

Training Assignment Asia 2007

Lebi Perez

Introduction:

The following notes are intended to reflect the main activities performed during my recent visit to OCIA Japan and OFDC/OCIA in China.

1) Japan:

- a) Spent three days conducting training to both Office staff and Inspectors. Office staff was basically trained on the new forms implemented for both processors and farms. Additional orientation was provided in regards to database management along with file handling during the certification process carried out for NOP and the rest of OCIA programs. Training was supported by the use of the data base, procedures and slides. The staff understood clearly the necessary steps to handle NOP applications and will work with Lincoln staff to support the process.**
- b) One day was dedicated to OCIA inspectors in Japan. Basically, we addressed the use and importance of the new forms with emphasis to processors. Many questions about specific sections of the NOP were also addressed. An update and review of some sections of the NOP was also conducted. Information on how to become an OCIA inspector was also provided to some interested inspectors. Inspectors showed great appreciation for our presence and the opportunity to exchange opinions and views related to inspections and general aspects of NOP certification. My appreciation to inspector Mutsumi who helped translating part of our discussion with inspectors.**
- c) The following inspectors and staff attended training:
Keiko Furuhata, Julia Yamaguchi, Eriko Saijo, Ekuko Asano, Yasuko Moriyama, Ayako Izutsu, Mutsumi Sakuyoshi, Yoko Mizuno, Koichi Kawamura, Naomi Inome and Kazuko.**

2) China visit:

04-08-07

Upon arrival in Shanghai I had the opportunity to attend a forum in which OCIA staff presented information about perspectives of certification and general aspect of the organic market. A presentation was also made about the new forms and what we expect with the use of this new format- here we also had the participation of Wengpeng introducing the new online form in Chinese. The attendees were basically general managers, technicians and field managers involved in organic certified programs by OCIA. Attendees from Hong Kong also assisted. A total of 90 participants attended this forum all day.

After the morning presentation the following concerns were expressed in regards to organic certification, among others: timely certification, transitional labeling of product, confidence of OCIA seal to the consumer, implementation of crop rotations, difficulties in exporting organic certified product into countries like Belgium and Germany. As per operator comments, a key factor to consider is maintaining ISO 65 accreditation, questions were also raised about the image and prestige of the organic industry in China, file handling in China, use of packaging materials, etc.

The support of certification staff in China is going to be a key factor, in regards to using the new outline format- the new outline was being translated. OCIA certification is seen with great respect and necessary for organic exports.

04-09-07

We had the chance to visit a processing operation, Zhejiang Zhongda Foods Co., Ltd, For Zhejiang Zhongda Newland Co. mainly dedicated to both organic and conventional processing of vegetables. Two lines of processing are used. Protocols are maintained for processing organic produce. OCIA growers basically supply most of the vegetables processed. The general manager said that growers have been certified for at least 8 years. Currently this operation is exporting to Japan and the U.S. A quality assurance program has been established and it is based on HACCP and ISO 9001, also maintains a BRC Global standard for food accreditation. Other

inspections are conducted by inspection Quarantine Bureau. The persons interviewed (Chen Wei- sales director, Song Jie- production manager, and Qian Jianzhong- quality control manager) allowed us to walk and inspect all the stages of handling on site. A closing interview was held to clarify any further questions and to review labels currently used to ship product to the U.S. It was noticed that one of the packages had labels written incorrectly. This observation was pointed out to the manager in charge,

Based on the inspection and interview, they expressed concern about TC timing, they seem not to have issues with inspectors and plan to install other plants near the farms.

4-10-07

I had the opportunity to assist to the opening ceremony of Expo Organic in Shanghai. There, we met with officials and other parties involved in organics including government officials, staff from OFDC, IFOAM representative and inspectors. Alex did represent OCIA in the opening ceremony along with officials and other representatives from other entities.

We visited the booths and had the opportunity to taste some organic foods such as milk, fruits (kiwi) and even biodynamic medications were offered to the public. We talked with entrepreneurs, private groups, IFOAM representatives and farmers that assisted to this show. Most of the operations are exporting organic products to Japan, Europe and the US. Other certifiers such as IMO, ECOCERT seem to be reaching a good acceptance level by marketers and operators.

4-11-07

On our way to Nanjin, we had the opportunity to visit a farm named Yueng Foong Biotech, which is basically dedicated to the production of organic vegetables like cabbage, and broad bean among other. The facility was inspected in all areas including fields, storage units and composting site. During this visit, the farm was harvesting cabbage that it is usually sent to certified processing facilities of the same company. Questions about the farm plan and strategies used for pest control were discussed. This farm usually has 4 to 5 planting seasons during the year, no

concerns were seen during this visit. Inputs such as Matrine are used in crop protection, apparently these inputs are “IFOAM approved”.

413-07

OCIA staff spent the day at OFDC facility, conducting training on NOP regulations, updates, procedures and the new forms outline. Specific indications were given to inspectors in regards to critical areas of inspection and reporting according to the new form. Inspectors worked an exercise to help them clarify specific situations related to audit trail, seed verification, etc and how to be addressed in the new inspection format.

4-16-07

As part of the inspector training (basic farm and processing) we had the opportunity to visit one of the farms (Farm # 12 of Taian Taishan Asian Food Co., Ltd.) contracted by Asia Food Co. Mr. Jiqiang Zhou took the group for a farm inspection and visit. The fields were visited including nurseries, equipment, etc. Students and staff had access to farm records and verification. At the moment, the fields were cultivated with Broccoli, but they grow other veggies as part of the farm plan. It was learned that imported seed from Europe is being used. Apparently seed used is untreated- further verification is recommended as the tags could not be translated correctly. This facility has also been certified by JONA for Japan exports. Mr. Zhou mentioned he might request OCIA JAS certification this year.

4-19-07

After finishing the last part of basic farm training, we had the opportunity to visit Taishan Asia Food Company, an operator that was recently inspected in February. This processing facility is managed by Mr. Wang Lin, who kindly allowed OCIA staff and students to visit. We were assisted by the quality control managers who took us for a tour inside the plant. We had the opportunity to see how organic asparagus are handled and processed. We basically conducted an inspection of the interior of the facility where we learned that they are dedicated for organic processing, measures for food safety are implemented. This plant also processes green beans, green sword beans. Most of the product comes from certified growers

that contract their harvest to this plant. Mr. Li expressed his satisfaction for our visit and understands how important the organic business is for his operation. We also learned that they hold HACCP and ISO guide 9001 certification as part of their quality assurance program. In this regard, managers explained that it is required by law to keep food safety certification programs to be able to export foods. Over all, the plant seems to have all the necessary controls for food safety and organic integrity. Audit trail verification was conducted as part of inspector training for a few lots processed.

4-20-07

Late night after finishing meetings at OFDC we were taken to “Chinan” airport. There I took a midnight flight to Harbin city arriving next day (4-21) around 5 Am to the city of “Qing-an” after driving more than 200 kilometers.

4-21-07

Around 10 Am we drove to the “Heilongjiang Xinlida” farms about 100 Km North, of “Qing-an” close to the Russian border, where I conducted a visit of the main farm. During this visit I was assisted by Jibin and May from OFDC and You Qifeng and Liang Fuyuan both general managers of the organic program. On site, I had the opportunity to visit fields, storage units, equipment, etc. Fields were not ready yet for planting. Only rice nurseries were getting ready to start seeding. The nurseries are made of plastic and framed with wood and metals posts. This operation was initiated a couple years ago by reclaiming land previously idle (natural conditions). Most of the land belongs to farmers from the region that are contracted to the main buyer (Heilongjiang Xinlida Grain and Oil Group). A main road divides fields; construction of ditches around fields and bridges has been performed. Basically roads, forests and fields are internalized. On their bulletins, I could read OCIA, NOP and JAS as part of their organic certification programs for the certified operations.

Based on our discussion, it looks like the operation is still trying different solutions to implement a marketable crop rotation. Hemp and rice are considered the major

crops after soybeans in the rotation. This depends on each field. Some areas seem to have heavier soils than others.

Most of fieldwork is performed using local labor; records of manual weeding were shown to me. Equipment is located in different farms along the areas dedicated for organic production. Apparently the first year this farm used conventional untreated seed, they said this year will use own organic harvested seed currently in storage at processing plant.

At the rice nurseries, I found empty fertilizer bags, that usually are brought from Russia. The manager explained to me, that these bags are filled out with soil to be used as a weight to the plastic that covers the entrance of the nursery. The bags originally contained Nitrogen and Potassium. Later on during the trip, it was shown to me how common these bags are used to protect the nurseries. The potential for contamination and noncompliance was explained to the managers. Even if they do not use synthetic inputs it is suspicious to see these bags in an organic area; no more information was provided. I recommend that this farm be inspected (unannounced) early during the growing season (June) and July.

4-22-07

Before returning to Beijing, I had the opportunity to visit the soybean cleaning plant, also located in the city of Qing-an. It belongs also to the “Heilongjiang Xinlida Grain and Oil Group”. The plant was built in May 2004 and it is located 161 Km North of Harbin-Yichun Highway. The plant basically cleans, selects (mechanically and manually) and bags soybeans of different grades. Currently the aim is to continue exporting soybeans to Korea, Japan and the EU, which are the main markets so far. During the visit, it was learned that last year crop (2006) was not sold as organic due to the fact that the JAS certificates arrived a bit late.

The general conditions of the plant are ok, equipment is well maintained, cleaning it is performed daily. Since this plant is not dedicated, it was strongly recommended to document purging performed before organic runs. Areas for drying (patios) and storage must be labeled to prevent commingling during handling.

All the seed to be planted this year was already bagged and ready.

Overall it was suggested to develop written protocols for organic handling and processing, including pest management and monitoring.

Both managers took notes about these suggestions and will work to improve their conditions. They showed great interest to get OCIA publications. They showed interest in using the web site to get information.

After this visit I was taken back to Harbin airport, concluding my visit at 3pm.

Conclusions

- 1. *The visit:* This visit allowed us to perceive by tangible means how organic agriculture is being handle by current certified operators. In these regards, it is important to continue making efforts to help understand better the applicability of the certification standards and their differences.**
- 2. *Certification:* Based on my review of the certification system carried out by OFDC, there is a good level of understanding of the necessary procedures before an inspection is assigned. The documentation used is translated and the staff seems to have a good knowledge of these procedures.**
- 3. *The inspectors/Inspections:* Based on the training provided, we considered that one (Tomas) out of five candidates had more potential to conduct a job accordingly. This perception was based on participation during class and common understanding of organic agriculture. It is necessary that this potential candidate be further trained if possible.**

On the other hand, it is suggested that experienced inspectors conduct new inspections. This will allow grasping a better understanding of the operations from the very beginning.

I stressed the importance of conducting document verification and visual observations of all areas in a farm operation.

4. ***Inputs:*** It is very important that any operation that uses commercial inputs such as botanicals, natural insecticides, seeds, etc, etc. verifies these before engaging in certification. Operators tend to believe that commercial inputs “approved by IFOAM” are good enough for any certification program. At my closing meeting I stressed the importance of input verification to OFDC staff for all the operations that do so.
5. ***Crop rotations:*** It looks like that in most operations there is one or two major organic crops for exporting, so crop rotation plans need to be verified during inspections and be planned ahead of time if possible. Depending of field conditions, rotations could be changed due to the relevance that exports have in these operations.
6. ***Documentation:*** It is necessary to continue making emphasis on the importance of keeping adequate records and organic protocols for each type of operation. This should complement the information provided in the organic system plan.
7. ***Training:*** This aspect shall be the basis of continuous improvement for OFDC, inspectors, staff and associates. This is especially important to address when changes of policies and standards occur.
8. ***Unannounced inspections:*** These types of inspections will upgrade the quality of the certification system established by OCIA. However, it is very important to choose staff that shows professionally and impartiality.
9. ***The Future:*** Personally I learned that OCIA has a great reputation, the name means something for entrepreneurs whom strive to continue certified. Other agencies such as Imo and Ecocert continue to gain positions in the certification business. It is going to be necessary that OCIA and OFDC staff keep working jointly in a consistent manner and with a high degree of responsibility. At OCIA we should be able to create enough oversight of the certification process carried out by the joint effort.

OFDC PERSPECTIVES:

After talking to Jibin, Wenpeng and Wenqin, they suggested the following actions:

1. They would like to see the final decision made in China, most likely by Wenqin, especially to re-certifying associates.
2. Jibin considers that one unannounced inspection is not enough and that companion inspections (OFDC/OCIA) would be better in the long run.
3. They would like to print directly the TC's requested, some time is lost when the TCA's have mistakes and have to be redo for correction they argued.
4. As part of training OFDC inspectors they would like to participate in joined inspections with OCIA inspectors in Asia, may be in Japan or nearby countries.
5. They would like to see in our promotion material mentioned OFDC/OCIA partnership.
6. If possible they would like to see a link to OFDC web site in the OCIA web page.

Final Note:

I would like to express my gratitude for allowing me to have such a rewarding and professional experience during this assignment to China and Japan. I am available to provide additional input or clarification if necessary. I have included a collage of pictures that reflect some of the visits made.

Lebi A. Perez

OCIA Training Dept.

Cc: Photos

Photos: China



At OCIA booth in Shanghai



At Trade show Shanghai



Organic teas



OCIA advertisement

Organic packaging of Broccoli



Organic Processing





At Yueng Foong Biotech

Interviewing Operator at At Yueng Foong Biotech



Field visit at Taian Taishan Asian Food

Broccoli at Taian T. Asian Food



Students at Taian Taishan Asian Foods

Reviewing records- audit





A picture at Taishan Asia processor



Teaching the standards



At Heilongjiang Xinlida Group Farm



Organic fields-Heilongjiang Xinlida



Rice nurseries at Heilongjiang Xinlida Farms



Farmer

