



INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURE MOVEMENTS

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**TO: National Organic Standards Board - NOSB**

From: IFOAM

**COMMENTS RE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CERTIFYING OPERATIONS WITH MULTIPLE PRODUCTION UNITS, SITES AND FACILITIES UNDER THE NOP (Docket No. AMS-TM-07-0118)**

IFOAM thanks the Certification, Accreditation and Compliance (CAC) Committee for its work on this document. The recommendation has stimulated discussion about certifying operations with multiple production units, sites and facilities (group certification). However, IFOAM has concerns about this recommendation and urges the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) not to approve this recommendation in its current form and to take into account our following comments.

The continuation of group certification is critical to the organic community worldwide. For over 15 years systems have been developed and implemented to assure compliance to organic standards for producers as a group. The group certification system is based on sound accreditation, inspection and certification norms of the International Standards Organization (ISO). The group certification system within IFOAM had initially been developed based on considerations on how to lower the barriers for smallholder groups to enter into the organic market, but the IFOAM Accreditation Criteria, revised in 2005, allows for the possibility that the scope of group certification may include different size and types of operations.

We agree with the position that the certification of group entities is fully consistent with the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA). However, we do not agree that such certification is or has been inconsistent with the current NOP regulations, and therefore do not support a proposal for a rule change in this regard.

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Certification should be an enabling mechanism rather than a technical barrier to market access and trade. IFOAM is convinced that the system for group certification which includes having a functional internal quality assurance system together with an annual inspection/evaluation by a third party certification body offers a sound and robust organic guarantee system that protects organic integrity. The system offers two levels of control as opposed to one. It encourages group organization, which enhances the overall capacity of individual members within the group to institute and further develop good organic management practices.

IFOAM is concerned because the CAC Committee recommendation does not clarify the status of individual members of a group with respect to the definition of “production unit.” Our accompanying recommendation offers criteria for designation of multiple members or fields within a group entity as a single production unit, which would be examined during each annual on-site inspection.

It is our opinion that a group of producers may constitute a single certified entity that is in many ways analogous to a large, complex farming or handling operation. If the group meets the criteria for designation as a single farm operation, including operating under a single Organic System Plan (OSP) and implementing an Internal Quality System (IQS), it should not be thought of as simply a collection of individual farms that is collaborating to market crops and provide other kinds of mutual support, nor is it a means to avoid rigorous certification oversight and verification.

The CAC Committee proposal introduces the term “direct observation” as equivalent to inspection, which does not clarify the requirements for verifying that the operation is complying with the regulations. We suggest that verification involves both physical examination of sites, facilities and production units and audit of documentation that the Internal Quality System is functioning as described in the group’s Organic System Plan. Our position is supported by the following description found in the Preamble of the National Organic

Program Rule: “The certifying agent will conduct an initial on-site inspection of each production unit, facility and site that produces or handles organic products and that is included in the applicant’s operation. As a benchmark, certifying agents should follow auditing guidelines prescribed by the International Organization for Standardization Guide 10011-1, “Guidelines for auditing quality systems - Part 1: Auditing” (ISO Guide 10011-1).”

The CAC Committee recommendation also suggests a definition for initial and renewal on-site inspections. Although the language in Section 205.403 appears to distinguish between the initial and subsequent on-site inspections, we do not believe that it was the intent of this provision to suggest that subsequent on-site inspections might be less complete than the initial one. We further do not believe that such a requirement is justified in terms of maintaining the rigor of the verification process.

The definition of “Facility or Site” provided in the CAC Committee recommendation fails to recognize that both facilities and sites may also be portions of a production operation. Wild crops may be harvested at designated “sites,” and livestock operations will generally include “facilities” such as housing that must be included in the on-site inspection.

In the time since the NOSB issued its last Grower Group Certification recommendations in 2002, significant experience has been gained with appropriate certification and inspection protocols for group entities. It is necessary to update the NOSB’s 2002 recommendation to consider questions that were not fully addressed in that document. We are therefore including here our proposal for a guidance document that would establish a framework for certification of such entities under the existing provisions of the NOP.

Our recommendation addresses group certification through a single organic system plan, criteria for designating a group of sub-units or plots as a single production unit, the purpose of the Internal Quality System, and general inspection protocols. Key concepts are

that certification bodies will inspect each production unit every year and include the use of risk analysis based sampling methodology for sub-units except that any sub-unit that includes a handling facility must be inspected every year.

IFOAM suggests that NOP create a separate accreditation category for Group Certification. An Accredited Certification Agency (ACA) that can document the necessary expertise in group certification, particularly the evaluation of Internal Quality Systems, as well as having procedures in place to verify compliance with the NOP by a group entity, should have Group Certification included in its scope of accreditation.

Additional guidance details are needed so that all ACAs will apply the same eligibility, application, and OSP requirements for group entities, and so that all ACA inspections and certifications apply the appropriate compliance and enforcement protocols to certified group operations. To facilitate the development of these protocols IFOAM suggests that the NOSB establish a working group composed of accreditation, certification, and inspection professionals with experience in group certification or quality system audits, as well as other stakeholders. Past NOSB working groups, such as the aquaculture working group, have provided valuable assistance in finding solutions to complex organic standards and certification issues.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Caudle', on a light blue background.

Angela B Caudle  
Executive Director