



## 2018 Standard Updates for Organic Producers

Vermont Organic Farmers, LLC (VOF)

Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT)

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VOF values the voices of our certified producers and we work hard to make sure that our organization is farmer-driven. This past year, our VOF Review Committee, comprised of six certified organic producers, created policies based on thoughtful interpretations of the USDA National Rule. These interim policies were then voted on at our Annual Meeting on January 25<sup>th</sup> at the Richmond Free Library in Richmond, VT. We had approximately 40 attendees representing 21 farms and processors. We want to thank those producers who were able to take time from their busy schedules to attend the meeting. It is vitally important that producers send a representative to the meeting to vote on standards interpretations. **If you were not able to attend, please consider sending a spokesperson in the future to represent your business's interests. Meeting minutes are available upon request by calling the VOF office.**

**Note: Approved standards changes are in bold type; old language has a line through it, if appropriate.**

## Standard Changes Approved at the Annual Meeting

### 1) Fall Tapping

#### ***Proposal Passed with Amendments***

##### Background:

VOF received questions in 2017 about whether it is permissible for organic producers to tap maple trees in the fall and if so, how early those taps may be set. Though we do not anticipate this practice to be common, because retapping holes in the same season is a prohibited practice and tapping early in the season may reduce the productivity of the tap hole, we felt the need to add clarity and guidance to the standards to address this question.

##### Relevant Standards:

##### *NOP Standards:*

NOP Section 205.2 defines organic production as, "A production system that is managed in accordance with the Act and regulations in this part to respond to site-specific conditions by integrating cultural, biological and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity."

##### *VOF Maple Guidelines:*

Organic maple sap and syrup production is defined by the following:

- 1) Cultural practices designed to maintain tree health and ensure long-term preservation of the sugarbush as an ecosystem;
- 2) The prohibition of synthetic materials added at various stages of management and production unless allowed on the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances NOP Sections 205.601-602 and 205.605-606.

#### D. Tapping Management

- Spout placement and techniques used to place the spout must not be done in such a way that compromises the health of the tree.
- Retapping a previously tapped tree during the same season (double tapping) or reaming (freshening the tap hole) is not permitted.

- Leaving spouts in trees at the end of the tapping season (60 days after end of sap flow) is not permitted.

*Sugarbush Management Standards and Tapping Guidelines for Forestland in Use Value Appraisal*

All taps shall be removed annually at the end of each sugaring season before full maple leaf out.

Used tubing, mainlines and drop-lines should be removed from the woods, when replaced or when the sugarbush is no longer tapped.

Approved: (new language in bold)

Maple Guidelines Section II. PRODUCTION STANDARDS, D. Tapping Management, Page 7

3) The depth of the tap hole shall be no more than 2.5 inches from the surface of the bark.

4) Retapping a previously tapped tree during the same season (double tapping) or reaming (freshening the tap hole) is not permitted.

5) Leaving spouts in trees at the end of the tapping season (60 days after end of sap flow) is not permitted.

**6) Trees should not have taps in them during the growing season. This is to maximize the ability of the tree to heal tap holes and maximize carbohydrate reserves. Because of this concern, taps shall only be set in the winter months, not before December 1<sup>st</sup>. VOF will accept proposals and may offer exemptions to this guidance on a case-by-case basis.**

## 2) Atmos Use Policy

### **Proposal Passed**

Background:

Organic producers with split operations (those operations that produce both organic and non-organic product) are required by the National Organic Program regulations to establish a management plan to prevent co-mingling and contamination between organic and non-organic products. Maple syrup producers who use conventional defoamer at the end of the sugaring season must be able to prove, through records and receipts, that no co-mingling or contamination has occurred.

Relevant Standards:

§205.201 Organic production and handling system plan.

(a)... An organic production or handling system plan must include:

(5) A description of the management practices and physical barriers established to prevent commingling of organic and nonorganic products on a split operation and to prevent contact of organic production and handling operations and products with prohibited substances; and

§205.272 Commingling and contact with prohibited substance prevention practice standard.

(a) The handler of an organic handling operation must implement measures necessary to prevent the commingling of organic and nonorganic products and protect organic products from contact with prohibited substances.

Approved: (new language in bold)

Maple Guidelines Section II. PRODUCTION STANDARDS, F. Practices Required for Split Operations, Pages 9 & 10

#### **F. Practices Required for Split Operations**

**Certified organic maple and other tree syrup producers who chose to switch to a conventional defoamer (one not approved for use in organic production) at the end of the season must follow the following record keeping protocols:**

- **Notify the VOF office of the date that production will switch to conventional.**
- **The production records (boiling and canning logs) must clearly indicate the dates of production and lot numbers of the wholesale or retail containers that contain the syrup produced with conventional defoamer.**
- **Maintain purchase receipts verifying the dates and amounts purchased for both conventional defoamer and defoamer approved for use in organic production.**
- **Maintain usage records for amounts of both conventional defoamer and defoamer approved for use in organic production.**
- **Wholesale containers of syrup must have a clear means of visually distinguishing the contents as whether certified organic or non-organic.**
- **Retail containers of non-organic syrup must not make an organic claim or otherwise be represented as organic, including on websites.**
- **Producers selling retail products must clearly indicate that both organic and non-organic maple syrup are sold.**
- **Sales records must be maintained to clearly and accurately distinguish wholesale and retail sales of both non-organic and certified organic syrup.**
- **All records must be maintained on-site for at least five years and be made available to the on-site inspector or to the VOF office upon request.**
- **Producers should anticipate their inspector conducting a full mass balance audit of their prior year's production and sales records in addition to an audit of their current year-to-date production and sales records for both organic and conventional production.**

**Due to the unique nature of maple syrup production where it is difficult to determine the amount of sap for each production run, VOF will not certify producers that are switching back and forth between conventional defoamer and defoamer approved for use in organic production as we feel it is impossible to verify the integrity of the organic product. Therefore, once conventional defoamer is used, a producer cannot switch back to organic production until the next season.**

### **3) Typical Grazing Season Length in Vermont**

#### ***Proposal Passed***

Background:

The NOP asked all certifiers how they determine the length of the grazing seasons in the areas they certify. VOF was also asked if 120 days of grazing is sufficient in Vermont. The Review Committee discussed this issued and determined a "typical" grazing season in VT that VOF will use as a benchmark.

Relevant Standards:

§205.2 Terms defined.

Grazing season.

The period of time when pasture is available for grazing, due to natural precipitation or irrigation. Grazing season dates may vary because of mid-summer heat/humidity, significant precipitation events, floods, hurricanes, droughts or winter weather events. Grazing season may be extended by the grazing of residual forage as agreed in the operation's organic system plan. Due to weather, season, or climate, the grazing season may or may not be continuous. **Grazing season may range from 120 days to 365 days, but not less than 120 days per year.**

§205.240 Pasture practice standard.

(c) A pasture plan must be included in the producer's organic system plan, and be updated annually in accordance with §205.406(a). The producer may resubmit the previous year's pasture plan when no change has occurred in the plan. The pasture plan may consist of a pasture/rangeland plan developed in cooperation with a Federal, State, or local conservation office: Provided, that, the submitted plan addresses all of the requirements of §205.240(c)(1) through (8). When a change to an approved pasture plan is contemplated, which may affect the operation's compliance with the Act or the regulations in this part, the producer shall seek the certifying agent's agreement on the change prior to implementation. The pasture plan shall include a description of the:

**(3) Grazing season for the livestock operation's regional location.**

§205.237 Livestock feed.

(c) During the grazing season, producers shall:

(1) Provide not more than an average of 70 percent of a ruminant's dry matter demand from dry matter fed (dry matter fed does not include dry matter grazed from residual forage or vegetation rooted in pasture). This shall be calculated as an average over the entire grazing season for each type and class of animal. **Ruminant animals must be grazed throughout the entire grazing season for the geographical region, which shall be not less than 120 days per calendar year.** Due to weather, season, and/or climate, the grazing season may or may not be continuous.

Approved: (new language in bold)

Ill Organic Livestock Production, D. Pasture Requirements, Page 57

#### D. Pasture Requirements

Pastures must be managed as a crop in a way that ensures pasture of sufficient quality and quantity is available to graze throughout the season. The producer will complete a pasture plan as part of their annual certification application. The plan will include detailed information on grazing system design and management, such as stocking rates, periods of occupation for paddocks, pasture grass heights before and after grazing, and regrowth/rest periods before re-grazing a given area. Producer must include how pastures are managed to minimize the spread of disease and parasites and also prevent erosion or water quality problems. In addition, access to streams and rivers must be restricted or managed in order to prevent these problems. Fenced riparian buffer zones are recommended along waterways to stabilize banks, reduce runoff and erosion and provide wildlife habitat.

**The climate in Vermont does not permit grazing for 12 months. Debate exists over the period which can be considered grazing season months in Vermont and the determination depends on specific situations, including available forage types and management strategies. In order to calculate the average length of the grazing season it is logical to eliminate the months during**

which grazing does not occur. The probability of occurrences of inclement weather conditions is high in December, January, February, and March; these months are also characterized by average monthly temperatures too low to support plant growth. Grazing during this 4-month period would not be dependable. The active growing season for perennial plants is from about mid-April to mid-October. The more typical/dependable grazing season in Vermont is from about mid May to mid-October. Therefore, a typical/dependable grazing season in Vermont is at least 150 days.

## Other items voted on by the membership

- 1) **Bylaw Changes (Proposal Passed)**
- 2) **2018 Proposed Budget (Proposal Passed)**
- 3) **VOF Review Committee & EC Committee Members (Proposal Passed)**

## Standard Updates

### 1) **Organic Grass-Fed Standards**

There is a need to establish a certification program for organic and grass-fed producers in the state. Currently a number of organic dairy operations are going outside of the state to obtain organic grass-fed certification for their milk market. In consultation with NOFA-NY, PCO and Organic Valley, VOF has created a grass-fed certification program to be implemented in 2018, for all producers wishing to seek grass-fed certification alongside their organic certification. VOF's goal is to achieve reciprocity with PCO and NOFA-NY's grass-fed standards and to have our standards accepted by Organic Valley. Therefore, our grass-fed standards cannot deviate in any significant way from the standards that these organizations currently use. We will present our standards at the annual meeting and will look for feedback from producers. We will also be discussing whether VOF should develop a grass fed logo for producer use.

### 2) **Application Deadlines**

VOF received a noncompliance from the NOP for failing to issue noncompliances in a timely manner to certified producers who do not submit annual applications and fees by the stated due date. As a response to this issue, VOF will make applications available in December (for maple producers), in January (for crop and livestock producers) and in April (for processors). We will send reminder notifications and make phone calls BEFORE the application due date in an effort to collect as many applications and fees by the deadline as possible.

Please note: VOF is required to issue noncompliances to producers with late applications or late fees approximately 2 weeks after the application due dates.

All of your information from last year will be pre-filled into this current year's application. You must log into your online community and review the information that was pre-filled. You will make updates to the information where applicable and re-submit the updated application electronically. Please do not hesitate to contact our office if you need assistance with the application process or if you would like to request a paper application update form.

### 3) **Maple Production Required Records**

In 2018, organic maple producers will be asked to keep detailed records of tapping dates. These will include, but are not limited to, the date you first tap and the date you pull taps. You will also be required to keep record of how many taps were put out in the current season and you will be required to keep all receipts for taps purchased. This will assist VOF with preventing fraud in the organic maple industry and allow inspectors to conduct a complete mass balance or traceability audit. Please have this information available for your inspector.

#### **4) Milk House Sanitizers**

Historically, it has been VOF's policy to allow the use of all milkhouse cleaning products, regardless of whether a clean water rinse followed the sanitizer or cleanser use. . However, the NOP has clarified that all sanitizers must undergo a material review if not followed by a clean water rinse. This means that all active and inert ingredients must be reviewed for compliance with organic regulations. We are currently developing a review policy for sanitizers to build both "Approved" and "Prohibited" product lists. In order to help producers avoid using sanitizers that may eventually be prohibited, we have included a list of approved generic materials as well as approved brand name products in our 2018 Organic Livestock Health Care List. Please note: sanitizers with artificial coloring are likely to be prohibited and producers should begin to transition away from these products.

#### **5) Treated Wood in Maple Production**

The following language will be added to the Maple Guidelines. Section II. PRODUCTION STANDARDS, E. Production Equipment, Methods, and Syrup Storage, Page 8

Sap Collection and Storage Equipment:

Prohibited:

- Producers shall not use lumber treated with arsenate or other prohibited substances in places that will come in direct contact with soil or livestock. The National Organic Program is currently finalizing their interpretation of the use of treated lumber in organic production. Until their draft guidance is finalized, VOF will allow the following uses of treated lumber: Treated lumber cannot come into contact with tapped trees or sap but can be used to support infrastructure (holding up mainlines/tubing), or other instances that are considered "isolated from production (sheds to house vacuum pumps/sap tanks. etc.)."