

CERTIBIONET: A network for organic quality

CERTIBIONET is an international association of seven organic certification bodies, founded in May 2003 by Laura Montenegro of Argencert (Argentina), Blaise Hommelen and Philippe Ghesquière, Certisys (Belgium) and Fernando Serrador, Certiplanet (Portugal). Certibionet is member of The Sustainable Organic Agriculture Action Network (SOAAN) which is *a think tank that positions Organic Agriculture and its related supply chains as a holistic, sustainable approach to the production of food and fiber for all of human society.*

CERTIBIONET plays an essential role in providing mutual assistance, the communication of data and services and as a forum for exchanging ideas and know-how. One of its main objectives is to improve control systems and the certification of organic products, and to contribute to the development and harmonisation of these control systems.

To find out more about CERTIBIONET, TOS interviewed Laura Montenegro, director of Argencert and president of this organization. “We started in 2003, Blaise, Philippe, Fernando and I; in 2016, we have seven members”, commented Laura.

TOS: One of the roles of CERTIBIONET, as announced on its website, is mutual assistance, the communication of data and services and as a forum for exchanging ideas and know-how. How does this work in practice?

LM: Many times we share the interpretation of rules or requirements, anticipating the fact that the rules will be changed as for animal production, or new rules will be added such as for salt, cosmetics and aquaculture. Sometimes, we send a member for training in eg, the NOP or anti-fraud initiatives and then, we share documents and experiences. Some members have more experience of the EU and others of third countries or with the NOP or other regulations like those of Japan, so we help each other with the know-how of these particular cases.

TOS: The code of ethics of CERTIBIONET regarding organic agriculture has three main objectives. One of them is that the quality of products is not only related to organic certification but also to their nutritional, bacteriological, gustatory and commercial quality. How this principle applied by CERTIBIONET members? Is this principle missed in the EU organic regulation?

LM: Quality is a specification of organic farming for which we certify, but we also advocate other aspects from a holistic point of view. We consider regulations like the EU’s, taking the basic bottom line and then adding further values.

This means that all other issues that are not specifically covered by organic standards, even if they are



Laura Montenegro, president of CERTIBIONET.

not linked directly with certification decisions, are always seen as a principle objective in keeping everyone informed. It also enables discussion with all kind of institutions and organisations, to clarify the criteria for defining the best quality of organic products. These concepts are not normally part of standards or regulations.

TOS: Other objectives of CERTIBIONET’s code of ethics advocate the social progress of producers and processors and the development of fair trade relations. Is this principle included in the organic standard applied by CERTIBIONET? Are these principles also missed in the EU regulation?

LM: We advocate social-minded organic farming, respecting all those in the organic network. This is characterised by quality, experience and recognition benefiting the organic sector as well as society in general. Together, the organisations

CERTIBIONET is in line with IFOAM regarding the four principles of the organic farming.

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FURTHER EQUIVALENCE ARRANGEMENTS BETWEEN THE EU AND CANADA

There is satisfaction in Canada's organic sector due to the expansion decided by the EU Regulatory Committee on Organic Production on 2 March 2016, to include products imported to Canada from other countries into the agreement. It is common that under the scope of categories accepted for approved third countries, only the products produced in the third country are accepted. This was the case with Canada, since the agreement signed in 2011, but now, after constant negotiations, this limitation has been removed. The expansion of the EU-Canada Organic Equivalency Arrangement includes:

- The recognition of processed products for use as both food and feed with organic ingredients imported from third countries and that are certified in accordance with Canada's legislation on organic products;
- Recognition of EU and Canadian organic wine standards.

The amendment into the Canada/EU agreement has been stated in the Regulation EU 2016/459 amending the Regulation EC 1235/2008 for imports and has been published in the Official Journal of the European Union on 31st of March 2016. ■



Members of CERTIBIONET.

themselves, their clients and their employees adhere to a deontological Code of Ethics.

Its vision is a continuous improvement of member services related to the development of organic farming from the point of view of certification. Those concepts are also not normally part of standards or regulations. We are also in line with IFOAM regarding the four principles of the organic farming.

TOS: CERTIBIONET carries out internal audits between its members; what are the criteria for such audits? Is it a kind of confirmation of accreditation for members?

LM: Based on ISO 19011 and quality systems of the members, this type of collaboration is offered without any obligation. One member sends an auditor to another member and where it is possible to reciprocate, the second sends somebody to the first. It is a way of giving more transparency to internal audits and at the same time, taking advantage of the

expertise of other members. We do not have types of accreditation; it is more like a peer review.

TOS: Is there any action or activity by CERTIBIONET towards the Organic 3.0 launched by IFOAM at the last Biofach fair?

LM: CERTIBIONET has participated in the development of the Best Practice Guidelines for Agriculture and Value Chains of SOAAN, and we are concerned about organic agriculture of the future. At the same time as certification bodies, we do not want to create more paperwork for the producer at each stage of the organic certification process.

TOS: How does CERTIBIONET facilitate equivalence between the standards applied in the different regions of its partners?

LM: With the exchange of training and using our know-how. For example, several years ago, to import beef to Belgium, ARGENCERT

CERTIBIONET was involved in the development of ITF tools for equivalency. ■



received the help of CERTISYS to fulfil and obtain government authorisation. At the time of application for equivalence to the EU we exchanged application knowledge and at the same time, CERTIBIONET was involved in the development of ITF tools for equivalency, now mentioned in the EU regulation and others.

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A NEW IMPLEMENTING REGULATION HAS BEEN PUBLISHED.

Commission implementing regulation (EU) 2016/459 of 18 March 2016 amending Regulation (EC) No 1235/2008 laying down detailed rules for the implementation of Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 as regards the arrangements for imports of organic products from third countries was published on 1 April 2016.

The New Regulation can be found at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016R0459&from=EN>. ■

TOS: Can CERTIBIONET's members offer specific certification programmes to other CERTIBIONET members? If so, how is this organised?

LM: Yes we do. For example, for the Brazilian standard, ECOSOCIAL, or the NOP (USA) we participate in the training offered for these programmes or we organise this training ourselves. We also act as inspectors of other members who are properly accredited certifiers for that programme. Of course, we also receive appropriate supervision of such programmes.

TOS: How does CERTIBIONET organise the day-to-day communication between members? Is there a secretariat? Are any staff dedicated to administrative, technical and/or coordination issues? How are conflicts or differences sorted out between members? Who decides what to do with regard to the acceptance (and if necessary, the expulsion) of a member?

LM: Communication is normally via our website - activity reports are published there, during the general assemblies that take place at BioFach in Nuremberg every year - and/or by mail or Skype. In addition, we organise Board meetings to consider the application of new members and we check that each member is complying with the code of ethics. If there is any conflict, it would be treated according our Statutes and Procedures guide. We have a secretariat but we try to keep it as less structured as possible; normally we



use our own sources - for example, CERTISYS personnel organise the booth at BioFach.

TOS: Is CERTIBIONET open to other certification bodies that would like to join? If so, what do those interested have to do?

LM: There is one application procedure available on the website. One important issue is that we would like to help local certification bodies; those that are present in their own countries, and that are part of the root of the organic movement in their country of origin. ■

We would like to thank Laura Montenegro, president of CERTIBIONET, for providing the information to TOS.

*Jesus Concepción-Cabrera
news@organicstandard.com*

CERTIBIONET act as inspectors of other members who are properly accredited certifiers. ■