



# The ACA Guidewire

Newsletter of the Accredited Certifiers Association, Inc.

Volume #1

July, 2005

## Welcome to our First Issue

Welcome to the first issue of the e-newsletter **The ACA Guidewire** – published by the Accredited Certifiers Association (ACA). Our plan is to publish this newsletter on a regular basis in order to keep you informed of topics of interest, events, issues you may wish to comment on, etc., that pertain to the implementation of the USDA National Organic Program.

**The ACA Guidewire** is a member benefit of the Accredited Certifiers Association. While we will send samples of **The ACA Guidewire** to non-members, this will be done only occasionally. We welcome your comments, letters and ideas for topics to include.

## ACA History & Current Activities

As you know, the ACA was formed in 2004, an outgrowth of the OTA's Organic Certifiers Council. At the time of formation, there was no paid staff. The Steering Committee focused on completion of our incorporation work and began the collection of membership dues. Early in 2005 a position announcement was distributed and as of May 1, 2005, the position of Coordinator has been filled by Patricia Kane.

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Since that time, Pat has attended the ACA Meeting in Chicago at the All Things Organic Show and has been occupied by organizing the historical files of the ACA. In addition, she has been establishing the office for the ACA, including developing a membership database, establishing e-mail lists for ease of communication, and developing a plan of work for the ACA office. The main focus of the office is to provide timely communications for our members. The publishing of this newsletter is the first step.

During the upcoming months we will finalize our draft bylaws and submit them to the membership for approval. Once the bylaws are approved, we will be submitting our application for tax-exempt status with the IRS. In addition, a permanent Board of Directors will be elected. Currently the ACA is operating with a volunteer Steering Committee and the Interim Executive Committee.

In August Pat will be attending the National Organic Standards Board meeting in Washington, D.C. A report to the members will follow this meeting.

## Membership Information

With the hiring of a part time Coordinator, the ACA has made a giant step forward in providing services to certification agencies. But (and there is always a but) to continue this work we need your continued membership support, plus we will need to increase our membership. Membership in ACA is open to all USDA-accredited certifying organizations, including those not based in the U.S.

Beginning in July, members will receive membership renewal notices the first of the month in which their membership expires. Your continued support of the ACA is imperative in order to continue and expand our work.

The chart below is the ACA current dues structure.

<p><b>Annual income from certification*</b> <b>&lt;\$300,000</b></p> <p>\$2 per certified operation (minimum \$150)</p> <p>*including inspection activities</p>
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or

<p><b>Annual income from certification*</b> <b>&gt;\$300,000</b></p> <p>\$3 per certified operation with dues cap of \$1,500</p> <p>*including inspection activities</p>
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### ACA Meeting Held in Chicago

The ACA met on May 1, 2005 at the All Things Organic Trade Show in Chicago, IL. There was a very good turn out for the meeting – members, along with non-member certifiers and other organic industry representatives attended. The primary topic of discussion was – what are the needs of certifiers and how can the ACA meet those needs. Of primary importance to those present is the improvement of communications among certifiers – including utilizing a newsletter, and either a list serve and/or discussion board type of service. In addition it was suggested that the ACA hold longer meetings in order to have time for discussion.

Additional topics discussed included:

- the possibility of sharing brand name product review lists and information

- working to develop improved inspector training, using IOIA training as a base requirement for inspectors
- work with other organizations, such as the National Association of State Organic Programs (NASOP), and IFOAM.

The Steering Committee will be reviewing this information and developing a plan for action on these topics.

### National Organic Standards Board Meeting, August 15 – 17, 2005

The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) will be holding its next meeting August 15 – 17, 2005, at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Washington, D.C. Hotel contact information is listed on the NOSB website at

[www.ams.usda.gov/nosb/meetings/HotelInfo08\\_05.html](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nosb/meetings/HotelInfo08_05.html)

### Nominations Needed for New NOSB Members

The USDA is seeking nominations for 6 positions on the NOSB. These positions include: organic producers (2), consumer / public interest (3), and a USDA accredited certifying agent. Each appointed position will serve a 5-year term. Written nominations, including a resume, must be postmarked on or before July 15, 2005.

### Miles McEvoy Seeks Nomination to Certifier Position on NOSB

Miles McEvoy, Program Manager of the Washington State Department of Agriculture Organic Program, is seeking nomination to the National Organic Standards Board. Miles is seeking letters of recommendation from other certifying agencies. If you would be interested in receiving a copy of Miles' resume, please contact the ACA office.

## National Organic Program Certifier Training

The National Organic Program (NOP) held a Certifier Training at the All Things Organic Trade Show in Chicago. Mark Bradley, Accreditation Program Manager for the NOP and Arthur Neal, Director of Program Administration for the NOP presented this training.

Mark indicated that the NOP would be changing its audit review procedures to a “process based” review – looking at the process used by a certifier, rather than the outcome. Processes to be examined during the NOP audit include:

- Providing clients with requirements for certification
- Process used to determine adequacy of organic system plans (OSPs)
- Process for reviewing and approving materials - must have a defined process, including decision criteria – and decision trees
- Process for conducting and reporting results of onsite inspections
- Process for recording and classifying noncompliances (Note: it was stated at the meeting that only **major** noncompliance [those resulting in certifier action] need to be reported to NOP, although this does conflict with the Rule requirements)
- Decision making process - personnel involved, segregated responsibilities, criteria
- Evaluating and approving labels - number one complaint to NOP regarding compliance is improper labeling; process used for approving labels; require a signoff of all labels using your label. ACAs need to monitor versions of labels on products. ACAs must sign off on a particular label and document it. Document

process for review and approval of label. Clients are producing labels (and sometimes products) without informing ACAs. Include statement in contract with client regarding submitting labels for prior approval. FDA website has label information.

- Issuing certificates
- Surveillance processes
  - labeling compliance
  - monitoring processors and producers
  - issuing notices of noncompliance
- Clearing noncompliances
- Issuing notices of proposed suspension or revocation - rule is vague on when you can quit dealing with client; it's ok to continue working with client to resolve noncompliances, even after notice of suspension.
- Issuing notices of suspension / revocation
- Reinstating certification - must issue notice of noncompliance; suspension. If certification is suspended due to non-payment and if they eventually pay, they must request reinstatement from Washington. May need to inform clients they may be out of business for awhile if suspended.

Several changes in the NOP On-Site Inspection process were noted:

- focusing on certification processes utilizing process based auditing
- auditor hourly fees - proposed rule for an increase in audit fees to \$108.00/hr. (see below)
- site visits for international certifiers will likely include site visits to any or all countries where the certifier conducts certification activities - this will provide additional oversight for larger, multinational certifiers
- auditors will begin leaving written notes for the closing meeting

- report is reviewed and recommendations prepared by ARC/NOP reviewer
- corrective actions to be submitted by certifiers to NOP

**Proposed Rule to Revise Fees for administering Quality System Verification Programs (QSVP)**

The proposed rule would establish a separate user-fee schedule for the QSVP and expand the scope of the QSVP to include all agricultural products and services within the responsibility of the Livestock and Seed Program which include livestock, meat, meat products, seed and feedstuffs, as well as processes involving the production of these products, agricultural product data storage, product traceability and identification. The services are voluntary, audit-based user-fee programs authorized under the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946. The proposed rule sets forth a fee of \$108 per hour to cover the costs of providing these services.

Several *draft* documents were distributed at the meeting.

- **Certifier Procedures for Responding to AMS Notices of Noncompliance**
- **Reinstating Suspended Organic Operations**
- **How to Apply for NOP Accreditation**
- **Recording and Classifying Noncompliances**

Mark stated that once these documents are approved, they will form the basis for how the NOP responds to audit noncompliances and will be the process by which the NOP reinstates a suspended operation. Copies of these documents are available from Mark Bradley at [Mark.Bradley@usda.gov](mailto:Mark.Bradley@usda.gov)

Additional areas of changes are:

- The requirements for supplying information pertaining to performance appraisals of a certifying organization's staff are being revised. Formerly the

specifics of the performance review were required. Now, however, due to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requirements, this will no longer be the case. Certifiers will now be required to identify the process used, who was evaluated, and whether the staff passed / failed the evaluation.

- An on-site inspection visit will be required **prior** to approval of renewal of accreditation.
- ISO and NOP audits will be combined.

The materials review process was also discussed and it was noted that certifiers must be competent to handle routine materials decisions. In addition:

- Certifiers must have a decision making process that references the National List. May not use only the OMRI List.
- Process should show proper implementation of the NOP Rule.
- Decisions must be made by qualified personnel.
- Decisions must be justified & documented.
- ACAs may not refuse certification due to a product not being on OMRI list.

**The purpose of the ACA is to provide a forum for USDA-accredited certifiers to:**

- Develop uniform criteria for certifying operations under the National Organic Program
- Provide training opportunities to accredited certifying agencies in order to improve the implementation of the National Organic Program
- Provide a forum for discussing issues impacting organic certification
- Develop strategies for reform of laws affecting organic certification
- To facilitate communication and sharing of information among organic certification agencies.

**Your suggestions & comments are welcome.  
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