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NOP bans Internal Control Systems?

Representatives of the US National Organic Program (NOP) have indicated that group certifications based on internal control systems where not all producers in a grower group are inspected by the certification body, are not acceptable under the NOP rules. If enforced this will have a dramatic impact on hundreds of thousands of small-holders, as well as what goes onto the shelves in the supermarkets of the western world.

In a recent NOP certifiers training session, held on 23 January 2007, the NOP informed attendees that:

'Grower groups ... certifiers are required to inspect each operation; a scheme that has internal control group is not appropriate, as that person has a financial interest...Must review entirety of operation – management and individual operations. [The inspector] still has to go to every site (cannot delegate to their internal control group). Don't necessarily have to do the opening and closing discussions with each location.'

Up to now products produced by grower groups certified under these systems have been fully accepted for imports into the US. For example, on

20 October 2002 the National Organic Standards Board issued recommendations on how such systems could fit under the NOP; and certification bodies have followed these recommendations as well as the IFOAM criteria for group certification. Certification bodies practising group certification with an internal control system have been accredited by the NOP.

The organic sector is alarmed by this recent shift in policy, and the Independent Organic Inspectors Association (IOIA) has requested that the NOP should not prohibit group certification, but instead endorse them according to agreed criteria. The IOIA writes that a prohibition of group certification will have a tremendous impact on small growers in developing countries and says:

'It is estimated that more than 300 grower groups and hundreds of thousands of growers produce organically in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. There is a huge diversity among them in size, structure, organization, agricultural practices, writing skills and access to technology.' ■

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