



Accredited Certifiers Association, Inc.

Accredited certifying agents working together to ensure the integrity of organic certification in the United States

February 27, 2015

Stacy Jones King, Agricultural Marketing Specialist
National Organic Program USDA-AMS-NOP
1400 Independence Ave. SW., Room 2646—So., Ag Stop 0268
Washington, DC 20250-0268

Re: Document number AMS-NOP-14-0062; NOP-14-01
Draft Guidance Natural Resources and Biodiversity Conservation for Certified Organic Operations

Dear Ms. King:

The Accredited Certifiers Association (ACA) would like to thank the National Organic Program (NOP) for publishing the Draft Guidance on Natural Resources and Biodiversity Conservation for Certified Organic Operations. We believe that this guidance document will assist operators, certification agencies, and inspectors with an important tool for determining compliance with the natural resources and biodiversity conservation standard.

The Accredited Certifiers Association (ACA) represents 50 foreign and domestic USDA accredited certifying agents. Our comments were developed through a Working Group of interested ACA members with additional input solicited from our entire membership.

In our discussions regarding the Draft Guidance, our members had the following observations:

- As certifiers we believe that generally organic farming operators have an increased awareness of the state of natural resources on their operation, and that organic farms have increased levels of biodiversity in their operations as compared to conventional operations.
- We recognize that maintaining and improving natural resources and biodiversity conservation are long term efforts; many operations will be at different starting points, and will apply solutions in different ways. The annual organic inspection will provide a snapshot of the current activities, however, comprehensive assessment for compliance with §205.200 is a multi-year process.
- Operations have competing constraints, such as food safety issues and pest control issues that may affect biodiversity conservation.
- ACAs are concerned with the loss of highly sensitive lands and believe that this topic is worthy of continued national discussion, and possibly the need for additional standards.
- Handling operations are specifically identified in Appendix A; however there is no specific reference to handling operations in the *Purpose and Scope and Role of Certified Organic Operations*.

- The *Role of the Inspector* as stated in the Draft Guidance sets requirements for inspector knowledge at a very high level. Many inspectors will likely need additional training in order to assess compliance, however, the Guidance does not suggest the types of training that would be applicable. The length of the annual organic inspection will likely increase, as will the costs of the inspections for the operators.
- As various ACAs discussed specific applications to operations of different types and in different parts of the world, it became apparent that it would be very difficult to apply this guidance in a consistent manner. While we all want to encourage greater biodiversity and improved natural resources, it was not clear what sanctions would be appropriate in specific cases. Except in extreme cases, it was also not clear what situations could be identified as violations of this part of the regulations.

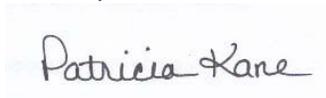
One example discussed for addressing issues of concern with operators is to require the operator to provide a plan to meet the requirement of maintaining or improving natural resources, specifying the resources to be used and a timeline for implementation and completion of the plan.

The ACA is requesting the following revisions in the Draft Guidance on Natural Resources and Biodiversity Conservation for Certified Organic Operations:

- Include in the *Role of Certified Organic Operations* section, language and examples specific to handling operations, as many of the examples provided apply only to crop and livestock operations.
- Include in the *Role of Certifiers* section, specific language that encourages certifiers to provide publically available resource information, including regionally appropriate tools to organic operators.
- The allowance for ACAs to conduct a focused periodic inspection to address the biodiversity conservation and natural resources management of operations. The focused inspection will enable a more in-depth assessment to be conducted, in conjunction with systems that require a more long term approach for improvement such as soil management. Inspectors with a high degree of knowledge and experience in natural resource conservation would be utilized for these assessments.
- The inclusion of specific language that states that while the Guidance includes examples of production practices that support conservation principles, operators are not limited to only the examples identified in the Guidance.

The Accredited Certifiers Association thanks the National Organic Program for providing guidance on the important issue of natural resources conservation.

Sincerely,



Patricia Kane
ACA Coordinator