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Ms Lorraine Coke  
National Organic Standards Board  
National Organic Program,  
USDA-AMS-NOP  
1400 Independence Ave., SW.,  
Room 2646 So., Ag Stop 0268  
Washington, DC 20250-0268

Via [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov)

RE: NOSB Certification, Accreditation and Compliance Committee Proposed Recommendation  
Inspector Qualification

**Summary:**

Oregon Tilth strongly supports and values the proposed recommendation for Inspector Qualifications recommended by the Accreditation and Compliance Committee. This change will address the need to strengthen the organic certification system significantly and provide enhanced consistency amongst Accredited Certifying Agents (ACA's). It is imperative that guidelines for inspector qualifications be well defined, so a level playing field can be established.

Work experience, education, training, continuing education and monitoring thereof by the accredited certifier are imperative to inspector qualifications and the accredited certifier respectively, but we believe this needs to be more defined and thorough in the following areas to ensure transparency and full understanding by all ACA's:

**Clarifying comment:**

In the discussion portion, there is a reference to "anecdotal evidence" suggesting that contract or part-time inspectors are not reviewed during USDA NOP audits of ACA's. Oregon Tilth's first-hand experience of over a decade of annual audits by the USDA (under ISO Guide 65 and the USDA NOP) does not support this statement.

During audits, the auditors select a sample of operator files for review. For each file, they identify the people involved in the certification process (initial reviewer, inspector, final reviewers who issue certification decisions and evaluate corrective actions) and then request personnel file information for each person. It doesn't matter whether the people involved in the certification process are employees (full-time or part-time) or an independent contractor. Auditors check personnel documentation for current declarations of interest, confidentiality

agreements, CV/resume & continuing education to demonstrate competence and qualifications, and they also check for timely performance reviews.

Based on our experience and for the public record, we respectfully request removal of language in the discussion portion suggesting contract or part-time inspectors are not often reviewed during current NOP audits.

**Section A.1.a-b: Baseline pre-requisites knowledge and expertise for initial organic inspector. Minimum two years of combined work experience, education and training in organic production, applicable to the scope of inspections to be initially performed. Must include at least two of the three different criteria experience, education and training.**

1. Entry level inspectors may have had experience and training in various types of operations that are not organic, but can show great knowledge in their fields of study. The work experience, or training may have been from agricultural production, processing operations, food safety / HACCP, or auditing. With two years of one of these types of training and the knowledge from an IOIA training, the inspector may be appropriately qualified for simpler operations upon which they can build their expertise and expand their inspector qualifications by ongoing education and training. We do not feel this gives enough options for novice inspectors to build organic experience in their specific field of interest.

2. Formal college education often does not have classes with any organic curriculum, but we consider a person with a bachelor's degree in food, or agricultural sciences and training from an IOIA course to be qualified for beginning organic inspections. We believe the criteria needs to be more clearly defined and take into further consideration the various combinations and types of work experience, education and training, which would be acceptable.

**Summary:** We suggest the language in A.1.a be changed to read: “Minimum two years of combined work experience, education **and/or** training in organic production.” This will allow more flexibility in combining education, experience and training by ACA's to determine appropriate qualifications of inspectors.

**Section A.1.e: Must have good evaluations and recommendations by an experienced organic inspector or certifying agent.**

1. How is a good evaluation defined, as there are always areas of improvement, even for “experienced” inspectors? How many years does it take to become an “experienced” inspector? There is baseline fundamental / initial criteria and continuing criteria mentioned in the recommendation, but no criteria for “experienced”. What is considered “experienced” to one accredited certifier may not be the same as another ACA.

**Summary:** We suggest language be inserted here to clarify these questions. “Must have an evaluation score of good or better by an inspector working in organic inspections for 4 or more years, or by a certifying agent assessing the inspectors understanding of inspection protocols and applicable organic standards.

**Section A.1.f: If an inspector establishes himself or herself as a competent inspector, they can then add new scopes of inspections without the two years of focused experience.**

1. There is no other criterion set forth for adding another scope of inspection. We ask how a person can go from livestock inspections to handling inspections without additional training in that area? This does not ask that the inspector add a specific course from an IOIA training, or have specific experience to that scope, which would be imperative to an inspector's training. Additionally, adding wild crop inspection scope would need to have specific training on ecology and biodiversity. This portion does not match the rigor of the rest of the fundamental criteria.

**Summary:** We suggest that some basic language be developed for this section to require education and/or training in the additional scope prior to an inspector being approved to that scope.

**Section B.1.b: Trainings conducted by ACA's and closed to the general inspection community do not apply toward continuing education hours given their tendency to focus on certifier procedures, rather than broad knowledge such as agronomic and food industry practices and general auditing skills.**

1. We do not believe that this statement holds true to all accredited certifiers trainings. Although some content is about the specific accredited certifiers policies, procedures and practices, trainings almost always include specific inclusion of guidance, upcoming issues and general organic systems and practices knowledge for which our inspectors have not been thoroughly trained. The basis for many of our trainings comes from NOP guidance, internal audit findings and quality system oversight that identify inconsistencies requiring clarification, or further instruction.

**Summary:** We ask that accredited certifier trainings are not discredited, but are evaluated based on their content, which can be viewed and evaluated by an external auditor and deemed to be consistent with continuing organic inspector training criteria.

**Section C.4.d: Documenting corrective actions on inspector performance.**

1. This requirement should be removed and replaced with something more general (see suggestion below) as this requirement, we believe, goes too far in prescribing personnel management or contractor management by the NOP. Many inspectors are independent contractors and many ACA's employ personnel "at will." The ACA should be provided the opportunity to exercise its own discretion in determining effective and appropriate corrective actions on inspector performance, including immediately discontinuing contract services provided by independent contractors or terminating employment for staff (without having to document performance issues and corrections) if the ACA determines such action is warranted.

**Summary:** We suggest this section be re-written as follows "All serious or persistent performance issues that arise during any assessment of the inspector should be documented by the ACA and appropriate actions taken."

Oregon Tilth appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed recommendation and thanks the NOP for carefully considering our comments.

Respectfully submitted,

Oregon Tilth, Inc.

*Oregon Tilth, Inc. is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization that supports and promotes biologically sound and socially equitable agriculture. Oregon Tilth offers educational events throughout the state of Oregon, and provides organic certification services to organic growers, processors, and handlers internationally. An NOP accredited certifier since 2002, Oregon Tilth currently certifies over 650 farms and ranches and over 600 handlers in more than 35 states affording us a broad perspective of current practices and challenges faced by organic producers and handlers.*