



October 3, 2019

Ms. Michelle Arsenault
National Organic Standards Board
USDA-AMS-NOP
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 2642-So., Ag Stop 0268
Washington, DC 20250-0268

Docket: AMS-NOP-19-0038

RE: Crops Subcommittee – Paper (Plant Pots and Other Crop Production Aids) (Discussion)

Dear Ms. Arsenault:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comment on the Crops Subcommittee’s Discussion Document on Paper (Plant Pots and Other Crop Production Aids). The subcommittee is inviting discussion on a petition for the addition of paper planting pots to the National List for use in organic crop production.

The Organic Trade Association (OTA) is the membership-based business association for organic agriculture and products in North America. OTA is the leading voice for the organic trade in the United States, representing over 9,500 organic businesses across 50 states. Our members include growers, shippers, processors, certifiers, farmers' associations, distributors, importers, exporters, consultants, retailers and others. OTA's mission is to promote and protect organic with a unifying voice that serves and engages its diverse members from farm to marketplace.

Summary

- ✓ OTA continues to support the allowance of paper to be planted in the soil when used as a planting aid because paper is already allowed for equivalent uses (e.g., as mulch).
- ✓ OTA continues to support the decision by NOSB to expand the scope of review to be inclusive of generic products that are paper-based and used as planting or seeding aids.
- ✓ In response to the discussion questions posed by the NOSB Crops Subcommittee, we question if commercially available paper-based production aids would be compliant.

We offer the following more detailed comments:

Background

NOSB received a petition in August 2018 for the addition of paper planting pots to the National List: “§205.601(o) production aids - Plant pot or growing container-hemp or other paper, without glossy or colored inks.” Paper pots are used as a vessel for growing transplants intended to be planted directly in the soil along with the plant material. Nitten paper chain systems, which are the subject of the petition, are

used to efficiently transplant closely spaced crops as part of a non-motorized machine transplanting system; the petitioned material is planted into the soil along with the plant material.

At the fall 2018 meeting, NOSB presented a discussion document to solicit public comments on the necessity and environmental impact of the material and the availability of alternatives. At the spring 2019 meeting, NOSB presented a second discussion document that continued to explore the petitioned material, and expanded the scope of its review to include a variety of paper-based production aids including pots, seed tape, collars, and hot caps. Out of concern for the use of synthetic fibers in paper-based planting aids, NOSB requested a technical report to evaluate the types of synthetic fibers and the biodegradability of the synthetic fibers used in these types of products. The technical report is now available¹. At this meeting (fall 2019), NOSB presents a third discussion document² that summarizes the Crops Subcommittee's evaluation of these paper production aids against the National List criteria using the information from the technical report.

Scope of Review

Consistent with our previous comments, we encourage NOSB's scope of review to be inclusive of generic products that are paper-based and used as planting or seeding aids that are left to degrade in the soil. This broadened approach will make efficient use of NOSB's efforts to review the existing variety of paper-based planting aids that share these key common characteristics (as underlined above). If the listing on the National List for these products were limited only to paper "pots" or "containers," it may exclude other paper-based planting aids made of the same material (paper) and used in the same manner (planted in ground), but are designed in slightly different customized design for whatever particular planting method is used.

At the spring 2019 meeting, NOSB indicated its plans to include seed tape, collars, and hot caps. At that time, we questioned NOSB's intent to broaden the scope to include products that *aren't* intended to degrade in the soil. At that time, we did not object to this broadened scope, but acknowledged that NOSB's evaluation of these products against the National List criteria may be impacted by whether the product is or is not intended to degrade into the soil.

Now that NOSB is considering a potential future annotation that specifies biodegradability parameters, we feel it important to revisit the question of scope. OTA suggests that the appropriate scope of review is generic products that are paper-based and used as planting or seeding aids that are left to degrade in the soil. Other production aids that are not intended to degrade in the soil (which is a very large category of very diverse products) should be outside the scope of review. Rather, we suggest a practical scope of review that is *broad enough* to capture the petitioned material as well as similar inputs that are paper-based and used as planting or seeding aids that are left to degrade in the soil (e.g. pots, chains, seed tape), but *narrow enough* to provide clear boundaries around the types of inputs intended to be included under the listing.

To address this scope of generic materials on the National List, the listing could read "Planting Aids" or "Seeding and Transplanting Aids," for example. The annotation for such listing would establish

¹ <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/PaperTRFinal7262019.pdf>

² <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/CSPaperPotsDDFall2019.pdf>

requirements common to all such products (e.g. “made from virgin or recycled paper; without glossy or colored inks”) and any other limitations as identified by NOSB regarding additives or other issues.

Discussion Questions

The NOSB Crops Subcommittee has requested feedback on the following discussion questions.

1. *Please comment on the following options under consideration by the subcommittee for listing at §205.601(o) as production aids:*
 - a. *“Virgin or recycled paper, without colored or glossy inks,” or*
 - b. *“Virgin or recycled paper, without colored or glossy inks; any synthetic polymer fibers included must not exceed 15% of the paper and must be 100% bio-based with content determined using ASTM D6866 (incorporated by reference; see 205.3), and demonstrates at least 90% biodegradation absolute or relative to microcrystalline cellulose in less than two years, in soil, according to one of the following test methods: ISO 17556 or ASTM D5988 (both incorporated by reference; see §205.3)”*

No comment regarding Option A.

Regarding Option B, we have questions about whether NOSB has confirmed that commercially available forms of generic paper-based production aids (that are intended to be allowed under this listing) will actually comply with the restrictive annotation. A clear understanding of the scope of allowable products under this annotation is critical, especially if the Board intends to expand the scope of the review to include seed tape and other planting aids intended to degrade in the soil.

2. *Synthetic polymer content—*
 - a. *Should a maximum synthetic polymer content be stated explicitly? If so, what is the appropriate level?*
 - b. *What is the amount (or range) of synthetic polymer content in products currently available?*
 - c. *How would synthetic content be measured? How would a certifier or Material Review Organization verify content? For example, if a product included recycled paper as an ingredient, how would the synthetic polymer content be determined?*
 - d. *Is it possible to manufacture paper production aids that use only natural fiber sources and that meet the product specifications for their intended use?*

No additional comments.

3. *Biodegradability—*
 - a. *Should a biodegradability standard be included for these products? If so, is this the appropriate biodegradability standard?*
 - b. *Does maximum synthetic polymer content need to be stated if there is a biodegradability requirement?*
 - c. *As the products biodegrade, what is the impact on the soil? Also, can fragments be consumed by wildlife or livestock before they are completely degraded?*

No additional comments.

4. *Bio-based content—*
- a. *Should a minimum bio-based content standard be included for these products?*
 - b. *Is 100% bio-based content achievable for these products? If not, what should be the minimum bio-based content requirement?*
- No additional comments.
5. *Is genetic engineering involved in the production of these products?*
- No additional comments.
6. *Does the annotation need to specify that added fungicides, insecticides, or other synthetic materials not typically found in paper would not be allowed, or is that already understood?*
- No additional comments.

On behalf of our members across the supply chain and the country, OTA thanks the National Organic Standards Board for the opportunity to comment, and for your commitment to furthering organic agriculture.

Respectfully submitted,



Johanna Mirenda
Farm Policy Director
Organic Trade Association

cc: Laura Batcha
Executive Director/CEO
Organic Trade Association