



## Small-Scale Certification

### Peer Review Certification Model

Peer review certification would be a useful tool for provinces seeking to regulate the use of “organic” but concerned about the effects of adopting the COR on small direct market farms. Several surveys of this farm demographic in BC, NS, and nationally by this Working Group, have received the clear message that COR certification does not meet the needs of these farms. Those provinces in which COR certification is the only option have also observed many small farms dropping organic certification and opting for terms such as “uncertified organic”, “natural”, or simply “local”.

To address the needs of smaller-scale farms marketing their products directly to local consumers, the Small-scale Certification Working Group proposes that provinces draft legislation that incorporates peer certification for direct market farms, thereby keeping these farms in the organic family. Here are some of the benefits of peer review certification for direct market farms:

- 1. Reduced Bureaucracy:** Farms that market direct locally do not require complicated 3<sup>rd</sup> party certification procedures designed to maintain organic integrity through extended supply chains.
- 2. Reduced Cost:** Without the burden of international compliance audits and by the very nature of peer volunteers being incorporated into model, the cost of peer certification can be significantly less.
- 3. Simplicity:** Local peer-reviewed certification relies more on trust and community oversight as a way to assure compliance rather than extensive record-keeping.
- 4. Building Peer Community:** Instead of sending paid inspectors, the annual farm visits would be conducted by nearby farmers and or consumer representatives on a volunteer basis which has the added benefits of sharing knowledge & understanding and building the organic community.
- 5. Empowerment:** The democratic structure of a peer review model and the fact that application reviews, inspections, and the overall running of the organization are up to the members builds collective responsibility and capacity.

#### Practical Elements of a Provincial Peer Review Certification Agency (PPRCA)

1. Staff and/or volunteers to operate the agency, maintain the website, and review applications.
2. Clear definition as to what operations this certification applies to: farms & processors that exclusively market direct to the consumer (farmers’ markets, farm-gate, CSA, etc.)
3. Production standard: reference the Canada Organic Standard

4. Application documents/questionnaire: a series of questions (preferably filled out and posted online) designed to touch on all aspects of organic production relevant to that particular operation..
5. Annual membership fees: kept as low as possible (\$200-\$300) to reduce entry threshold for small farms with increases on a sliding scale for larger farmers – online payment ideal.
6. Declaration document: signed and submitted annually by the operator verifying that they understand and accept the terms of participation – also posted online.
7. On-farm inspections: - conducted by peers (ideally other nearby PPRCA organic farmers) as part of a volunteer requirement to inspect at least one other farm. Inspection forms and guidelines provided by the PPRCA.
8. Record-keeping requirements: Receipts for all off-farm inputs including feed, soil amendments, seeds, planting stock, etc. for the peer inspector to verify. Soil test results prior to application of off-farm soil amendments.
9. Certification benefits: Certificate, use of the PPRCA logo and marketing materials, public profile on website, access to PPRCA peer network.

### **Regulatory Background: Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS)**

The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) defines participatory guarantee systems as locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange.

“Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are revisiting the way organic certification started a few decades ago. At the same time, many PGS have existed for over 40 years. The development and professionalization of the organic sector, accompanied by increased international trade has called for third party certification to become the norm in most developed organic markets; nevertheless, PGS have never stopped to exist and serve organic producers and consumers eager to maintain local economies and direct, transparent relationships.”

The Provincial Peer Review Certification system described above has all the characteristics and benefits of a PGS: limited to local organic direct market sales where farmers are active participants in the certification system who value the resulting “social networks and knowledge exchange.” PGS initiatives can be officially approved by IFOAM but in Canada, provincial regulations could be drafted to enable PGS certification such as the PPRCA described above.

### **Recommendations**

The Canada Organic Regulation (COR) was created to regulate third party certification systems to facilitate inter-provincial and international trade but it does not apply to intra-provincially. Each province is responsible for regulate organic agriculture within its own borders. While some have already done so, others are still looking for tools that will close the regulatory gap while still respecting regional agricultural realities.

Provincial Peer Review Certification is just such a tool. It can operate seamlessly alongside third party certification while offering the benefits of greater local transparency, improved networking & knowledge transfer, and a lower entry threshold for new small organic farms selling into the local market. In drafting provincial regulations, legislators could specifically enable the development of a PPRCA along with a unique logo and brand that emphasizes the local organic nature of the products (for example: Ontario Local Organic).

For future revisions of the COR, peer-review PGSs could also be recognized and enabled as a legitimate form of certification nationally. This could be particularly helpful for producers whose local markets may involve crossing of provincial borders or serving direct market mail order customers in other provinces (seeds for example) which could be considered illegal under the current regulation.