

Debate sparked in Spain

Other positions explained on public or private certification

The September issue of The Organic Standard (TOS77) contained an article on the debate taking place in Spain between the supporters of public and private certification, including allegations by the association APECPAE that the public certifier CCPAE in Catalonia charges excessively high fees. The article instigated a lively response within the organic sector in Spain.

The reactions of two stakeholders – SEAE, the Spanish association of organic farming, mentioned in the TOS77 article, and AE2, a processors and traders association (see box) whose members do not feel represented by APECPAE's position – are reported here.

SEAE (Spanish Society of Organic Farming)

In the September article, SEAE was named by the APECPAE President as one of the organisations that rejected a proposal to allow operators to choose between public and private certification. After making it clear that all organic certifiers – public and private – can be SEAE members, Victor González, Secretariat of SEAE, further explained the organisation's position on this issue.

Victor González believes that the debate on certification should focus on defending systems that permit the maximum participation of operators and guarantee the transparency of its management, rather than whether the best system is private or public. In Victor's opinion, in Spain such participation has been achieved through governing boards of regional certification bodies, known as 'Consejos or Comités', although he does recognise

that there are difficulties achieving the full representation of every interested party, and that this must be improved.

Victor González compares the Spanish certification model with those developed by farmers associations in countries such as Switzerland or Germany; but in Spain the presence of a public Administration, which has

a monitoring role, compliance with all applicable laws and regulations can be guaranteed. He claims that the Spanish model is as valid as the private certification models developed in other countries of the EU.

Regarding fees, the SEAE representative pointed out that fees charged by the public certification body are decided by the board that represents the operators, and those fees are public and transparent. SEAE believes that this is a fair system, because those with higher income pay more.

AE2 response

AE2 also rejected the proposal made by the APECPAE President to allow operators to choose between public and private certification. The reasons they gave for defending the public certification model in Catalonia were:

- Participation of the sector is guaranteed through democratic representa-

Background on AE2

AE2 is an association of organic processors and traders from Catalonia. Established in November 2006 it has 20 members, who are, according to its President, Dionis Guiteras, all supporters of the 'genuine' concept of organic farming. In particular, they believe in aspects such as social justice and support specialised retailers instead of supermarkets and short-distance rather than long distribution channels.

AE2's aims are to promote organic farming and consumption, act as a lobbying group, support research and development projects, etc. It also has specific concerns associated with their location in Catalonia.

Encouraging Catalonia to declare itself as a GMO free region; encouraging the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Organic Farming in Catalonia; supporting the creation of a Catalonian institute for organic farming; cooperating in the continuous improvement and updating of CCPAE policies and procedures and supporting the creation of specific standards for organic smallholder production and processing units.

Many of its aims, especially the general ones, are in common with APECPAE. Dionis Guiteras explained that they were happy when APECPAE was created three years ago as it created the much needed opportunity for the organic sector to work together. Unfortunately, AE2 did not feel represented by APECPAE and did not agree with the approach and the personal style of its representatives.

tion (elections every four years) in the CCPAE government board (Consell).

- By being under the umbrella of the administration operators and consumers have more confidence in CCPAE's handling of scandals.
- In Catalonia very little financial support is given to organic farming. The fee system established by CCPAE, in which many small operators pay less than their real certification cost and bigger companies pay higher fees than their certification cost, is the only system that can sustain a certification service affordable for everyone in Catalonia.
- The public certification model is not such an anomaly in Europe as its detractors claim, occurring in other countries such as in Finland and Denmark.
- CCPAE control is very rigorous, comparing favourably with most private certification bodies.

On the matter of the fees so denounced by APECPAE, Mr Guiteras, President of AE2, commented that they are high and that they do affect their members who would like to pay less. However, the approach taken by AE2 is to support CCPAE and to carry on contributing to the improvement of the public certification system instead of demanding private certification bodies in Catalonia. They believe this will make it possible for the totality of the organic sector in the country to continue enjoying the advantages of the current system.

In addition, Mr Guiteras pointed out that under the present fee system, operators do not pay for residues analysis, which are frequent in the CCPAE control system. Especially expensive are the analyses for GMO contamination, which are systematically conducted in all risky activities such as

the feed industry or the corn growers. AE2 also disagrees with APECPAE that high fees affect the competitiveness of the organic industry in Catalonia. Mr Guiteras commented that, while no one likes paying the high fees, they do not make a big impact on the overall budget of companies.

AE2 believes that APECPAE's confrontational position with the Administration is not the right way to achieve their targets. This is an important issue in Spain, especially as there is a general feeling that until recently the government has not taken organic farming seriously, resulting in a low consumers awareness. ■

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Information provided by Víctor González, SEAE Secretariat, and Dionís Guiteras, AE2 President.
