

1. Introduction

1.1 British Columbia Certified Organic Program

The principles of organic farming have been practiced in British Columbia for many years. However, it was in the 1980's that producers and consumers began creating regional organizations to provide credibility to the organic production systems and opportunity for interaction between farmers and consumers. For the most part, horticultural farmers were the founding members of the organic movement in British Columbia, relying on direct interactions with consumers to market their products. Organic standards were developed on a regional basis, and as a consequence they varied across the province. In 1989 the *Food Choice and Disclosure Act* was passed, allowing food products produced according to prescribed standards to be certified. In recognition of a need for a province-wide organic standard, a group of certification bodies (CBs), led by industry, formed the Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia (COABC) in 1993. The Organic Agricultural Products Certification Regulation under the *Food Choice and Disclosure Act* designated the COABC as the administrator of the regulation to implement a government audited accreditation and standard setting program for organic certification. The standard for production and the system of farm inspection and certification established in the British Columbia Certified Organic Program (BCCOP) were developed by the COABC in collaboration with British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture and Lands (formerly the British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries). The *Food Choice and Disclosure Act* was later replaced with the *Agri-Food Choice and Quality Act* in 2000 and allowed for the certification of non-food products and clarified some aspects of certification for handlers and retailers. British Columbia and Quebec are currently the only Canadian provinces with legislated organic certification programs.

The British Columbia Certified Organic phrase or checkmark (shown at right) is licensed to the COABC by the province of British Columbia for use on products produced according to the procedures and standards maintained by the COABC.



The COABC's member associations are the CBs which certify individual operations that meet the standard of the BCCOP. The COABC Board of directors is made up of representatives of each of the member CBs and a representative from a consumer or environmental organization. A provincial government representative is a non-voting member of the Board. The British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is an associate member.

For more information on the BCCOP or the COABC, see www.certifiedorganic.bc.ca

1.2 Global Principles and Standards of Organic Agriculture

Though the roots of the organic movement trace back to the late 19th century in Europe, an internationally recognized standard for organic agriculture did not appear until 1980 when the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) published their Basic Standards for Organic Production and Processing. Standards and

third party certification systems had been developed much earlier by regional groups of organic farmers; however, an international standard was an immense step towards the development of the global organic market which exists today. With the aim of leading, uniting and assisting the organic movement, IFOAM represents hundreds of organizations in countries all over the world. In September 2005, IFOAM approved the following revised version of their principles of organic agriculture:

“The Principles apply to agriculture in the broadest sense, including the way people tend soils, water, plants and animals in order to produce, prepare and distribute food and other goods. They concern the way people interact with living landscapes, relate to one another and shape the legacy of future generations.

- *The Principle of Health: Organic Agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal and human as one and indivisible.*
- *The Principle of Ecology: Organic Agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them.*
- *The Principle of Fairness: Organic Agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.*
- *The Principle of Care: Organic Agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment.”*

For additional information on IFOAM, see www.ifoam.org

In addition to IFOAM, the Committee on Food Labelling of the Codex Alimentarius Commission has addressed the need for harmonized international guidelines for the production of organic food. The Codex Alimentarius was created by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations as a single international reference point for food quality. The Codex includes standards, guidelines and codes of practice for all aspects of food production from food safety to the nutritional quality of food, and since 1999 and 2001, includes guidelines for organic plant production and animal production, respectively. IFOAM was an official observer of the development of the Codex guidelines, which are in line with IFOAM’s basic standards. The Codex guidelines provide guidance for countries developing national regulations for organic food, and act as a baseline organic standard for international trade disputes.

For more information on the Codex Alimentarius, see www.codexalimentarius.net

1.3 Organic Certification

Certification is used to justify an organic claim on a product. Hundreds of standards for organic agriculture have been developed worldwide, with equally as many certification bodies to oversee their application. Through its subsidiary the International Organic Accreditation Service (IOAS), IFOAM accreditation is available to CBs that comply with the IFOAM standards and certification criteria; however, the basic IFOAM standards and principles have provided a framework for independent organic certification programs all over the world.

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is a network of national standards institutes, such as the Standards Council of Canada (SCC). ISO develops international standards for everything from technical specifications for wrenches to processes such as general requirements for accreditation bodies accrediting conformity assessment bodies (ISO Guide 17011) and general requirements for bodies operating product certification systems (ISO Guide 65).

National organic regulations such as those of the European Union (EU) require ISO 65 compliant certification on all imports as a means of ensuring the legitimacy of a CB's certification system and standards. Accreditation allows a CB to demonstrate it is competent to carry out ISO compliant certification. In Canada, the SCC and provincial authorities such as the COABC and the Conseil des appellations agroalimentaires du Québec (CAAQ) offer accreditation services. In the proposed national system, the SCC, CAAQ and COABC will have to demonstrate their compliance with ISO 17011.

In British Columbia, participation in the BCCOP is currently voluntary; therefore operations producing organic products in British Columbia may choose to be certified by a CB of the COABC, an independent CB, or to simply not certify at all. Additionally, organic products imported into the province are not legally required to be certified under the BCCOP.

The Organics Products Regulation was published in the Canada Gazette in September 2006 allowing for a seventy five day comment period before finalization. This regulation provides authority for the CFIA to establish a mandatory organic regime in Canada. (See Section 9.2).

Accreditation and Certification Defined

Accreditation is a procedure by which an authoritative body evaluates and gives formal recognition that a certification body is competent to carry out certification in accordance with specified standards. For organic agriculture, certification programs can be accredited by provincial, national or international authorities.

Accreditation of Certification Programs

Certification Program	Authority
Provincial	COABC, CAAQ
National	SCC, USDA, MAFFJ
International	IOAS

Certification is a procedure by which a third party (the CB) gives written assurance that organic production and management processes have been methodically assessed. The assessments ensure adequate confidence has been provided that the agricultural products in question conform to certified organic requirements.

1.3.1 Certification of a Process, Not a Product

Organic certification guarantees the process used to produce organic food products. The system is designed to ensure producers follow the standards and principles adopted by their certification body. Certification does not guarantee physical characteristics of the

product produced, merely the processes and substances used in its production. This concept is often a point of confusion among consumers, who are accustomed to purchasing food products based on their ingredients, not on the means used to produce them.

1.3.2 Allowed Inputs in Organic Agriculture

The standards of a CB include lists of materials that are approved as inputs on organic farms. These include naturally occurring materials, pesticides derived from natural products, non-synthetic fertilizers, and livestock production materials. National and international organic standards include specific criteria which are used to evaluate the suitability of a material for use in organic production. CBs may also provide lists of brand names of the materials which meet the requirements and are approved for organic use. The manufacturing processes of the materials must also be acceptable for organics. The Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) is a non-profit organization in the United States (US) which assembles lists of generic materials and brand name products deemed acceptable for use in organic agriculture. However, not all of the products listed by OMRI are registered or approved for use in Canada. The OMRI lists have been used for advisory purposes by COABC, independent CBs in Canada and government agencies in developing their own materials lists.

1.3.3 Transition to Organic Farming

Farms converting to organic agriculture must go through a three year transition period before certified organic status can be granted by the CB. Transitional farms must be managed according to organic standards and use only approved inputs. Also required are completed plans for farm design, crop rotation, and nutrient and waste management. Operations in transition are inspected by verification officers each year, and following the review of the certification committee, are issued certificates designating their transitional status. During transition, some producers may receive small price premiums for their transitionally labeled product in direct marketing channels, however, most transitional producers receive returns equivalent to conventional producers. Producers may certify individual components of their operation and maintain conventional components on the same farm; however, strict documentation of the separation of organic and conventional components is required. Conventional producers who enter their farms into transition often certify in stages, rather than taking on the challenge of transition all at once.

1.4 The Canadian National Standard for Organic Agriculture

Development of a national standard for organic agriculture in Canada formally began in 1996. The Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) formed a stakeholder committee consisting of industry members such as producers, processors, retailers, and CBs, with representation from consumers and government. The committee began their work with a draft standard provided by the organic industry, and in 1999 the first National Standard for Organic Agriculture was ratified by the Standards Council of Canada (SCC). To date

the SCC has accredited two CBs, the Organic Producers Association of Manitoba and Pro-Cert Canada, to certify organic operations according to the National Standard.

Adherence to the National Standard for Organic Agriculture is currently voluntary in Canada. However, the CAAQ in Québec has implemented its own mandatory organic regulation and standard. With the aim of implementing a national regulation for organic agriculture, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada requested the standard be revised to ensure its compliance with other international organic standards and the Codex Alimentarius. Although the original intention was to have the revision completed by August 2002, consensus from the CGSB committee has been difficult to achieve. The revised national standards "Organic Production Systems: General Principles and Management Standards (CAN/CGSB-32.310-2006) and the Permitted Substances List (CAN/CGSB-32.311-2006)" were approved by the SCC in September 2006. The proposed national regulation to govern the labeling of organic products references the National Standard. See section 9.2 for more details.

1.5 Certification Bodies in British Columbia

There are 19 CBs certifying organic operations in British Columbia. COABC is made up of 11 CBs, some certifying within specific regions, and others covering the entire province. In 2005, 89% of the organic operations (including farms, processors, and handlers) in British Columbia were certified by the BCCOP. Of the COABC membership, two CBs are currently accredited to certify their members according to ISO 65. ISO 65 compliant CBs must essentially maintain a more rigorous documentation of policies and the administration of certification services. The additional administrative costs of being an ISO 65 compliant CB are passed on to the producers in their certification fees.

Individual certification bodies are responsible for their own standards for organic production; however, they must be at least equivalent to the standard referenced by the accreditation program. Some certification bodies have more stringent or detailed requirements that go above and beyond the standards laid out by their accrediting organization. For instance, the 1999 Canadian National Standard (Can/CGSB 32.310.99) stipulated that livestock must have *regular* access to the outdoors. COABC standards meet the national standard but require that livestock have *daily* access to the outdoors. A CB accredited by the COABC could then further specify the length of time access is granted to animals on a daily basis. It is expected that COABC will adopt the new national standard.

In addition to the CBs of the COABC, there are also eight local and international organizations which certify British Columbia organic operations. Operations typically seek certification from CBs outside the COABC if export conditions make certification with those CBs more convenient, if a CB specializes in certifying their type of operation, or if they have ideological reasons for using another CB.

Table 1.5 Organic Certification in British Columbia - 2005

	Total Operations	Farms	Processor/Handlers
COABC	89%	93%	74%
Other	11%	7%	26%

For a complete listing of CBs certifying in British Columbia see [Appendix 1](#).

1.5.1 Verification and Auditing in the British Columbia Certified Organic Program

Certified organic operations are required to maintain records detailing all inputs, crop yields, receipts for purchases and sales, and copies of valid certified organic certificates from all sources of organic products. Usually, certification procedures of COABC CBs require annual inspections of every operation they certify. However, a new risk based program has been introduced which allows CBs to reduce the frequency of inspections for low risk operations where product is for the local British Columbia market only. To date, only one CB operates such a program. Inspections are carried out by organic verification officers trained by the Independent Organic Inspectors Association (IOIA). Verification officers inspect the entire operation and its records, and file a report with the CB. The CB's certification committee reviews the report and decides whether the operation should receive their certificate designating their certified organic status for the following 12 months.

Audits of the certification process are performed at two levels. The Level 1 Audit is a document review used to determine if the certification program of the CB complies with the procedures and standards of the BCCOP. The Level 2 Audit is an on-site assessment of the implementation of the CB's certification program. The procedures of the Level 2 Audits depend on the type of accreditation the CB has (Regional or ISO 65 compliant).

One third of the CBs in the regional program are chosen at random every year for a Level 2 Audit by the COABC Accreditation Board. The COABC Accreditation Board auditor (either the BCMAL member of the COABC Accreditation Committee or a contracted evaluator) reviews a sample of the CB member files. The content of the files is used to assess the CB's performance, not that of the individual organic operation. The auditor then reports his/her findings to the Accreditation Board. A full evaluation of the CBs in the ISO program takes place every three years with follow-up surveillance audits as necessary in the intervening years.

2. International Markets and Production

Worldwide, there are more than 600,000 organic farms covering over 31 million hectares (ha).¹ See Table 2.1 for the land areas under management in selected countries. While certified organic production is now practiced in approximately 120 countries around the world, 96% of the market for organic products remains concentrated in Europe and North America.¹ Figure 2.1 shows the distribution of organic land across the globe. The global market for certified organic food was valued at \$25 billion US in 2003, and growth continues in all organic markets¹.