

Update on EU organic regulations

After a lengthy formulation process, last month MEPs voted in favor of all the proposed amendments to EU organic regulations. Martin Hausling MEP will now begin the process of triologue negotiations with the European Commission and Council of Ministers to agree on a package of amendments that are acceptable to all three groups. The timescale for this is unconfirmed, but this is the final stage of the negotiations.

Many of the original proposals would have stifled any growth in the organic sector, acting as a disincentive for those planning to convert to organic farming and forcing some producers to cease organic production. Therefore, the NFU has pushed hard push for measures that will enable UK producers to make full use of the opportunity organic farming provides and will continue to lobby throughout this process, to ensure that the amendments are not to the detriment of UK producers.

Certain proposed amendments will provide a boost for producers. These include:

Retroactive conversion periods – for pasture and open air areas used by poultry and pigs, certification bodies can reduce conversion to 1 year or 6 months in certain cases where adequate evidence is available to show that unauthorized substances haven't been applied.

Derogation for organic seed – despite earlier proposals, derogation for the use of non-organic seed where organic is unavailable, remains. The criteria for this are reiterated and as well as lack of availability, include shocks to supply such as extreme weather or disease.

In-conversion feeds – up to 25% of livestock feed can be from land in-conversion to organic and 100% of feed if it's from on-farm land which is converting to organic.

Mixed holdings – despite earlier proposals, mixed organic-conventional holdings will still be permitted, as long as 'conventional farming activities are clearly differentiated from organic farming activities'.

However there are a number of significant issues with the proposals, in particular:

Organic feed sourcing – at least 60% of herbivore feed and 30% of pig and poultry feed will have to come from within 150km of the farm or be produced on-farm. The NFU would like to see a review of the EU organic feed market undertaken by 2020, to determine the viability of any feed proposals as no consideration has been given as to whether the feed market in each member state could facilitate this. Similarly, the NFU is lobbying for producers to be allowed to source feed from throughout the EU.

Management of mixed farms – mixed holdings are still permitted, but the regulation stipulates various management requirements for the conventional part, and stipulates that the organic and conventional part must be separated into 'clearly distinct production units. It is uncertain how this will be enforced in practice, and the NFU are anxious to ensure that this will not create unnecessary administration or management requirements for producers.

Animal breeds – the appropriateness of ‘organic’ animal breeds will be determined by EU average growth and production rates for each breed which may well limit choice for producers. The NFU is concerned that this is an overly simplistic approach and is adamant that organic producers must have full access to the genetic resources that they need, in order to remain competitive into the future.

Plant breeding – access to hybrid seeds is still permitted, but their use is discouraged in the text. The NFU is anxious that this will not form a stepping stone to their prohibition as hybrid seeds are a fundamental part of many producers’ businesses in all sectors. Again, limiting access to these seeds would mean that many organic businesses are no longer viable.

Wins for the NFU:

Through extensive lobbying at throughout the EU institutions, the NFU have helped ensure the following:

Mixed farms remain permitted – the initial proposal was to abolish them.

Derogation for non-organic seed continues to be allowed where organic seed is not available – the initial proposal was to only allow derogation for trials and seed from in-conversion land.

In the case of inadvertent contamination, NFU members are not pitted against each other in inconclusive legal action – the initial proposal was for the ‘responsible’ operator to pay compensation for any contamination of organic land. However, in many cases it is impossible to reliably determine who is at fault and whilst safeguarding members’ organic certification is fundamental, the NFU cannot sanction anything that would lead to legal action between members.

Non-organic residue thresholds that lead to automatic decertification are scrapped – the initial proposal was for thresholds that would automatically lead to decertification.

A 2020 report into the EU organic sector will specifically look at the availability of organic feed and breeding stock, to inform future regulations – the initial proposal did not specifically mention organic feed.

Greater use of in-conversion feed is allowed (25%) – the initial proposal was to allow 15%.

For further information about the proposals see <http://www.nfuonline.com/sectors/organics/>