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JAS organic revision makes certifiers nervous

In Japan the JAS Organic Standards must be reviewed every five years. As the time now approaches the revision is likely to bring some changes.

In 2000, the Japanese Agricultural Standards (JAS) Organic Standards were installed, giving the term 'organic' a legal definition in Japan for both domestic and imported organic products. The JAS Law requires that the standards are reviewed at least every five years. Consequently, starting in October 2003, the Japanese Government has held several meetings especially to examine the JAS certification system, and to gather information for the revision. To involve as many relevant people as possible, public comment has been encouraged and the meetings have been held in many parts of Japan. Members attending the meetings have included consumers, distributors, producers, inspectors, journalists, and university professors. It is intended that the revisions for JAS Organic Standards (for agricultural products and processed foods) will be completed and introduced this year.

Presently there are 68 domestic certification organisations (COs) and 24 foreign organisations registered to the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF). Over the last four years several other organisations have closed their certification business, probably because they have not had enough or any applicants. In addition, three COs lost their registration after suspected certification malpractices were investigated by MAFF.

Last month, on 19 April, the news was released that ICS Japan, an international certification organisation, had been ordered to cease all their certification activities within a week. In addition, all products produced by businesses certified by ICS Japan must be reviewed by 18 June, to ensure they comply with the JAS Organic standards and regulation. Currently there are 322 organisations, including 101 organisations based in foreign countries, certified to JAS Organic standards and regulation by ICS Japan.

This development is likely to have a significant impact on the organic movement in Japan, and it is clear MAFF is now very serious about conducting thorough audits of COs. Last year MAFF recruited 400 new staff specifically to research food labels. It is likely there are two purposes for these checks; first to ensure labels correctly inform consumers of the appropriate information, and secondly to verify food safety. MAFF has recently intensified residue tests in food, including organic foods.

Recent examples of residue testing by MAFF emerged when two organic re-packers were suspected of fraud. After MAFF's investigation, MAFF made the facts public and announced they would undergo a public hearing in May.

All Japanese COs are audited by MAFF on an annual basis, but it