standards?

Answer: The IFOAM Benchmark for Standards presents principles and objectives that governments should take up in their own standards development. But because the document is less prescriptive, there is more flexibility for IFOAM members in different regions to advocate for details that are appropriate to the situation of their region.

Question: There are no lists of substances? How then can this IBS be a valid and useful organic benchmark?

Answer: Organic farming and processing are innovative and dynamic in meeting the Principles, and nowhere is this more the case than with the list of substances. Also, substances are subject to great variability over the world. While it is still useful for IFOAM accreditation and other purposes for IFOAM to maintain an indicative lists of substances, the dynamic and variable nature of the lists led to the conclusion that the lists should be maintained administratively. Closed, positive lists that subject all of organic production and processing to a finite set of substances that cannot be altered except every few years, are not suitable to a Benchmark document such as this. IFOAM intends to keep and revised the current lists of substances in the Appendix of the current IBS. The lists and their development will be very transparent.