Info-bio

THE ORGANIC FEDERATION OF CANADA NEWSLETTER

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Review of the Canadian Organic Standards

Final modification to the standards

A clause in the revised Canadian Organic Standards published, for information purposes, in August 2015 on the OFC website attracted so many negative comments that the Chair of the Technical Committee on Organic Agriculture, Hugh Martin, and the Conveners of the Working Groups have agreed to reconsider the wording of the clause in order to clarify its meaning (see report below).

The OFC posts the very final version of the Canadian Organic Standards:
General principles and management standards - CAN/CGSB-32.310 – Sept. 2015
http://organicfederation.ca/sites/documents/0032-0310-000-EN-NE0-0016%20sept%202015_0.pdf

Permitted Substances Lists - CAN/CGSB-32.311 – Sept. 2015
http://organicfederation.ca/sites/documents/0032-0311-000-EN-NE0-0016%20sept%202015%20rev.docx_.pdf

The revised standard will be officially published in November 2015

It is election time again! The Canadian government has launched an election and suspended the publication of the revised organic standard.

Election periods, long or short, impose restrictions: the government has to maintain political neutrality and avoid any activity that could be perceived as partisan during the election campaign and for seven days after the election date.
The new publication target date is November 9, 2015.

How can we protect the integrity of organic crops?

Revised isolation distance for corn

The proposed isolation distances intended to prevent the contamination of organic crops have raised serious concerns and Hugh Martin, the Chair of the Technical Committee, and the Conveners of the Working Groups have revised the wording of the isolation distances between organic crops at risk of contamination and genetically modified crops of the same type.

In the version posted on the OFC website in August, clause 5.2.2. d) read as follows:

5.2.2 If unintended contact with prohibited substances is possible, distinct buffer zones or other features sufficient to prevent contamination are required:

a. *buffer zones shall be at least 8 m (26 ft. 3 in.) wide;*

b. *permanent hedgerows or windbreaks, artificial windbreaks, permanent roads or other physical barriers may be used instead of buffer zones;*

c. *crops grown in buffer zones shall not be considered organic whether or not they are used on the operation.*

d. crops at risk of contamination from commercialized GE crops shall be protected from cross-pollination. If the isolation distance for at risk crop types is less than 10 m for soybeans, 500 m for corn, and 3 km for canola, alfalfa (for seed production) and apples, mitigation strategies such as but not limited to physical barriers, border rows or delayed planting shall be implemented to protect organic crops.

However, many producer associations have raised questions about the prescribed isolation distances; dairy farmers who produce organic corn as feed commented that the 500 m distance from any GE corn field was not realistic and that mitigation measures to reduce contamination risks should be a joint responsibility.

A number of arguments have been shared among the Conveners, the TC Chair and the GMO Task Force to address the concerns of producers, including the following:

- Producers shall implement mitigation measures, if they have not already done so, to reduce the risk of contamination of their crops from neighbouring GE fields of the same type; the length of the isolation distance does not matter that much, as contamination is a real risk that producers should address by implementing a prevention plan.

- Organic principles are clear: GMOs are forbidden and consumers expect organic products to be free from GMOs. All measures shall be put in place to stop contamination.

- Isolation distances are needed to provide guidelines for the sector; otherwise, prevention measures will not be harmonized across the country.

- Isolation distances were introduced after the public comment period held in the summer of 2014 and the sector never had the opportunity to comment on this new clause.

- Some producers are not so familiar with mitigation measures; they are requesting an impact study to assess the cost of these measures (cost, impact on yield, feasibility).

- The actual distances have been questioned: how were they established? Research on the Web has found values ranging from 10 m to 3 km. A distance of 500 m was proposed in the study entitled *Challenges and approaches in mitigating risks associated with the adventitious presence of GM products in organic crop production in Canada*, funded by AAFC and OSGATA, the Organic Seed Growers and Trade Association.
  Shorter distances (between 10 and 200 m) are recommended by the University of California, Ohio State University, and on the website of the Canadian Seed Growers Association.

- Other arguments questioned the main sources of contamination that would result mostly from the use of contaminated seeds rather than by drifts from neighbouring GE fields. Corn pollen, transported mainly by wind, generally falls within a 5 m radius around the field where the crop is grown, and rarely beyond 25 to 50 m. Moreover, corn pollen does not survive after two hours of exposure to the sun.

- The Canadian Organic Standards does not set out any contamination threshold for GMO contamination that would justify the loss of certification of an organically produced crop. Organic certification proves that the producer's practices have been verified; it is not based on crop testing. How can producers grow perfect crops that are protected from wind, bees, and drifts as well as from all other potential sources of contamination?

The Working Group Conveners and the GMO TF, led by the Chair of the Technical Committee, have finally reached a compromise for corn production:

- The isolation distance for corn will be 300 m; and

- All isolation distances will be indicated in an informative note inserted after clause 5.2.2 d) instead of being indicated in the clause itself. An informative note is not enforceable; rather, it is intended to provide information and guide producers.

Revised clause 5.2.2.d) reads as follows:

Crops at risk of contamination from commercialized GE crops shall be protected from cross-pollination. Mitigation strategies such as, but not limited to, physical barriers, border rows, strategic testing or delayed planting shall be implemented, unless generally accepted isolation distances for the at-risk crop type are present (see informative note).
Informative Note: Generally accepted isolation distances for crops at risk of contamination from commercialized GE crop types include soybeans – 10 m, corn – 300 m, canola, alfalfa (for seed production) and apples – 3km.

Nevertheless, extension services will be needed to help producers apply efficient mitigation measures. They will have to develop and implement their mitigation plan one year after the official publication of the standard.

Canada's National Organic Week is the largest annual celebration of organic food, farming and products across the country.
http://organicweek.ca/

ORGANIC SCIENCE CLUSTER II

A second organic science conference in the offing

The Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada, the Organic Federation of Canada and the Quebec organic sector plan to hold a second organic science conference that will focus on the cooperation between researchers and organic producers in the research activities currently being carried out across the country. The conference is slated to take place at the end of

September 2016. The first organic science conference was held in Winnipeg, in February 2012. More to come!

The people behind the research

Two farmers with both feet in research

Ian and Linda Grossart, Howpark Farm owners, are partnering with Dr. Terence McGonigle on Organic Science Cluster II (OSCII) Research Activity A.7: *Well-established commercial organic farming: Effect of rate of composted manure application on soil mineral nutrients, yield, and crop nutrient uptake.* They describe their commitment to organic research.

Can you give a brief overview of Howpark Farm?

We are located 12 miles southeast of Brandon. Our farm was homesteaded by my great-grandfather in 1869. My wife and I operate as a partnership. We have three kids who are all in university, who have helped out over time and my dad is still involved with some of the labour. We have just a little over 2000 acres of total area, and of that, about 800 acres is cropland. Our rotation is usually about a 3 year rotation of alfalfa, then flax, then oats. The oats are usually underseeded with clover, so we have clover the next year as a plow down. After the clover, we go into either rye or wheat, then back into the alfalfa. We also have cattle, but they are all grass finished, so the grain is sold off-farm, but all of the hay from alfalfa is used in our cattle enterprise for feed. We have free-range broiler chickens in the summer, and we feed them the grain screenings as part of their diet.

How did Howpark Farm become involved in Organic Science Cluster II and how did you help to shape the research activity?

We've worked with Brandon University for years. We have a range of hills here and a lot of native prairie, so for a long time the Botany Department has brought students out to do plant identification. Terry [McGonigle] has brought classes out, and I guess we got talking about what we were doing in organics and he was looking at some research ideas that would work here. So, he is following the first five years of a field that is just into organic, to see what changes happen under organic management with compost application.

Linda and Ian Grossart of Howpark Farm.
Photo by Brandon University

How are you participating and contributing to Organic Science Cluster II?

We've contributed a 40 acre field, which is where the research is happening. We have provided the land for the plots; we are doing all of the tillage, all of the seeding and providing the seed. We

will do the compost applications, and will provide the compost as well. It's all work that we normally would do; we have just integrated it into this project.

What excites you the most about the research?

Being able to look at and validate what we are doing within our organic system, and also to find out if there are ways that we could improve our system, like by adding more compost. Hopefully out of this, we will find some other things that we might be able to do rotation-wise. Even just to get to know a little bit more about each step in the rotation, like how much nitrogen is being supplied from our system, is wonderful.

How do you think this research will impact your work, as well as other organic growers?

For our work, as I mentioned above, it's going to either validate or refute what we're doing so we can maybe change our program. Other people will also be able to look at our program and the research results, and it may provide them more of a background on what has worked and has not worked here, particularly when it comes to rates of compost. So, I think it is going to be valuable, and beyond just here.

For more information on this project, please visit http://www.dal.ca/oacc or read our interview with Dr. McGonigle

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