

Opportunities and Risks of the Revised European Import Regime

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Abstract

At the end of December 2006, the EU published new regulations on imports of organic products. The revised import procedures replace the current (temporary) system of import authorizations by an approval system for inspection bodies operating in countries outside of the EU. The new regulation will lead to substantial changes in the import regime which provides opportunities and risks for the organic guarantee system:

Compliance: *The provision on compliance with the EU regulation is new. At a first glance, compliance with the EU regulation seems to be the best option to protect organic integrity. But full compliance in regions with completely different climate, crops, and socioeconomic conditions is impossible and would be against the objectives and principles of organic agriculture, which require a locally adapted system.*

Equivalency: *Although all imports so far fall under the equivalency provision, there are no guidelines on how equivalency might be determined.*

Supervision: *It may be assumed that main burden of supervision will remain with the accreditation bodies. A consistent on-the-spot assessment of the activities of certification bodies in third countries by auditors trained in the EU requirements and having at least the qualification of organic inspectors is necessary.*

Third country certification bodies: *The new system allows inspection bodies from non-EU countries to apply for recognition at their own initiative, that is, they can prove their recognition prior to the start of trade relationships and they no longer depend on European importers for acceptance in the European market.*

Trade: *Trade will be the winner of the new system: bureaucracy will be considerably reduced and will be no longer the importer responsible for verifying equivalency with the EU regulation, but instead will be the certification body.*

Conclusions

The revised import regime of the EU has the potential to increase the efficacy of the control system in third countries, to reduce the bureaucracy for international trade and competitive disadvantages for non-European certification bodies. But there are also serious risks for organic integrity if not implemented thoroughly:

Guidelines must be developed on how to determine equivalency.

Equivalency assessments as well as the determination of compliance should be published to increase transparency and allow a harmonized implementation of the EU regulation.

Guidance is needed on how requirements related to organic production, although regulated in other regulations, shall be covered in third country inspections.

Measures which impose unbearable burden on farmers in third countries should be eliminated or defined by clear criteria on the flexibility rules in such a way as to allow access to the European market without creating unfair competition.

Most important is a consistent and consequent surveillance of European and non-European certification bodies. This requires qualified accreditation bodies and, in addition, a European supervision authority.

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