



# National Organic Coalition

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United States Department of Agriculture  
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Fredericksburg, VA 22406

Comments sent to: [ARCBbranch@ams.usda.gov](mailto:ARCBbranch@ams.usda.gov)

March 6, 2009

Dear Jim Riva,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Audit Review and Compliance Branch's (ARC) recent changes to its auditing procedures.

The National Organic Coalition (NOC) is a national alliance of organizations working to provide a "Washington voice" for farmers, ranchers, environmentalists, consumers, and progressive industry members involved in organic agriculture. NOC seeks to work cooperatively with, and add value to, existing organic and sustainable agriculture organizations, networks, and coalitions to ensure a united voice for organic integrity.

NOC has been a strong proponent of accreditation systems in providing oversight of the certification bodies working in the organic industry. We appreciate ARC's program for accreditation against ISO Guide 65 to facilitate export of US products to foreign markets and also ARC's role in providing auditing services for the National Organic Program (NOP).

## ***Commendations***

Before we submit our comments on the specific documents you posted for comment, NOC would like to extend its commendation to ARC on the recent changes to ARC's programs specifically related to the agency's efforts to comply with ISO 17011, the international standard for management of accreditation bodies. NOC is familiar with the rigor of this standard and we have noted multiple changes to ARC's systems over the past few months as ARC has been adjusting its systems to comply with ISO 17011. In particular, we would like to mention the following upgrades that we have noted:

1. Posting ARC Branch ISO 17011 Quality Manual on the agency's website, which allows the all interested parties the opportunity to better understand the management of ARC's accreditation systems and to see the steps ARC has taken toward compliance with internationally-accepted standards for accreditation systems;

2. Creating an “Interested Parties Committee” that encourages input on proposed changes to ARC’s accreditation systems from the full spectrum of positions with a direct or indirect interest in ARC’s accreditation activities—accreditation bodies, certifiers, government, industry, operators, and other interested parties and stakeholders;
3. Posting the procedure for managing the Interested party Committee on the web so that the public is informed about the structure and function of the committee as well as the opportunity for participation in the Committee;
4. Establishing the ARC Newsroom to inform the public about changes to ARC’s programs and procedures;
5. Implementing a subscription system that allows interested parties to register to receive e-mailed notifications whenever the newsroom is updated, thus proactively encouraging both transparency and public input;

### ***Response to Request for Public Comment***

ARC’s request for public comment asked for review of changes to 2 procedures: ARC 1000 and ARC 1012. ARC1000 applies to all clients who request audit and accreditation services from the ARC Branch and ARC 1012 is specifically related to ARC’s ISO Guide 65 accreditation for organic certification bodies.

We appreciate ARC posting the documents in “track changes” mode. This makes the revisions clearly evident, thus enhancing the transparency of the proposed changes and facilitating comments from the public.

#### ***ARC 1000: Quality Systems Verification Programs General Policies and Procedures***

##### **§1—Scope**

We noticed that the references to ARC’s compliance with ISO 17011 in the request for comment applied specifically to the ISO Guide 65 program for accreditation of organic certification bodies. NOC heartily supports ARC’s efforts to bring its ISO Guide 65 program into compliance with ISO 17011. NOC believes that compliance with ISO 17011 will not only improve the program by providing increased transparency, clarity, and rigor, it will also increase the value of the accreditation program to participating certification bodies through its acceptance by officials in other countries, thus easing the way for US organic products to flow into foreign markets.

Although NOC focuses on issues related to the organic industry, we are pleased to note that some of ARC’s upgrades will affect all of the agency’s programs for auditing US agricultural products and we urge ARC to consider expanding the scope of its application of ISO 17011 to each of its auditing programs as soon as possible.

##### **§8—Desk Audit**

NOC does not agree with ARC’s procedure allowing the client to forgo a desk audit and we believe that this procedure is not compliant with ISO 17011, §7.6.s, that, “The assessment team shall review relevant documents and records supplied by the certification body to evaluate its system...for conformity with the relevant standards(s) and other requirements for accreditation.” We note that ARC 1012 does not allow the practice

of allowing a certifier to request to forgo a desk audit and we urge ARC to eliminate this possibility for certifiers accredited under ARC's other auditing programs. (As mentioned below, we note that the opportunity to request elimination of the desk audit is specifically prohibited for organic certification bodies participating in the ISO Guide 65 program.)

#### **§§14 through 17—Suspension, Revocation and Voluntary Withdrawal**

NOC applauds ARC's efforts to clarify and differentiate its procedures for suspension, revocation, and voluntary withdrawal; our interpretation of ARC's previous procedure was that it did not allow for ARC to revoke an accreditation, only to "permanently suspend" it. In order to ensure the continued integrity of organic certification systems, NOC believes that it is vitally important for ARC to document clearly articulated procedures for suspending and revoking accreditations, as required by ISO 17011, §7.13. Distinct sections addressing each of these subjects in ARC's revised procedure now present the agency's compliance procedures more clearly.

#### **§24—Appeals**

NOC appreciates the addition of the definition of the term "appeal" in §24.1, finding that this change, as well as the other revisions of §24, strengthen ARC's appeal procedures.

#### **§25—Complaints**

NOC concurs with the provisions added to ARC's complaint procedure. We find that the documentation of a third party's right to submit a complaint, in addition to a certifier's right to do so, is a distinct improvement to ARC's procedure.

#### **§26—Objections to Audit Team Members**

NOC agrees with addition of a procedure for certifiers to object to ARC's assignment of a particular auditor or technical expert. Such a procedure fosters the possibility for certifiers to provide direct feedback about their concerns related to the performance, fairness, and competence of audit team members. Compliance with the ISO 17011 requirement to provide certifiers with this right emphasizes ARC's commitment to improving the quality of its audit programs.

#### **§29—ARC Branch Websites**

As stated in our introductory section, NOC appreciates ARC's efforts to provide additional information about its procedures to the public through its website postings. Documenting these procedures provides a foundation for the agency's accountability to the public regarding its transparency.

### ***ARC 1012: USDA ISO Guide 65 Program Accreditation for Certification Bodies***

#### **§5—Public Information**

NOC supports the provisions in §5, which establish procedures for providing information about ARC's ISO Guide 65 program to the general public. The newsroom and Q&A pages both provide opportunities for increased transparency and should help certifiers, producers, and consumers better understand the ISO Guide 65 program.

NOC urges ARC to post evidence of compliance with ISO 17011, such as internal audit report, in order to provide assurance that all requirements of the standards are fully addressed by the ISO Guide 65 program.

## **§6—Desk Audit**

The change to §6, which ensures that a desk audit be conducted prior to each site assessment is clearly required by the provisions of ISO 17011. We have been aware of some certifiers' concerns about auditor lack of preparation for audits and we think that the requirement of a desk audit should mitigate this problem.

## **§11—Revocation of Accreditation**

NOC concurs with the changes made to clarify the procedures for withdrawal (revocation) of accreditation from a certification body in §11. In our opinion, it is particularly important for accreditation bodies to have clearly documented procedures for suspension and revocation of accreditation. As the occasion for their use is associated with serious noncompliances within a certification body, the integrity of the organic industry and its products relies on ARC's ability to enforce suspension and revocation procedures with precision.

## **§12—Soliciting Comments about Accredited Certifiers**

NOC notes the inclusion, in §12, of a procedure for soliciting comments from the public about the performance of certification bodies as well as these certifiers' conformance to accreditation criteria. We support this practice and view this as an example of a proactive system for soliciting information from the public. We believe information resulting from this new procedure can provide focal points for ARC's audits, thus increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of ARC's services. We anticipate this procedure will increase the likelihood of identification and correction of issues of concern within organic certification systems as well as problems within the organic farms and handling operations overseen by the certifiers.

## **§12—Information about the Outcome of Compliance Actions**

NOC applauds the changes in §12 related to the listings for certification bodies subject to suspension, or withdrawal (revocation), and those that have voluntarily withdrawn from the program. In the past, NOC has noted that ARC has simply removed the listings of programs without making public the reason for the change. This has led to confusion within the organic industry as wholesalers, retailers, consumers, and officials of foreign import authorities have not had a full understanding about why a certifier's listing had been removed. The new level of specificity in the information, as required by the amended procedure, will provide adequate information to all organic stakeholders about the status of a certifier's ISO Guide 65 accreditation in the event that it has been suspended, revoked, or voluntarily withdrawn.

## **§15.2—Information Required for Audits**

Changes to §15.2, which detail the requirements for submission of information for surveillance assessments and reassessment audits should help certification bodies prepare for their ISO Guide 65 audit by providing clear instructions about the information they must submit to ARC. In addition, it provides a measure of assurance to the public that ARC is collecting adequate information for performance of rigorous assessments of certification bodies.

## **Conclusion**

NOC has long been a proponent of the need for accreditation bodies to comply with ISO 17011, as evidenced by multiple comments from our organization before the National Organic Standard Board and in other venues.

Although ARC's efforts will improve the oversight of the organic certification bodies that *voluntarily* participate in ARC's ISO Guide 65 program, NOC believes that it is critically important for the National Organic Program's *federally mandated* accreditation program for organic certification bodies to be brought into compliance with ISO 17011, as required by §205.509 of the NOP's regulations. We urge NOP to use ARC's experience with meeting ISO 17011 requirements as a springboard for launching upgrades to NOP's own accreditation program. We suggest a goal of reaching full compliance with this international benchmark for management of accreditation systems before the end of 2010. Since NOP contracts auditing services from ARC, NOP can embark on revisions to its quality system with the knowledge that a large number of ISO requirements have already been addressed by ARC's compliance with ISO 17011.

Thank you for the chance to comment on ARC procedures. Please feel free to contact us if you have questions on any of the points we have raised.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Beyond Pesticides  
Center for Food Safety  
Equal Exchange  
Food & Water Watch  
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association  
Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Services  
National Cooperative Grocers Association  
Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance  
Northeast Organic Farming Association -Interstate Council  
Rural Advancement Foundation International -USA  
Union of Concerned Scientists