



September 30, 2021

Ms. Michelle Arsenault
National Organic Standards Board
USDA-AMS-NOP

Docket: AMS-NOP-21-0038

RE: Policy Subcommittee – Discussion on Oral and Written Comment Submission

Dear Ms. Arsenault:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comment on the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) Policy Subcommittee Discussion Document on oral and written comment submissions. The subcommittee is seeking feedback from organic stakeholders on how it might modify established procedures to maximize community engagement practices that facilitate fair and equal access to NOSB members by all stakeholders.

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 organic businesses across 50 states. Its members include growers, shippers, processors, certifiers, farmers' associations, distributors, importers, exporters, consultants, retailers and others. OTA's Board of Directors is democratically elected by its members. OTA's mission is to promote and protect organic with a unifying voice that serves and engages its diverse members from farm to marketplace.

Questions for Stakeholders:

- 1. Should the Board move to an entirely virtual format for oral comments the week before in-person meetings or maintain the pre-pandemic format of hearing oral comments, both virtually prior to the in-person meeting as well as in-person at the public NOSB meeting?*

The Organic Trade Association supports a process that optimizes the ability for every organic stakeholder to provide comment. The virtual format for oral comments appears to be working very well and could provide NOSB with additional time at in-person meetings to hear from expert panels, extend complex topic discussions as needed, or even plan for other day-long organic education/stakeholder symposium opportunities. We have learned that public comment can be successfully accomplished through virtual means. Therefore, we encourage NOSB to think about how the in-person time can best utilize activities or functions that are not possible or ideal in a virtual setting. That said, we are not opposed to maintaining the pre-pandemic form of hearing oral comments virtually and at the in-person meeting. It is very possible that some stakeholders can only give oral comments in person. We favor equal opportunity for every organic stakeholder to give oral comments.

2. *If NOSB meetings move to a model wherein all oral comments are heard virtually the week before the meeting, would it reduce the attendance of stakeholders at the Board meeting?*

Perhaps for some, but not others. Oral comments (in-person), are certainly entertaining and liven up the experience of in-person attendance. There is also no doubt that the room begins to empty once the public comment session is over. None the less, we don't believe in-person comments are, or should be, the number one driver of showing up in person.

3. *Restrictions due to the pandemic aside, would the availability of a live-stream meeting discourage in-person attendance?*

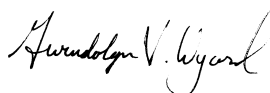
We support the live streaming of all NOSB meetings. The goal should not be in-person attendance, rather it should be accessibility for all organic stakeholders in a manner that works best for all.

4. *Is the practice of scheduling multiple oral comments by a single organization (such as a business/company/non-profit/trade group) inherently unfair? Is there a path by which the Board can field multiple areas of expertise from a single organization, while balancing the limits of time, fairness, and the importance of receiving a wide range of stakeholder feedback?*

No, we do not think it is unfair given that a single organization can represent thousands of organic stakeholders responding to an NOSB agenda of 30+ topics detailed by a 200+ page meeting packet. Our observation is that most organizations try to cover the full range of topics by utilizing staff according to areas of expertise. This approach seems perfectly fair and reasonable. The approach of an organization signing up multiple staff people to cover ONE topic may challenge the limits of time and fairness, although this may be difficult to parse out in advance (e.g. if commenters are addressing different aspects of a single topic).

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,



Gwendolyn Wyard
Vice President of Regulatory and Technical Affairs
Organic Trade Association

cc: Laura Batcha
Executive Director/CEO
Organic Trade Association