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Massive protest against USDA conflict of interest rule

A large number of US and international organisations are protesting against the organic rule in the US that will effectively force farmers out of any participation in certification organisations.

In a joint letter to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) they say that 'Organic farmers are at the very heart of the National Organic Program and as such it is an insult to them to remove them from Boards of the very organizations that built the organic industry and developed organic certification.'

While most of the final US Rule on Organics was welcomed by the US organic industry, there are a number of issues that are still under fire. The most controversial is the rule that prohibits any engagement of certified operators in a certification body's decision-making or executive organs. The USDA takes a much more restrictive approach than the ISO in the guide 65 or by IFOAM in its

accreditation criteria. In addition, not only does the Rule have implications for US certifiers, should the USDA apply it in its accreditation of non-US certifiers it will also have consequences on all organic imports.

In contrast to the US Rule, not only does the ISO 65 de facto acknowledge the possibility of including certified operators in the decision-making bodies, it actually goes further making their involvement a requirement by stating that 'the structure [of the certification body] shall enable the participation of all parties significantly concerned in the development of policies and principles regarding the content and functioning of the certification system.'

The US ruling was challenged by twenty-nine organisations in a joint letter dated 31 May 2001. The petitioners include major US certifiers, such as OCIA, CCOF, Oregon Tilth and ICS (FVO), as well as advocacy

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ONE CERTIFIER QUILTS

One US certifier has already decided to opt out of certification altogether due to the final rule. On April 26 the Board of Directors of the California Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA) decided to phase out their certification programme. The CFSA state that the USDA Organic Program will reduce certifiers to regulatory agencies under the USDA, which would limit the organisations' ability to continue with education and support services. In addition, they specifically mention the restrictions for having farmers on the Board as one of the main reasons for closing the certification programme they have been running since 1987.

More information: www.carolinafarmstewards.org