

Certification Orientation

Saturday, November 24, 2012
Georgian Room, (9:00am – 4:30pm)

Workshop: Reflections on the Transition Process (3:00 – 4:30)

Panel : **Amy Smith, Heart Beet Organics, PE (OCIA)**
 Tim Livingstone, Strawberry Hill Farm, NB (ACO)
 Shannon Jones, Broadfork Farm, NS (Ecocert Canada)

Executive Summary:

Often the best information at a conference comes from talking with other organic farmers. The panel represents several farmers in the transition process who each used a different certifying body. They shared with the workshop attendees their experiences, honest opinions, tips for success, and things to avoid when embarking on the path to organic certification.

Detailed Notes :

Amy Smith, Heart Beet Organics, PE (OCIA)

Amy runs a 1 ½ acres mixed vegetable farm. She has been an organic gardener for 15 years and has been working on farms for 7 years.

Why Certification

Amy decided to go for certification for the label, in order to gain the trust of the public.

Choosing a Certifying Body

Amy received advice from a friend to email a list of questions to a number of certifying bodies. She could then make her decision based on the certifier who best answered her questions in a timely manner. Amy chose OCIA (Organic Crop Improvement Association) as her certifying body as they responded immediately and answered all her questions.

The Disadvantages

Amy found the process to be challenging and frustrating. To her surprise not all certifiers were on the same page when it came to input products (an example would be potting soil) There did not seem to be enough awareness as to what was considered organic and what wasn't. She felt the need to challenge some of the items which were deemed unacceptable i.e. request proof from the certifier.

OCIA is a large organization with a lot of paperwork; some of which she felt was redundant. The paper work is completed during the off-season. The inspection occurs during the growing season.

The Advantages

Amy felt it was still an important process to go through in order to be counted for in government. (i.e. statistics on Organic Farming, funding, support etc).

Amy found the record keeping was useful later on to refer back to when making decisions on the next growing season i.e. how much compost to use (based on previous years) etc.

Amy referred to “GAP” Good Agriculture Practices. GAP refers to "practices that address environmental, economic and social sustainability for on-farm processes, and result in safe and quality food and non-food agricultural products.” Refer to the website www.fao.org for more information.

She stated that the **audit trail** which record keeping provides, allows for traceability. It allows you to isolate product. i.e. if anyone should become sick from your food you will be able to trace it back to the source.

Record Keeping

The Required Forms

1. Field History Chart to be kept for 3 years, which documents what is grown and what is applied to the field during this period
2. PULA (Previous usage land application)
3. List of all the inputs, including pictures and labels, to be provided before the application
4. Organic System Plan (16 pg) which includes information about the fertilizer being used, pest control and disease, harvesting method, post harvest, storage of the crops, transportation to the market, buffer (location and how it is managed) and a field or production map
5. Compost Log which includes the turning and temperature records or that the compost has been tested
6. Activity log
7. Harvest records, what, where and when
8. Organic Seed Search – the sources you have looked at (at least 3)
9. Sales Records
10. Audit Trail

Tim Livingstone, Strawberry Hill Farm, Pembroke NB (ACO)

Tim purchased Strawberry Hill Farm in the summer of 2011. The previous owners had kept good records so it helped to smooth out the certification process.

Tim grew up on a farm in New Hampshire and helped with the care of a variety of livestock including managing a pasture for grazing sheep. His family grew a big vegetable garden as well. He worked for about 20 years in the greenhouse industry primarily raising bedding plants. In 2001 he started with the production of organic soils and then compost and compost teas. In 2003 Tim and Kirsten (his wife) took training in soil biology and biological farming.

Previously, Tim had been the grower for Jolly Farmer's outdoor vegetables and been heavily involved in their weekly box program. Now that Jolly Farmer has stopped their program, he is providing a similar program on his farm.

Why Certification

Tim believes in certification. He doesn't want to use the name "Organic" unless he fully participates in the regulated process i.e. the organic standard has promoted the word. The process to become organic has given him the confidence and necessary challenge to do the best he can.

Choosing a Certifying Body

Tim chose MCOG (Maritime Certified Organic Growers) as his certifying body, which is now known as ACO (Atlantic Certified Organic Cooperative)

Note: In August 2008 ACO assumed the certification services of the region's two certification bodies, the Nova Scotia Organic Growers Association (NSOGA) and the Maritime Certified Organic Growers (MCOG). In December 2008, it became official that ACO was granted accreditation by the CFIA. ACO is now recognized as providing third party organic certification services that is ISO Guide 65 compliant: the international standard of general requirements for bodies operating product certification systems.

Challenges: Split vs. Parallel Farming

One of the challenges Tim had encountered during certification is running a farm that has both organic and non-organic acreage. He must prove that there is no cross contamination. This requires that he operate a split farm. Split production is where one field is not organic (beans) and another field is organic (corn). He cannot run parallel fields i.e. he cannot grow non-organic corn along side organic corn.

Challenges: Livestock Transition (Pigs)

Tim wanted to get back into raising animals again so had to start again with the transition into livestock. This presented more challenges. One of the livestock he wanted to produce organically is pigs. However, he does not know a local organic pig

farmer so in order to raise his own it would require him to feed the pigs organic feed for 1 year. The cost of doing this is prohibitive.

Shannon Jones, Broadfork Farms, River Hebert, Cumberland County NS (Ecocert Canada)

Shannon's interest in farming originates in a passion for holistic health and nutrition. She grew up with organics and healthy food and has made it her lifestyle. Shannon has apprenticed on organic farms and had a desire to grow natural food on a farm of her own.

Why Certification

Shannon believes that the general public is misinformed. The average consumer believes all farmers markets are organic. She wants to be able to display the sticker so that the consumer knows what they are buying.

Choosing an Organic Certifier

Shannon contacted 4 Certifying Bodies (CB) and talked to farmers before making a decision. Price was important. She wanted to know how they based their fees; on acreage or income.

In the end she chose Ecocert as they provided the personal touch as well as offered the most competitive price. Ecocert was the first to contact her and they had pre-existing knowledge about Shannon's farm which impressed her.

Record Keeping

Shannon uses a spreadsheet to satisfy most of the records she needs to keep.

Challenges (Beehives)

Shannon wanted to certify her beehive but was unable to because she needed to have 3,000 meters around the beehives to be considered certified organic.

Disadvantage to Certification

Shannon said the one big disadvantage to certification is having to verify every product. She also, like Amy, ran into variances with what inputs were acceptable as organic.

Advantage to Certification

Shannon says certification makes you a better farm manager and encourages you to expand your knowledge and be more efficient with necessary record-keeping.

The Panel In Conclusion

Each panel member had chosen a different Certifying Body and had encountered different challenges. However all three provided the following advice:

1. Apprentice on someone else's organic farm, learn as much as possible
2. In choosing a Certifying Body do your research first: i.e. talk to other farmers, send out a questionnaire to several. Include questions about the pricing (acreage vs income), process involved and allowable inputs.
3. Ask for proof – don't be afraid to challenge
4. Use google earth to get a snap shop of your field – the application can be downloaded for free
5. Get involved, sit on government boards to be heard and to influence the policy makers.