

DEVELOPMENT OF A CERTIFICATION MODEL FOR SMALL SCALE ORGANIC FARMERS



Submitted by

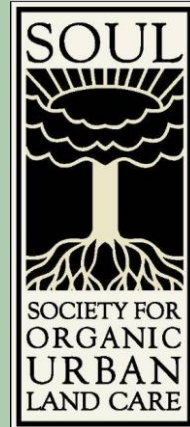


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project set out to explore whether education-based organic accreditation of small farmers could be a viable alternative to inspection-based organic product certification in situations where farmers are unable to certify to the Canadian Organic Standard due to land tenure requirements, or where such certification is not economically feasible and has led to a plethora of unverifiable quasi organic claims, diminishing the value of the organic brand.

The first step of this project saw the development of an organic farmer accreditation model and associated professional code of conduct (the addition of a Food Production section to the Organic Land Care Standard).

The Organic Land Care Standard

The revised standard addresses unique challenges such as:

- food production in potentially toxic environments
- the use of manure in highly populated areas
- the potential nuisance aspects of urban agriculture such as smells, noises and rodents

Model Organic Farmer Accreditation

The proposed accreditation is a 3-step process:

- A 30 hour accreditation course focusing on underlying scientific concepts and ecological principles of organic practice, the connection between soil, plant, animal and human health in a farming context, and how all this relates to the Canada Organic Standards. The objective of the course is to communicate a holistic land management decision making framework. Although presented in the context of food production, it will not be a production course, and does not provide all the knowledge required to be a successful organic farmer. Rather it will be a perfect complement to structured farm-based apprenticeship programs teaching hands-on production skills. A segment on recordkeeping for intensive small-scale producers will also be included. The projected cost of the course is \$695.00
- A 3-hour accreditation examination. The exam can be completed online from the participant's own computer (some conditions apply), or as a paper exam. Both require qualified proctors. The projected cost of the exam fee is \$100.00, with additional proctor charges of \$50.00 – \$80.00
- Application for accreditation, and yearly renewal. The projected accreditation fee and yearly renewal fee is \$100.00, including one-year membership in the Society for Organic Urban Land Care (SOUL)

In the proposed model Accredited Organic Farmers are not restricted to organic practices. However they must sign an affidavit that food sold in conjunction with the promotion of this accreditation has been produced according to the SOUL Organic Land Care Standard.

Further, this accreditation does not entitle Accredited Organic Farmers to promote their products as “organic” or “certified organic”. However, nothing prevents Accredited Organic Farmers to also seek certification for their products to the Canadian Organic Standards.

This model and revised standard was then communicated to a large audience across Canada with a request for feedback. Comments were categorized as relating to

- the Organic Land Care Standard
- the proposed program
- expressions of interest in being involved
- the educational component
- the promotion of the program

All comments were reviewed and the Organic Land Care Standard and accreditation model were adjusted accordingly.

Key Findings

- There is a need for accessible education in organic principles and standards for new farmers
- There is a vibrant and growing urban farmer movement in many major Canadian cities
- There is interest in education based credentials for farmers, particularly for those without land tenure sufficient to meet the Canadian Organic Standard
- Most of the urban farmers interviewed seem committed to organic ideals and would like to be counted as part of the organic community
- The new organic farming generation is more likely to work in service situations than on their own land, requiring different regulatory support
- Interest was Canada-wide.

Based on what we heard and saw, we believe the possible benefits of developing professional credentials for a new generation of farmers would be to:

- ✓ help unify and strengthen the organic community
- ✓ reduce the number of unverifiable and misleading production claims
- ✓ increase consumer awareness of the environmental benefits of organic farming practices
- ✓ give municipalities a regulatory framework they can incorporate into their food policy decisions
- ✓ facilitate Accredited Organic Farmers to seek product certification once they become more established, as they will be well versed in the standards
- ✓ raise the knowledge level of new and small organic farmers, increasing their chance of success.

Next Step

The next step is to develop a pilot project:

1. Identify potential project partners (governments, NGOs, certification bodies and educational partners)
2. Secure funding
3. Draft course curriculum and educational materials
4. Identify equivalent courses
5. Develop accreditation exam
6. Create promotional plan and materials
7. Run pilot projects based in the Vancouver Lower Mainland and Victoria.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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All citizens and participants in public meetings provided invaluable input and feedback.

All images used in this report are the property of the authors.

Funding Support

Funding for this project has been provided by the Organic Sector Development Program (OSDP), a \$900,000 fund for the development of the BC organic sector. Funding for the OSDP comes from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Canadian Agricultural Adaptation Program (CAAP), which is delivered by the Investment Agriculture Foundation in British Columbia.



Agriculture and
Agri-Food Canada

Agriculture et
Agroalimentaire Canada



INTRODUCTION

In July 2013 the Society for Organic Urban Land Care (SOUL), in partnership with Island Organic Producers Association (IOPA) and Similkameen Okanagan Organic Producers Association (SOOPA), received funding from the Certified Organic Associations of BC (COABC) Organic Sector Development Program to develop a model education-based organic farmer accreditation process parallel to SOUL's accreditation for organic land care practitioners. The impetus came from two places. The 2012 COABC

Small Scale Certification Research Project identified education-based farmer accreditation as a potentially viable alternative approach to inspection-based product certification. Simultaneously SOUL was completing a comprehensive review of the Organic Land Care Standard, which revealed an opportunity to extend its professional certification model to farmers.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The three organizations that undertook this project:

Society for Organic Urban Land Care (SOUL)

SOUL was formed in response to the growing need for ecologically responsible land care practices. SOUL's mission is to cultivate knowledge of organic land care and support its practice. It promotes and supports organic practices in its communities through education, accreditation and certification of Organic Land Care Practitioners, and the publication of the Organic Land Care Standard. In partnership with Oregon Tilth Certified Organic (OTCO) and the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) SOUL has developed unified principal aims of organic land care. The Organic Land Care Standard has been referenced and/or used by a number of organizations for standards and manuals.

SOUL has approximately 400 members Canada-wide, although most reside in the Lower Mainland and on Vancouver Island.

The Islands Organic Producers Association (IOPA)

IOPA is a COABC regionally accredited certification body. It is a non-profit association of 50 organic growers and producers on southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands.

The Similkameen Okanagan Organic Producers Association (SOOPA)

SOOPA is a COABC regionally accredited certification body. It is a non-profit association of 31 organic growers and producers mainly located in the southern interior of the province.

RATIONALIZATION FOR PROJECT

The recent exponential growth of the small scale farming community has created a need for novel solutions to providing certification support to organic farmers, particularly those in urban settings. Many are new to farming and do not have an understanding of organic principles and standards. Additionally, they often do not have long-term tenancy sufficient to meet land transition requirements, and thus their products do not qualify to become certified to the Canadian Organic Standards (COS). This has meant these farmers are not part of the certified organic community, nor is there any assurance that their practices comply with organic principles, while they are selling their products in the same marketplace as certified organic farms.

There is also a strong belief that urban organic farmers need to take responsibility for some additional issues beyond those embedded in the Canadian Organic Standards. For example, possible high levels of lead or other background pollutants along with activities that impact neighbourhoods (e.g. noise, congestion, smells) are urban issues that need to be addressed.

Development of an education-based practitioner certification prototype for organic farmers would provide organic community for those currently disenfranchised. It could also serve as a stepping stone towards full product certification, while providing practitioner credentials especially in situations where it is not possible to secure certification to the Canadian Organic Standards. It would also address the urban issues not covered by the COS.

The proposal is analogous to expanding a tent. Farmers holding product certification are standing within a tent, versus those on the outside who don't. Essentially the tent is being made wider so everyone will fit under the same tent.

METHODOLOGY

The first step, in collaboration with project partners and other stakeholders, was the revision of the Organic Land Care Standard (OLC) so it could support production of food for human consumption.

The second step was the development of the education-based practitioner accreditation model. SOUL does not plan to deliver the educational aspect of the program but would oversee the accreditation process.

Lastly, feedback was solicited on the standard and program model, via various means of communication including:

- Listserv messaging on Certified Organic Associations of BC, BC Food System Network, CanReg (Organic Federation of Canada), Vancouver Urban Farmers Society, Gaia College and SOUL.
- BC Association of Farmers' Markets and Vancouver Farmers Markets association newsletters.
- Emailing SOUL membership and participants in the previous standard review.
- Press release sent to The Canadian Organic Grower, the Small Farm Journal, and Western Producer.
- Article in BC Organic Grower
- Interview with Jordan Marr, Nov 21.

The project outline, concept and standard were workshopped at:

- BC Food system Network 2013 Gathering, July 5-7.
- Kwantlen Richmond Farm School, Aug 22.
- UBC Farm, Oct 17.
- Vancouver Urban Farming Society Workshop Event, Nov 17.

PROJECT DELIVERABLES

The two key deliverables identified in the project proposal were a revised Organic Land Care Standard and a program model.

The revised Organic Land Care Standard

The new draft Sixth Edition of the Organic Land Care standard includes an in depth food production section with an emphasis on specific criteria relevant to urban settings. The balance of the standard was reviewed and revised to support the new concepts. Major challenges specific to urban food production were

- Growing food in a potentially toxic environment
- The use of manure in highly populated areas
- Alleviating potential nuisance aspects of urban agriculture such as smells, noises and attracting rodents

A copy of the draft Sixth Edition of the Organic Land Care Standard is attached as Appendix 2.

The proposed Organic Farmer Accreditation program

In 2013 SOUL adopted a 2-tiered certification process for its Organic Land Care Professionals:

1. Accreditation – granted after the completion of a 1-week (30 hours) course on the fundamentals of organic land care, and passing an exam.
2. Certification – granted after additional comprehensive education and 2 years experience. There is also a requirement for 6 continuing education hours / year.

The new organic farmer accreditation program will mirror the organic land care accreditation, but with a focus on food production. Successful individuals would be identified as Accredited Organic Farmers. The second certification tier could be developed if demand exists.

The Course

The accreditation course will deal with the underlying scientific concepts and ecological principles of organic practice, the connection between soil, plant, animal and human health in a farming context, and how all this relates to the Canada Organic Standards. The objective of the course is to communicate a holistic land management decision making framework.

Although presented in the context of food production, it will not be a production course, and does not provide all the knowledge required to be a successful organic farmer. Rather it will be a perfect complement to structured farm-based apprenticeship programs teaching hands-on production skills.

The Exam

The exam will be similar to the current organic land care accreditation exam, but the questions will be cast in a farming context. The exam has 150 questions, and is completed within 3 hours. It can be taken online or as a paper-based exam.

The Certificate

A Certificate of Accreditation will be issued to those who pass both the course and the exam, stating: “This farmer has completed intensive training and passed an exam to demonstrate an understanding of the principles and practices of organic agriculture.” Since it is anticipated that farmers will be displaying the certificate in public, it will also provide the following definition of organic agriculture: “Organic agriculture is an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain, or enhance ecological harmony. The primary goal of organic agriculture is to optimize the health and productivity of interdependent communities of soil life, plants, animals and people.”

Accreditation is valid for one year, and must be renewed annually.

The Costs

Cost is often cited as a deterrent to product certification. This program has some significant up-front costs in the educational component, but the yearly maintenance cost is considerably lower.

- Course - \$695.00
- Exam - \$100.00
- Proctor - \$50.00 to \$80.00
- Accreditation Fee - \$100.00
- Yearly Renewal - \$100.00

Dual Practice

Accredited Organic Farmers are not restricted to organic practices, since farmers working as employees may not have the power to make those decisions. However they must sign an affidavit that food sold in conjunction with the promotion of this accreditation has been produced according to the SOUL Organic Land Care Standard.

A copy of the draft Organic Farmer Affidavit is attached as Appendix 1.

Product Certification

This accreditation does not entitle organic farmers to promote their products “organic” or “certified

organic or bear the SOUL logo, as this is not a product certification scheme. However, nothing prevents accredited organic farmers to also seek certification for their products to the Canadian Organic Standards.

DISCUSSION

Based on the workshops and one-on-one interactions the key discussion points can be divided into five groups:

- Those relevant to the Organic Land Care Standard,
- Those relevant to the proposed program, such as possible consumer confusion, allowable labeling, program oversight, professional development, and soil testing,
- Those expressing interest in being involved in the program,
- Those relevant to the educational component, and
- Those relevant to the promotion of the program.

Comments relevant to the Organic Land Care Standard

A wide assortment of people from across the country participated in the development of the revised Organic Land Care Standard. Farmers, food activist, scientists, researchers, community planners, landscapers and educators supplied feedback on the modified OLC. Many challenged the status quo as well as identified gaps. Members of the advisory committee completed an intensive review of the standard, considering all comments received. The OLC is available free of charge at the SOUL website: <http://www.organiclandcare.org/>

Comments relevant to the proposed program

The most common objection we encountered to the proposal was that this program might **increase confusion in the marketplace**. Are we now adding yet another label to the “uncertified organic”, “beyond organic”, “local” and “unsprayed” plethora of unverifiable and misleading claims that already exist? The goal, of course, is to do away with those claims by giving producers who cannot satisfy the land tenure requirement of the Canadian Organic Standards and other small producers a viable option to legitimately participate in the organic agriculture community. Essentially we are inviting everyone in under the same tent called Organic Standards. Sure, the tent is wider than before, but at least it is the same tent. Our hope is that education-based organic accreditation will stop the “we vs. they” mentality we are seeing.

Another objection was that **how are customers to know the difference between certified organic products and products grown by an Accredited Organic Farmer?** Because they are dealing with an Accredited Organic Farmer, customers can now rest assured that there is no difference in the way the products are grown, except some may be labeled “organic” or “certified organic” and others may be associated with an Accreditation certificate. Our expectation is that Accredited Organic Farmers would talk about their credentials and would explain why they don’t qualify for product certification; or why they decided not to secure organic certification. It would require some customer education, but we are talking about small producers who are most likely selling directly to the customers, rather than through wholesale channels. There is nothing stopping larger producers from taking the program, but there are fewer options where such marketing could be of benefit. And this accreditation will actually strengthen the organic label by doing away with unverifiable claims, and directly educating consumers in the ecological benefits of organic agriculture.

The third type of objection is around **policing: how can we ensure that accredited organic farmers are actually doing what they are supposed to?** Under the organic farmer accreditation program farmers are required to sign an affidavit guaranteeing that any food sold in conjunction with the promotion of the accreditation has been produced according to the latest edition of the SOUL Organic Land Care Standard. However, they are not subject to regular inspections, rather enforcement is complaint-based. Farmers desiring the benefits of inspection will need to pursue organic product certification. This is where we see the greatest difference between inspection-based product certification and education-based professional accreditation / certification. Each is a third party verification process, but professional credentials are granted to individuals based on knowledge and experience. What we have learned over the last decade of certifying land care professionals is that education is extremely powerful: we cannot un-see something once we have seen it. Again and again land care professionals have told us that their education has been life-changing, paradigm-shifting, and how grateful they are for the tools to begin doing things differently. They already knew they should, they just didn’t know how. We are certain the same will be true for organic farmers. We are more concerned with infractions due to ignorance. And so we believe that a really important part of the program will be community building, finding ways for all organic farmers to form supportive networks and continue sharing their knowledge and learning from each other. Peer pressure is a very powerful too, and so in some way this is a step back to the good old days where farmers inspected each other. None of us have “arrived”, there is always something new to learn, and we need to foster opportunities for lifelong learning.

Some people thought that **professional development / continuing education should be a requirement of the accreditation** program. Professional development is indeed a requirement of most professional certification programs, however the proposed accreditation is only the first step towards potential full certification. In the organic land care sector, Certified Organic Land Care Professionals must – in addition to fulfilling all requirements for accreditation – prove 2 years of experience and extensive additional education. Certification renewal requires 6 hours of continuing education per year. At this time we do not see the need for such credentials in the organic farming sector, where product certification is infinitely more useful. Consequently organic farmer accreditation would more likely serve as an optional stepping stone towards organic product certification. In other words, the two programs (organic land care and organic farmer accreditation) run parallel up to the accreditation stage, and beyond that farmers wishing to attain certified status have the option to seek product certification, or become Certified Organic Land Care Professionals.

Comments from those interested in being involved

Many comments received were from organizations interested in being involved in delivery or in engaging their members, as they believe the organic farmer credentials would service a need in their region.

- Laura Hannant of the Kootenay Farm School Project expressed interest in promoting and delivering the program.
- Jillian Merrick, the Program Coordinator for Fraser Fort George Community Futures, Beyond the Market: Growing the North program expressed interest in partnering to offer online courses for the accreditation in that region.
- Both Becky Lipton, the Executive Director of Organic Alberta and Joyce Kelly of the PEI Certified Organic Producers Cooperative, and ACORN's representative on the Organic Federation of Canada board, would like to be kept abreast of what evolves as both thought the program may be of benefit in their provinces.
- Instructors, program coordinators and students from both UBC Farm in Vancouver and Kwantlen Farm in Richmond expressed interest in participating.
- The Vancouver Urban Farming Society asked what they could do to facilitate this coming into reality.
- Colin Lundy, The Growing Up Organic Farmer Outreach Coordinator, of the Canadian Organic Growers – Ottawa St. Lawrence Outaouais Chapter could would like to use Organic Farmer Accreditation as a filter for selecting project candidates.

Comments relevant to the educational component

Again and again farmers expressed the desire for comprehensive education. They wondered how the accreditation course could possibly teach all there is know about farming.

The objective of the accreditation course is to communicate a holistic land management decision making framework. The course will deal with the underlying scientific concepts and ecological principles of organic practice, the connection between soil, plant, animal and human health in a farming context, and how all this relates to the Canada Organic Standards and the Organic Land Care Standard.

Although presented in the context of food production, it will not be a production course, and does not provide all the knowledge required to be a successful organic farmer. Rather it will be a perfect complement to structured farm-based apprenticeship programs teaching hands-on production skills.

Comments relevant to the promotion of the program

Many felt extensive communication was imperative to assure any level of success for this program, as consumers and farmers are both going to need to understand what organic farmer credentials convey and mean.

In assessing the potential complexity of the promotional efforts we need to consider that these farmers are already in direct communication with their customers, and have the perfect opportunity to promote their new credentials directly to their target audience as part of their overall marketing plan.

Definitely this will require more thought, and will be addressed in the next stage of program development.

KEY LEARNINGS

- There is a need for accessible education in organic principles and standards for new farmers
- There is a vibrant and growing urban farmer movement in many major Canadian cities
- There is interest in education based credentials for farmers, particularly for those without land tenure sufficient to meet the Canadian Organic Standard
- Most of the urban farmers interviewed seem committed to organic ideals and would like to be counted as part of the organic community
- The new organic farming generation is more likely to work in service situations than on their own land, requiring different regulatory support
- Interest was Canada-wide.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Based on what we heard and saw, we believe the possible benefits of developing professional credentials for a new generation of farmers would be to:

- ✓ help unify and strengthen the organic community
- ✓ reduce the number of unverifiable and misleading production claims
- ✓ increase consumer awareness of the environmental benefits of organic farming practices
- ✓ give municipalities a regulatory framework they can incorporate into their food policy decisions
- ✓ facilitate Accredited Organic Farmers to seek product certification once they become more established, as they will be well versed in the standards

- ✓ raise the knowledge level of new and small organic farmers, increasing their chance of success
- ✓ increase the size of the organic farming community.

NEXT STEPS

The next step is to develop a pilot project:

8. Identify potential project partners (governments, NGOs, certification bodies and educational partners)
9. Secure funding
10. Draft course curriculum and educational materials
11. Identify equivalent courses
12. Develop accreditation exam
13. Create promotional plan and materials
14. Run pilot projects based in the Vancouver Lower Mainland and Victoria

APPENDICES

1. Draft Accredited Organic Farmer Affidavit
2. Draft Sixth Edition of the Organic Land Care Standard



Affidavit

I, the undersigned agree to the following:

1. I guarantee that, when I promote this accreditation in conjunction with selling food, it has been produced according to the latest edition of the SOUL Organic Land Care Standard.
2. My certification may be revoked if I breach this agreement.

Signed:

Witnessed:

Name:

Name:

Address:

Address:

Date:

Date:
