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Conversion standards getting tighter

‘It achieved little and was marked by a distinct lack of consensus.’

Thus was summarised a two-day meeting of the EU Standing Committee on Organic Agriculture, held on 11-12 December. The most contentious issue at the meeting was the proposal for revision of the Regulation EEC no. 2092/91 regarding conversion periods.

The proposal to revise the rules on conversion periods contains two major changes to the current Regulation:

Length of the conversion period

The current requirement for the conversion period is that the Regulation shall have ‘been applied on the parcels [of land] during a conversion period of at least two years before sowing or, in the case of perennial crops other than grassland, at least three years before the first harvest of products’ However, the current Regulation provides ample opportunities for the conversion period to be shortened. For example, by ‘having regard to previous [land] use’ it allows a reduction of the normal two years without making any further qualifications or limitations. It is no secret that in some Member States the conversion period for many or even most of the farms have been one year and not the two years indicated as normal in the Regulation.

The new proposal will limit shorter conversion periods to cases where organic land has to be treated with pesticides as part of a compulsory programme or where scientific

tests, as approved by the Member States, are carried out. In these cases the actual crop will lose certification but the land will not be required to undergo any conversion period in the following season if there are no measurable traces of the non-permitted substance.

Start of the conversion period

Currently the Regulation does not indicate how the start of the conversion period is established. The new proposal clarifies this by stating ‘The conversion period shall commence at the earliest on the date on which the producer notified his activity [to the certification body]’.

However, there are circumstances when the new proposal allows the start date to be established retroactively. These include:

- Farms that have been part of the EU agri-environmental schemes, and thus have been documented and randomly inspected during a period of time equivalent to the conversion period. Under these circumstances the start date of the conversion period can be back-dated the full two years.
- Natural or agricultural areas that