

BC Certified Organic Program Consultation: Summary of Stakeholder Input

Table of Contents

Consultation process.....	3
Consultation results	4
Demographics:	4
Question 1: Contact information.....	4
Question 2: Please indicate your age range.....	4
Question 3: Please tell us about your operation.	4
Question 4: Please tell us about yourself (Certified, non-certified).....	5
Main Survey	6
Question 5: intention of becoming certified organic	6
Question 6: Positive or negative impacts on current certified organic operators.....	7
Question 7: Transitional support strategies.....	8
Question 8: Barriers affecting organic operator in becoming certified:.....	9
Question 9: Compliance & enforcement	10
Question 10: Other Comments	10
Next Steps	11
Appendix A: Results Tables	12
Question 3:	12
Question 8:	12

CONSULTATION PROCESS

The Ministry of Agriculture conducted a web based consultation with the organic sector about developing a three pillar approach to strengthen the awareness and reputation of British Columbia's (B.C.) organic foods, locally, across Canada, and internationally. The survey instructions were sent by email to 178 farmers, associations and businesses. Over the 64 day consultation period, which concluded on March 31, 2015, we received 195 completed surveys.

To assist in informing the survey, Ministry of Agriculture developed a backgrounder document to describe the model under consideration. In summary, the proposed model consists of:

- Regulating the use of the term "organic"; so consumers purchasing local products are confident the producers and processors are certified under either the provincial or federal certification program. If the producer or processor is not certified they would not be able to use the term "organic" to describe or market their products;
- Developing transitional strategies that support farmers to become certified through initiatives such as assistance with business strategies, market development programs and a suitable period of transition;
- Developing a compliance and enforcement system; and
- Exploring branding options to market B.C. organic foods.

Requiring organic certification would assure consumers the products they purchase are grown using recognized organic practices, and promote the use of consistent standards of organic production in B.C. Currently, companies with organic products produced, handled, and sold exclusively within B.C., may voluntarily participate in the BC Certified Organic Program, which is administered by the Certified Organic Association of BC (COABC).

The survey was composed of eleven questions to gain an understanding of the organic sector views on the proposed model, which include the identification of:

- Non-certified organic producers that will become certified;
- Potential impacts to the sector;
- Preferred transitional support strategies;
- Barriers to certification;
- Administration, compliance and enforcement options; and,
- Other issues that may not be identified.

The Ministry of Agriculture worked with industry stakeholders including the COABC and the BC Association of Farmer' Markets (BCAFM) in developing distribution lists, to reach as many organic producers (certified and non-certified) as possible. Industry was also consulted on the backgrounder and online survey questions. This document presents the results of the online survey.

CONSULTATION RESULTS

In response to the consultation, the Ministry of Agriculture received two types of submissions. These submissions included 195 completed survey responses and 86 emails. Overall, the majority of the email responses expressed support for the proposed model.

The survey results also indicated a majority support of the proposed model and want to see it implemented as soon as possible. The concerns raised by the minority of respondents related to limited return on investment and the cost to certification for small operators.

DEMOGRAPHICS:

Questions 1 – 3 are demographic questions, to provide some insight into the types of responses. Please see Appendix A for full details on demographic questions that are not restricted because of privacy.

Question 1: Please provide us with your contact information: Name and Organization/Business.

- Response is restricted because of privacy

Question 2: Please indicate your age range.

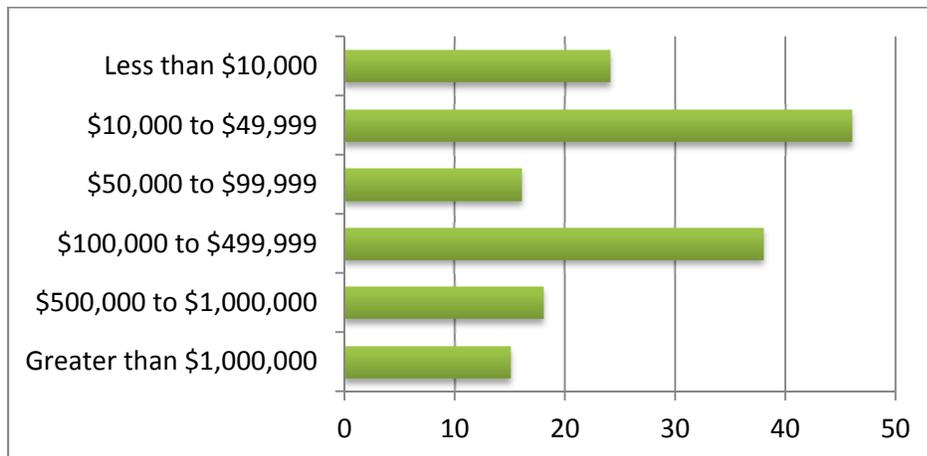
- Response is restricted because of privacy

Question 3: Please tell us about your operation.

Type of operation:

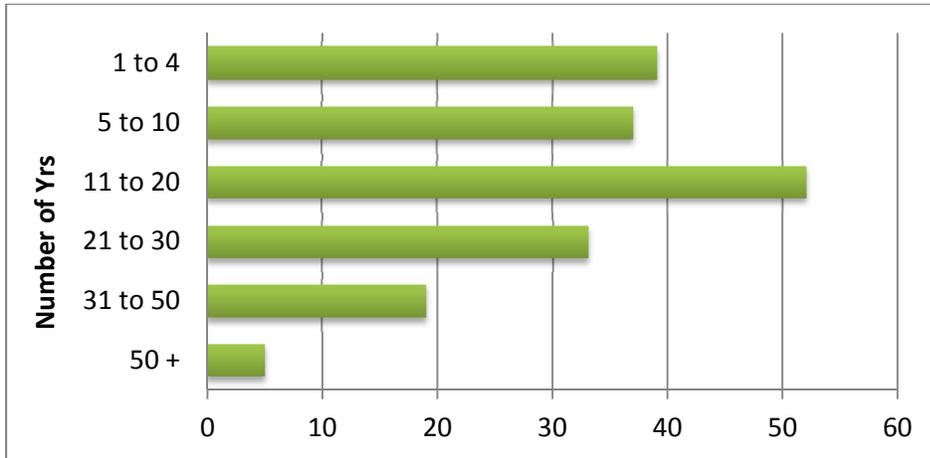
- The largest type representation: farms that grow mixed plants only (31%)
- Second: mixed farm that includes raising livestock (17%)
- Third: tie between dairy and tree fruit/berry producers (6%)

Approximate annual farm gate sales:



*total responses = 157

Duration of operating:



*total responses = 185

Question 4: Please tell us about yourself:

- All certified organic respondents represent (55%)
- All non-certified organic respondents represent (24%)

	Count	%
a) Certified organic producer in BC	91	47%
b) Certified organic processor in BC	11	6%
c) Certified organic retailer/wholesaler in BC	3	2%
d) Non-certified organic producer in BC	41	21%
e) Non-certified organic processor in BC	3	2%
f) Non-certified organic retailer/wholesaler in BC	2	1%
g) Other, please explain: (see next table for breakdown)	44	23%

*total responses = 195

The other option provided an open text comment for those respondents who do not fit the predefined categories:

	Count	%
g) Other:	44	
Conventional producer, processor, retailer, wholesaler	14	32%
Other agency (certifying body, consultant, verification officer and the like)	11	24%
Transitioning to organic	8	17%
Interested in becoming certified organic	3	7%
Peer-review "organic" producer (not following Canada Organic Standards)	5	11%
Marketing term other than organic	4	9%

*total responses = 44

MAIN SURVEY

Question 5: As a non-certified organic operator in BC, please indicate whether you intend to become certified should the Province of BC choose to regulate the term “Organic” in British Columbia:

	Count	%
I am undecided	29	40%
No, I do not intend to become certified	26	36%
Yes, I intend to become certified under the regional program	14	19%
Yes, I intend to become certified under the national program	3	4%

*total responses = 72

Additional comments from respondents were collected and presented in the following table. The comments related to the reasons behind intentions to become certified or not.

	Count	%
Certification too costly	13	35%
Do not plan on changing current farming practices	12	32%
In transition or interested in certifying	7	19%
General support for proposed model	5	14%

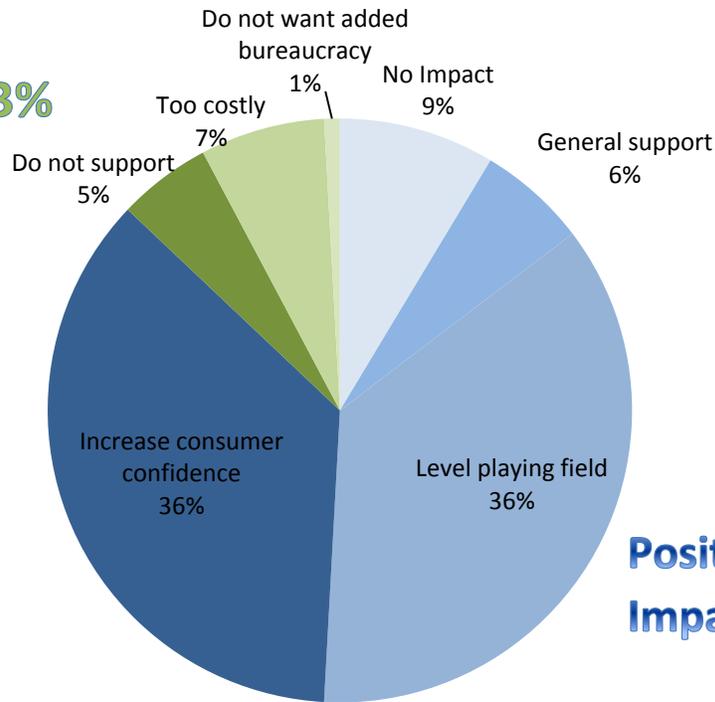
*total responses = 37

Question 6: As a certified organic operator in BC, please identify any positive or negative impacts to your operation that would result should the Province of BC choose to regulate the term “Organic” in British Columbia?

The majority of responses (78%) indicate general support or positive impacts. The removal of operators who make false organic claims which levels the playing field, as well as benefitting from increased consumer confidence are the top positive impacts. A minority of respondents are concerned about the negative cost impact on small producers and the impact on relationships within the farming community. This highlights the need create educational programs, outreach, and public relations campaigns.

Impacts on Organic Operators

Negative Impacts: 13%



Positive Impacts: 78%

*total responses (positive & negative) = 116

Question 7: As a non-certified organic operator in BC considering certification, please indicate the level of importance of the following transitional support strategies should the Province of BC choose to regulate the term “Organic” in British Columbia?

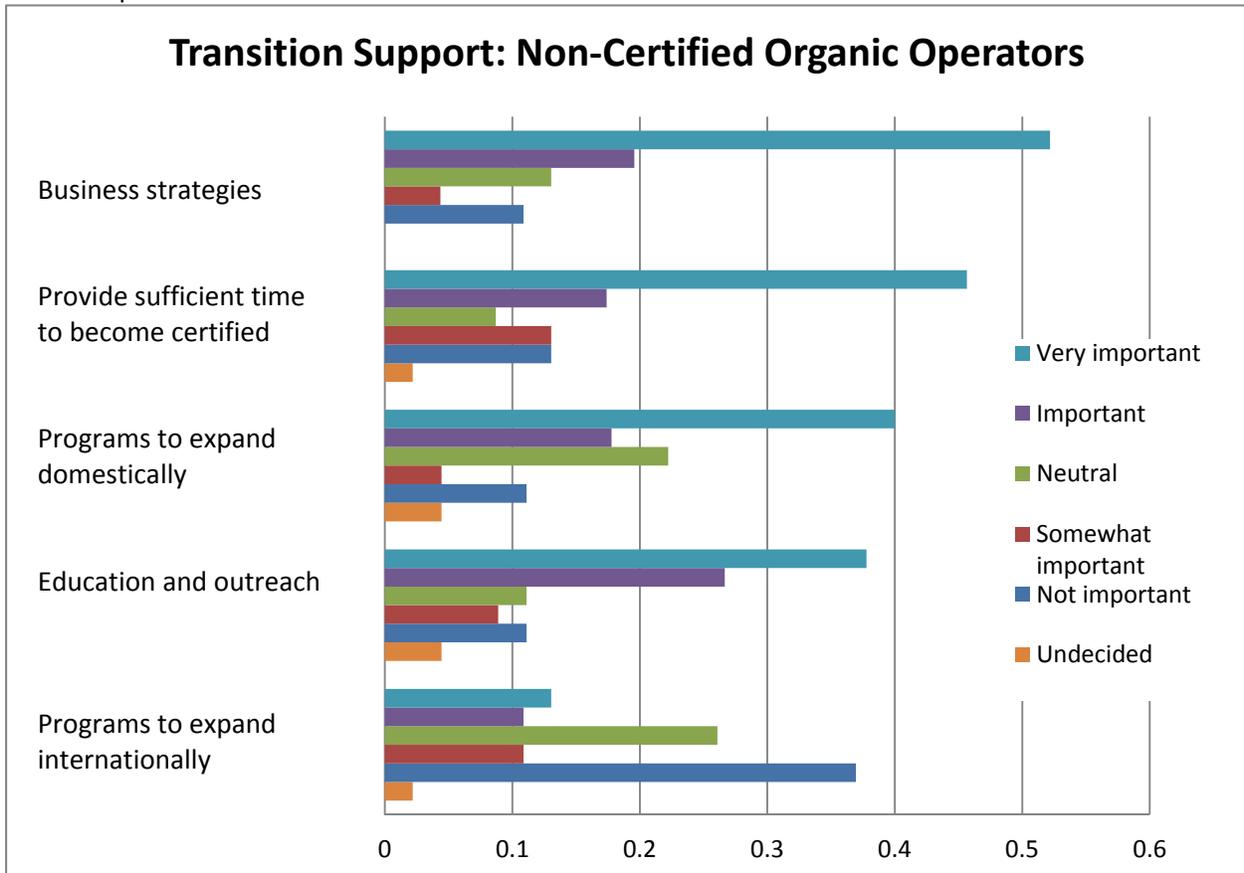
Preferred transition option of respondents who are *undecided about becoming certified*:

- Providing sufficient time to become certified prior to the requirement being put into effect.

Preferred transition option of respondents who *intend to become certified*:

- Business strategy programs providing funds and business advice on a plan to become certified.

*total responses = 36



Respondents were given the opportunity to provide comments on alternative transition options that are important for government to consider:

	Count
Create simple application forms and process	4
Subsidize program and transition costs	3
Education programs to help producers talk to customers	2
Research funding to advance organic practice	1
Urban farm transition options	1

*total responses = 11

Question 8: Barriers to certification for non-certified organic operators have been identified. Please indicate the degree of severity the following barriers affect an organic operator in becoming certified:

The most severe barrier to respondents who are *undecided about becoming certified*:

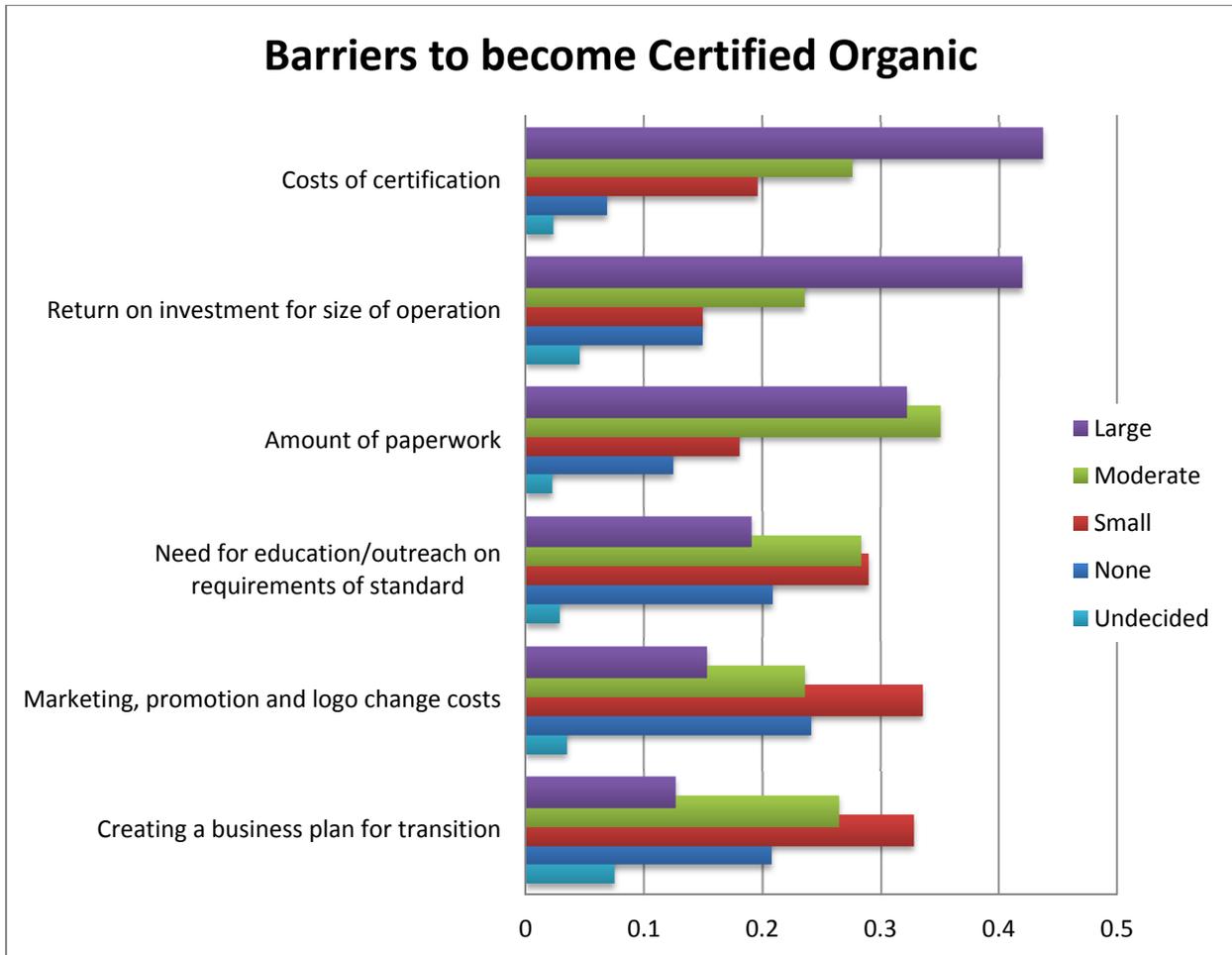
- Return on investment for size of operation tied with costs of certification.

The most severe barrier to respondents who are *intending to become certified*:

- Amount of paperwork tied with costs of certification.

The most severe barrier to respondents who *do not intend to become certified*:

- Return on investment for size of operation.



*total responses = 145

Respondents were given an opportunity to provide comments about other barriers to becoming a certified organic operator. Most of the comments (49%) reiterated cost of certification or need for education. Other comments were made about limited access to inputs and the input cost (14%). A few others identified the ability to meet the Canada Organic Standards because of their location or area of land (9%). Please see Appendix A for full details.

Question 9: Consideration will need to be given to the development of an effective and efficient administration and enforcement system. What do you see as necessary for the development and implementation of such a system?

*total responses = 141

Respondents provided a broad range of comments which were organized into themes and are reported by number of individual comments rather than a percentage of the total respondents. The largest theme group (32 comments) indicated that an escalating enforcement model (17) that starts with education, outreach and public promotion of the certified organic program itself, is an important aspect of administration and enforcement.

Key considerations for how the system works:

- Introduce fines as both a deterrent and a consequence of non-compliance (11)
- A complaint based system with a hotline where anonymous complaints may be made (19)
- Some wanted to see people on the ground doing random compliance checks across the value chain to maintain integrity of the whole system (6)
- Some requested the system should be scalable to small farms or allow exemptions to small farms (9)

Key considerations for who enforces

- Government involvement in inspection, enforcement and organic program was important (5)
- Industry led with an adequate number of knowledgeable inspectors and enforcement officers (4).

Other key considerations include:

- Stable funding for the administration and enforcement program and for transitioning (14)
- Keep the system simple with clear rules that are easy to follow (13)

Question 10: Are there other issues that have not been identified?

*total responses = 95

This question provided a forum for respondents to raise other topics or issues they felt were important for the ministry to consider, but had not previously identified.

Highlights include:

- Certified organic producers indicated support for a public outreach campaign to inform consumers of the meaning behind the term 'organic'.
- Transitional support workshops and tools to educate specialized producers (aquaculture, horticulture, urban farms, etc) could be useful.
- Parts of the current system should be maintained, such as: current administrative model which includes the national standards, and focus on promoting the "certified organic" term.

These comments re-state what has already been identified, but they help to illustrate the issues that are most important to respondents:

- Lower the barriers of costs and time to complete paperwork for certification for small farms or create exemptions.
- Certified organic producers highlighted the need for transitional support, which can help the sector stay unified.
- Certified organic producers indicated that more verification officers, or inspectors, would be beneficial to the sector. These inspectors should be knowledgeable and trained such that they are consistent in their requirements and expectations.

NEXT STEPS

The Ministry of Agriculture would like to thank all those who took the time to respond to the survey and send in e-mails. Your feedback is important to us and is used to identify what issues are most important. After completing the analysis of this feedback, we look forward to providing information on progress in fall 2015.

APPENDIX A: RESULTS TABLES

Question 3: Type of Operation

	Count		Count
Mixed Farm, plants only	61	Vineyards	4
Mixed Farm, incl. livestock	34	Distribution/Retail	3
Dairy	12	Grain	3
Tree Fruits/Berries	12	Beef	2
Mixed Livestock	11	Hazelnuts	2
Farm Other	10	Nursery/Horticulture	2
Processor/Manufacturing	10	Sheep	2
Regulatory/Certification	9	Hemp	1
No Farm/Other	5	Apiary	1
Poultry	5	Brewery/Hops	1
Aquaculture	4	Goats	1

*total responses = 195

Question 8: Table represents the comments from respondents on other barriers to becoming a certified organic operator.

	Count
Cost to certify/added bureaucracy	11
Lack of education on how to certify	10
Limited access to inputs and input cost	6
Ability to meet Canada Organic Standards	4
Time to certify	3
Does not support other farm models	2
Not enough specialists to provide assistance	2
Standards not backed up by science or too low	2
Voluntary program not everyone following rules, no reason to certify	2
Non organic products just as healthy, no reason to certify	1

*total responses = 43

Question 9: Table represents the comments from respondents on alternative enforcement options.

Theme	Count
Education/outreach/training for all operators	22
Escalating enforcement / quick responses	17
Identify secure long-term funding for system	14
Keep it simple	13
Certification issue (improvement to existing program)	12
Fines/consequences	11
COABC continues administration	10
Hotline	10
Public education (what to look for, how to get information)	10
Complaint-based	9
Low cost to farmer/scalable to revenue	9
Exemption for small farms	6
Online system (applications, monitoring, research, status, complaints, list of offenders)	6
Third party inspection/audit/enforcement random	6
Use certifying bodies for enforcement	6
Use existing experts & industry to come up with details	6
Does not support taking away word "organic"	5
Government led enforcement	5
Government staff to provide outreach and specialized services	5
Retail enforcement	5
Conventional should disclose farming methods	4
Industry led C&E	4
Make sure there are enough enforcement officers	4
Time to become certified	4
Funding support for transition	3
Knowledgeable / well trained inspectors	3
Model after existing systems	3
Regional compliance and enforcement	3
Adopt federal program	2
Clear rules	2
Free certification	2
Accessible administration system	1
Build on existing system	1
Do not combine existing voluntary program and Federal program together	1
Don't need a mandatory system	1
Easy to access	1
Farm names on all product	1
Fines proportionate to income	1

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Theme	Count
Funding for certifying body enforcement	1
Funding to support existing farms mentor new ones	1
Government takes over administration and adopts federal system	1
Government to increase research opportunity / knowledge base on organic issues	1
Peer review	1
Provide incentives to require producers to display evidence of certification	1
Tax break to existing organic operators	1
Use BC checkmark logo	1

*total responses = 141, total counted themes 236