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## Bridging obstacles to international trade

**T**he multi-lateral agreement (MLA) between IFOAM Accredited Certification Bodies (ACBs) came into existence in October, 1999. That date was not an ending, but a beginning.

### Some history

The MLA was originally submitted in draft at BIOFACH 1998 to the ACBs by David Crucefix, the then International Manager for SACert (Soil Association Certification Ltd.). David continued to hone the document throughout 1998 with feedback from the ACBs. A third draft was submitted to the ACBs at the first annual ACB meeting held in Miami in June 1999. At that meeting nine of the then fourteen ACBs committed to signing the document and plans were made to announce the MLA to the world at two meetings, the IFOAM Trade Conference 1999, held in Florence, Italy, and Expo East 1999, held in Baltimore, USA. That target was indeed met and, in the event, twelve ACBs signed the MLA. The two that did not, were unable to attend the meeting, but had already committed to signing when logistically possible. Since then, the number of ACBs, and subsequently the signatories for the MLA has grown to seventeen and fifteen respectively, with two committed to signing.

### What is it?

It had long been recognised that a mechanism to allow acceptance of products between ACBs was needed. This acceptance would be based on the recognition that all ACB's standards were at least equivalent to the IFOAM Basic Standards (IBS), and that each ACB's competence as a certification body was ensured by meeting IFOAM accreditation criteria. The MLA was designed to be that mechanism of acceptance. Creation of the MLA was no small feat considering differences in standards beyond the IBS, and the fact that most ACBs are subjected to their home country's regulatory requirements. To meet the demands of standards beyond the IFOAM Basic Standards and regulatory requirements, an 'Additional Requirements' clause was incorporated into the MLA. Since its inception, most of the work surrounding the MLA has been centred on identifying these 'Additional Requirements' and discussing ways of eliminating as many as possible. During a three-day ACB meeting in Bristol held this year, the ACBs were challenged to condense their lists of additional requirements as far as possible and many met the challenge. There is still work to do in this area and all signatories to the MLA are committed to doing what

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