

Definition of Organic Agriculture Task Force Response to Comments on the First Draft

IFOAM is in the process of drafting a definition to explain what Organic Agriculture is, reflecting its true nature and the Principles in a concise way. Details of the process are contained on the IFOAM website at http://www.ifoam.org/organic_facts/doa/index.html. The IFOAM Definition of Organic Agriculture Task Force (TF) sent out a first draft of the definition of organic agriculture and called for comments from IFOAM internal bodies. All responses (see report) were analyzed, considered and appreciated.

Summary of the Comments

The comments were generally supportive, with most offering minor revisions and positive suggestions for improvement. Many wanted to have specific words added, substituted, or eliminated. A number of the comments were editorial in nature, questioning matters of style and punctuation, as well as commenting on translation to languages other than English. However, there were a number of common themes.

Several said that the purpose was unclear. The TF agrees and include an explanation with this second draft. Several considered the definition too broad or vague, while others thought it included important parts of the organic community. The TF asks commenters to respect the diversity of the organic community. Details of what constitutes organic farming are best described in the principles and standards.

A number of words and phrases were identified as unclear. The TF took these comments very seriously and sought to come up with more clear language. In particular, the phrases 'build fair relationships that account for social and environmental costs' and 'living landscape' have been deleted from the current draft. The first draft used both the word 'maintain' and 'sustain' and there were comments to replace or interchange them.

Colons and semicolons were deleted and a single sentence was replaced by three sentences used to define two words. First, the adjective 'organic' used to modify the nouns 'food,' 'product,' 'system' and other things that are organic. Second, the phrase 'organic agriculture' used as a noun is defined as a collection of systems.

Words and phrases that were suggested but not accepted included 'livelihood,' 'regenerate,' 'standards,' 'traditional scientific knowledge,' 'reduce,' 'reactivate,' 'movement,' 'culture,' 'alternative,' 'food chain,' 'promotes rural development,' 'animal welfare,' 'local resources,' and 'economic sustainability.'

Some considered the definition too long, others thought it too short. There were strong statements from those who wanted a legalistic definition, with references to following established regulations and certification. These were balanced by those who opposed to legalistic / bureaucratic definitions that imply organic food must be certified or under a regulatory supervision. Some expressed strong opposition just to having a definition.

Some commenters made suggestions to better reflect the principles of organic agriculture. One commenter thought that the definition need not reflect the principles. The TF disagrees and calls that commenter's attention to the directive from the IFOAM Board.

Forbidden Inputs

The TF received eight comments that the definition should include a reference to forbidden inputs and technologies, either in general or specifically. The TF recognizes how much of organic agriculture's identity is based on the avoidance of pesticides, petrochemical fertilizers, genetically engineered organisms, animal drugs, and synthetic food additives.

Forbidden inputs create two problems for a definition of organic agriculture. The first is that frequently issued statements that organic agriculture prohibits certain broad categories of substances—such as fertilizers, pesticides, animal drugs, food additives, and

processing aids—are false. While most synthetic fertilizers and pesticides are forbidden for use in organic production, there are a few exceptions that make a flat statement that organic food is grown without synthetic fertilizers and pesticides untrue.

The second is that the definition should state what organic farming *is* as opposed to what it is *not*. The IFOAM Executive Board supported the TF's decision in its comment and found that to be the deciding comment. The definition is not the principles or the standards. Stating that organic agriculture does not use forbidden inputs requires knowledge of the principles and standards in a way that the target audience for the definition will not understand. Negative definitions of organic agriculture are often legalistic.

If the comments in this round again suggest to define organic in the negative, the TF would like the opportunity to work toward multiple definitions that would recognize both the use of the word organic in the negative sense, as well as recognize that the word 'organic' has a legally defined status when applied to food and other products in many jurisdictions throughout the world.

Next Steps

Along with this response, the TF is presenting a second draft to give the membership the opportunity to comment. Deadline for comments on the second draft is September 24th, 2007. The Task Force will use all input to craft a next version of the Definition, to be presented to the IFOAM World Board. The IFOAM World Board will consider whether another revision will be needed subsequent to the next draft. The final draft will be presented for ratification to the IFOAM membership at the coming General Assembly in Modena, Italy in June 22nd - 24th, 2008.