

May 1, 2012

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**Re: Biodiversity Conservation Guidance Document**

We the undersigned are submitting the attached Biodiversity Conservation Guidance for consideration of inclusion into the National Organic Program (NOP) Handbook. The Guidance assists certifying agents and certified operations in understanding how to comply with requirements related to the conservation of biodiversity including natural resources, in crop, livestock and handling operations that are certified as organic under the National Organic Program.

Biodiversity conservation is part of the NOP regulation, and its preamble.

§205.2 Organic production is a “system that is managed . . . to respond to site-specific conditions by integrating cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity.”

Preamble: The use of “conserve” establishes that the producer must initiate practices to support biodiversity and avoid, to the extent practicable, any activities that would diminish it.

§205.200 and §205.2 Production practices . . . must maintain or improve the natural resources of the operation (natural resources includes soil, water, wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife).

The Biodiversity Conservation Guidance will help the NOP fulfill its stated commitment to biodiversity as a priority in organic agriculture. This guidance will also allow the NOP to respond positively to the NOSB’s 2009 recommendation that biodiversity conservation be comprehensively addressed, and further tie into the NOSB’s 2005 recommendation that biodiversity be part of the model Organic System Plan (OSP).

We think you’ll find that the Biodiversity Guidance can be easily adopted by the NOP, since much of the wording, style and formatting (see yellow highlighting) from other NOP Guidances has been used. To clarify the words commonly used in this guidance and in other NOP publications, definitions are supplied. Besides examples presented on acceptable actions for biodiversity conservation of natural

resources (soil, water, wetlands, woodlands and wildlife), examples were included for biologically diverse seed and planting stock, and for livestock breeds. The document also provides helpful suggestions for certified operations to use USDA NRCS' plant database, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's endangered species list, and/or to request an environmental evaluation from NRCS, when necessary. Since the Guidance builds on the NOP's 2011 model OSP by always using the same conservation language (see aqua highlighting in Policy section for Certified Operations), it will be easy for certifying agents and certified operations to see the connections, and consistency between NOP documents is assured.

In 2009, the NOSB pointed out the need for inspectors to evaluate sustainable practices for converting new land into agriculture. This document proposes a way for operators to consider the pros and cons of such an undertaking, and suggests the best steps to take if it is determined that conversion is still the optimum course of action.

We feel the primary tool for ensuring biodiversity conservation compliance is education, and this guidance is an important aspect of that. It will bring parity between certifying agents who have for years inspected for biodiversity conservation compliance, and those who have not. It should put an end to those certifiers who have lost business because they require compliance. Once the Guidance is adopted by the NOP, it would be beneficial for the NOP to conduct NOP-accredited certification agency trainings on biodiversity conservation, as another portion of the NOSB's 2009 recommendation suggests.

NRCS' recent efforts to support more organic farmers through new and existing programs are resulting in better access to economic conservation incentives and better conservation compliance. With a National Center for Appropriate Technology project that is currently helping to further the building of a bridge between NOP regulations and NRCS programs, conservation compliance on organic farms will continue to improve. These important programs may help to offset additional financial considerations for farmers.

We would like to continue to work with you and others to ensure that this document reaches our conservation goal of protecting biodiversity, and be practicably implemented by organic farmers.

Most importantly, this guidance will help solidify credibility with consumers, who assume organic food is grown in environmentally friendly ways. Consumers are constantly told that organic farming is better for the environment – it is on packaging, in advertisements, and on websites. Let's make sure those consumers stay loyal customers, and that the market continues to grow by safeguarding organic values, whether we are talking about the integrity of soil diversity, wildlife conservation, livestock breeds, or about land conversion.

Sincerely,

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