

October 6 2018

Review of the Canadian Organic Standards

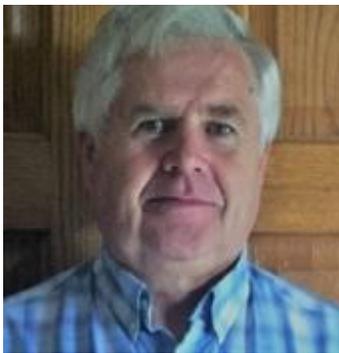
The review is launched!

By Janet Wallace

Funded with a contribution of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada as [announced August 24th, in Mara, BC](#), the Organic Federation of Canada has launched the review process that will culminate with the publication of the 2020 version of the Canadian Organic Standards by November 2020.

After the OFC called for petitions the summer 2018, more than 200 petitions have been submitted by stakeholders of the Canadian Organic industry.

How can we improve the Canadian Organic Standard? Right now, a team of conscientious, passionate people are working hard to answer this question. With their help, updated and improved versions of the Canadian Organic Standard and Permitted Substances Lists will be available by November 2020.



Hugh Martin
Agronomist, Chair of the Committee
on organic agriculture

Hugh Martin remains Chair and ensures continuity between revisions

Reviewing and updating the standards is a challenging and time-consuming process. Around a hundred people across Canada, many of them volunteers, are spending hours analyzing suggested changes and discussing these in long conference calls.

“We need to keep up-to-date,” says Hugh Martin, the re-elected Chair of the Committee on organic agriculture of the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB).

“New technology is always coming online, such as gene editing, new issues regarding animal welfare issues and new products are always entering the market. We need to review these.”

Another advantage of looking closely at the standard every five years is, as Hugh explains, we can ensure our standard “maintains relevance with the organic standards of our other trading *partners, such as the US, Europe and Japan.*”

“But on top of all this,” Hugh continues, “The review process allows us to improve our standard. With each revision, we try to make the standard easier to read.”

“Do you feel our standard is easy to read?,” I ask.

“It’s easier to read than if it was written by a bunch of government people,” Hugh replies while laughing. This brings up an important point. The standard is not written and reviewed by bureaucrats. Farmers are integral to the process. The standard is used by farmers and is largely written and reviewed by farmers.

Why are we doing this now? The short answer is: We have to. The organic standards are owned by the Government of Canada, specifically by the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB). CGSB requires that all standards be updated every five years; it doesn’t matter if the focus is mattress quality, cotton dishcloths, aviation fuel or organic agriculture. But there are other benefits.

“This five-year requirement provides us with an opportunity to improve our standards in many ways,” says Hugh Martin.

The Review Process

1. Call for petitions (June to August 2018)

Farmers, consumers, and industry stakeholders have been invited to submit petitions to change any aspect of the standard. They simply filled out a form where they cited the current standard, described how they would like to change it, and provided the background and rationale for the suggested change. The Organic Federation of Canada (OFC) organizes and translates these petitions. More than 200 petitions have been received.

Livestock production, Organic Principles and Production Standards and Permitted Substances Lists, has received the highest number of petitions.

To consult the list of petitions:
CAN/CGSB-32.310-2015 – [click here](#)
CAN/CGSB-32.311-2015 – [click here](#)

2. Working Groups (September 2018 to March 2019)

There are several Working Groups each with a specific focus (e.g., crop inputs, livestock, processing). They meet on conference calls in which all participants can look at shared online files while talking about the issues.

“Working Groups of 12-15 people do the bulk of the work,” says Hugh.

“These are mostly farmers but also technical experts. For example, veterinarians have been invited to attend Livestock Working Group meetings. At times, researchers are hired to conduct literature reviews and background research on particular products.”

“Working Groups are open to anyone who has the time, interest and expertise. They provide recommendations to the main ‘Technical Committee’ as to whether they should accept, reject or modify the proposed change,” he explains. “In all meetings, we aim to reach consensus. Technically, consensus is achieved when two thirds of the participants agree but we aim for 80-90% agreement.”

The list of WG participants can be [consulted here](#).

The Review Team



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3. Committee on Organic Agriculture (September 2018 to March 2019)

The Committee has around 40 voting members; all are representatives of agricultural organizations. Approximately half are farmers and the others represent consumers or other interests. They discuss the recommendations of the Working Groups on three-hour conference calls held every few weeks, followed by a 2.5-day meeting in Ottawa in March (people can attend in person or by phone). At the end of these meetings, all the petitions are voted on in a secret ballot.

Meeting calendar of the Committee on organic agriculture

- October 29 2018 – 3h conference call
- Week of December 17 – 3h conference call
- March 19-20-21 2019 – 2.5 day in-person meeting

- Summer 2019 – CGSB public comment

4. Industry and Public Consultation (November 2018 to Summer 2019)

The industry will be invited to comment on the proposed changes and to ensure that their wording is clear and accurate. In summer 2019 the CGSB will launch a public consultation on all of the proposed changes.

5. Publication (November 2020)

After proofreading again and again in both official languages, the new COS will then be reviewed and accredited by the Standards Council of Canada and the new and improved Canadian Organic Standard will be published.

Want your opinion to be heard?

If you want to have input into the changes, don't wait. Contact your provincial or regional organic organization, organic commodity organization or another group with a member on the CGSB Committee on Organic Agriculture.

And, says Hugh Martin, "Stay tuned for comments!" Over the next few months, articles like this will address the key and controversial proposals.

"The challenge of the whole process," he says, "is how to stand up to the rigours of organic principles while keeping the standards practical for farmers so they can make a living."

"We do our best," says Hugh.

Meet Hugh Martin

Hugh Martin grew up on a mixed farm (still operating) with field crops, livestock and vegetables in Ontario's Essex County, Canada's most southern county. After acquiring BSc. and MSc. degrees in agriculture at the University of Guelph, he worked, briefly, as a pesticide and seed salesperson. For the next 34 years, he worked with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) as a field crop specialist, weed specialist and organic crop program lead. He has worked with organic certification and standards development since the late 1980s.

Hugh says that his "key interest in organic food and farming has been to help people buy the food they want. If xx% of the population want to buy organic, we should help them to get the product they want and help Canadian farmers and others in the food chain to produce it for them."