



**Report on the ECO-PB meeting on  
International Attuning of the  
Assortment, Supply and Demand  
of Organic Seed**

**in vegetable production of North-West  
Europe**

Warmenhuizen, The Netherlands, 25.-26. September 2008

Edited by

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### Colophon

Lammerts van Bueren, E.T., K.-P. Wilbois, C. ter Berg (2008) Report on the ECO-PB meeting on International Attuning of the Assortment, Supply and Demand of Organic Seed in vegetable production of North-West Europe, Warmenhuizen, The Netherlands, 25.-26. September 2008. Driebergen, The Netherlands. 14pp.

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This workshop was organised by the European Consortium for Organic Plant Breeding (ECO-PB), Research Institute for Organic Agriculture-FiBL in Germany and the Louis Bolk Institute in the Netherlands. It was financially supported by the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality through the Bioconnect research program on Organic Plant breeding and Seed production, The Netherlands.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Aim of the meeting

The aim of this ECO-PB meeting is to facilitate an international attuning of variety assortment and derogation policies between countries of the same climatic conditions and with a certain overlap in variety requirements (e.g. NW Europe) to gain more level playing field.

The questions that one can put forward are:

- Are there (sub)species for which an agreement on attuning of derogation policy could be possible between a number of countries within the next 2-5 years? Which countries could collaborate on which crops and on what kind of time schedule?
- If so, what steps (national or international) are required to come to such an agreement?
- How can countries communicate on this issue? Do we need to create a special gremia for this? Who will take the lead? Can members of the SCOF see a role for them in this issue?
- How can we further increase the commitment of member states?

It is clear that this meeting cannot be a decision-making workshop because the achieved agreements/proposals shall need further national follow-up discussions for support of the involved stakeholders. Nevertheless, the achieved proposals can be an important step to move forward in several cross-country collaborations, as an Annex on the level of the complete EU will not be realistic in the near future.

The focus will mostly be on the larger biannual vegetable crops being exported between the countries, but also other large crops such as cereals and potatoes could be taken into consideration.

For this meeting we aimed at a concrete result such as a top five list of crops that are candidate crops for cross-country agreements in the coming 2-5 years of which it could be possible to work towards a considerable reduction of derogations or which can even end up in a category 1-list, allowing no more derogations.

## 1.2. Preparation for the meeting

To make this meeting output oriented as much as possible each participating country was asked to make an inventory prior to the meeting with respect to:

1. the candidate crops that can move on to a national list for which no more derogations will be given within the next 2-5 years
2. for which of those crops is a cross-country agreement essential?
3. what are the most important missing varieties to complete a national required variety assortment of such crops? And what are the perspectives of the seed companies to provide such varieties?

## 1.3. Background

In the EU countries the use of organic seed is increasing. However, there are large differences in policies on derogations among the countries creating a threshold for further development. But also between the different stakeholders in the production chain (seed producers, farmers, government, database managers etc) within one country there are different positions toward the policies to increase the use of organic seed and decrease the number of derogations for conventional seed.

In 2007 a Dutch national project was conducted to coordinate direct communication between growers and seed producers on the variety needs of the farmers and the possibilities for the seed producers to

deliver such varieties in due time. A table of missing and desired varieties in the organic assortment of several important crops was created and seed producers showed their possibilities and impossibilities to meet this demand within the coming years. A concrete, long-term perspective for a more or less sufficient minimum assortment of organic seed of the main varieties per crop was the result.

A next step to gain more level playing field for certain crops, we would like to facilitate an international attuning of variety assortment and derogation policies between countries of the same climatic conditions and with a certain overlap in variety requirements. The focus would be mostly on the larger biannual vegetable crops being exported between the countries, because there competition in product price counts.

#### **1.4. Participants**

The round table meeting focussed on the production and market conditions of North West European countries. As the meeting aims at negotiating and attuning the specific minimum of required variety assortment with the possibilities of the committed seed producers, we therefore in the first place have invited key-players of North Western European countries (Denmark, UK, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany). But also key-players from other EU member states were very welcome to join. Eventually some 40 participants from 13 countries were present: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom. The participants represented: seed companies involved in organic seed production, agricultural advisors, scientists, database managers, control bodies managing the derogation system, representatives from the national ministries of agriculture of which some were also members of the SCOF<sup>1</sup> in Brussels.

#### **1.5. Organisation**

The meeting is organised under the umbrella of the European Consortium for Organic Plant Breeding (ECO-PB) by E.T. Lammerts van Bueren and C. ter Berg of the Louis Bolk Instituut in the Netherlands, and K.-P. Wilbois of the Research Institute for Organic Agriculture-FiBL in Germany. Bejo Seeds in Warmenhuizen hosted the meeting during the Bejo Open Days. It was financially supported by the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality through the Bioconnect research program on Organic Plant breeding and Seed production, The Netherlands.

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<sup>1</sup> Standing Committee on Organic Farming in Brussels

## 2. Programme of the meeting

### Thursday, September 25, 2008

13.00 - 13.15	Welcome and opening and aims of the workshop	E. Lammerts van Bueren, Chair ECO-PB
13.15 – 13.30	Short introduction of participants	all
13.30 – 15.00	State-of the-art and possible measures to raise the use of organic seed in organic farming per country	Country representatives
15.00 – 15.30	Seed producer presenting their view on the development regarding organic seed trade	Bejo Seeds (biennial crops), Vitalis Organic Seeds (annual crops), Bingenheimer Saatgut AG (Open pollinating varieties)
15.30 – 16.00	Coffee break	
16.00 – 16.30	Questions, remarks and short discussion regarding the previous inventory	all
16.30 – 17.00	Dutch projects/measures to stimulate use of organic seed and the need for international cooperation	C. van Winden, Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality
17.00 – 17.45	Presenting lists of potential candidate crops for which now or maybe in the near future no more derogation will be given	Country representatives
17.45 – 18.45	Start of the discussion and identification of cross-national potential candidate crops	all
19.00 – 21.00	Dinner	all

### Friday, September 26

8.30 – 10.00	Follow up of previous afternoon discussion to come to a list of candidate crops for international cooperation and cross-country agreements	Structured discussion, all
10.00 – 10.30	Coffee break	
10.30 – 11.30	Further measures and possible cross-country agreements regarding a increase in organic seed use	Structured discussion, all
11.30 – 12.00	Summary of the results and agreements for national follow-ups	Plenary, All
12.00 – 12.30	Final remarks and closure	E. Lammerts van Bueren, Chair ECO-PB

### 3. Results of the discussions

The results of this meeting are reported below by grouping the issues that were discussed in the plenary sessions.

#### 3.1. Need for harmonisation

- There is a need for harmonisation in the language being used among the countries. For instance, there are several words for the same type of categories, such as 'red list', national annex, or category 1.
- The category for general derogation is interpreted in different ways. Some countries use this category to list those species for which there are no varieties at all available (such as flowers). Other countries use this category for those species that have no or some varieties but no main varieties.
- The participants of the meeting pointed out that there is a need for a stricter and more harmonised management of the derogation criteria between member states.
- It might not be possible to harmonise derogation procedures but at least one could start with harmonising the template/format of the national reports on the procedures in each country. At present, hardly no comparison between the data of the countries is possible. (see recommendation of Organic Revision report, see Appendix 3.)

#### 3.2. Issues concerning the text of the regulation

- The text of the regulation is not tight enough to facilitate or even understand and implement the regulation in the different Member States. (see also next point)
- There is a need for a good procedure to define "appropriateness of varieties", as there is now a fairly broad interpretation of appropriateness among the member states. 'Available' does not mean 'suitable' or 'appropriate'. It has been noted that appropriateness includes not only market criteria but also agronomic criteria, such as the availability as pelleted seeds for those species where this is a prerequisite for sowing mechanically.
- Amendments or rewording the regulation text is not easy but small changes or amendments are requested and are considered to be possible, such as opening up the (European) annex for subspecies, and including a definition of 'appropriateness'.

#### 3.3. Near steps for lifting derogations in the future

- It was suggested that it would be good to get rid of general-derogations category as soon as possible for main crops where organic seeds of varieties are available. General derogation is needed for certain groups of species (e.g. ornamental flowers) but not for main crops. This is to be agreed in SCOF.
- Another argument of reducing the use of the general-derogation category is that this category does not provide insight in the varieties requested so that seed producers do not get a feedback.
- It was suggested that for species where there is sufficiently organic seed produced in a neighbouring country one should be able to phase out derogations in the near future. Access to each other's database.

- It would be very helpful to get insight into not only in given derogations, but also into the (increase of) the use of organic seed in the national reports. Therefore there is a need to develop a way to better record the use and increase of organic seed in each country.

### 3.4. Databases

- Some countries are dependent on global companies for providing seed of certain species for which no domestic production occurs, worthwhile to strive for a common database for countries with common markets. Communication between databases should be made possible.
- To allow mutual access to databases of neighbouring countries harmonisation of databases with English names and Latin are a precondition.
- There are complaints of farmers that not all available organically produced varieties are listed in databases. However, it was noted that the databases are an instrument for derogation procedures in the first place. In most cases the websites of the seed companies show all varieties available.
- It was suggested to keep organic seed free from cms-varieties derived from proto-/cytoplasm fusion and to provide information on database to allow farmers to make a more conscious choice.
- It was suggested that there is a role for the Standing Committee (SCOF) to come to a stricter implementation of the national databases in each member state, as there are still countries with not an interactive, computerised database.

### 3.5. Involvement of more stakeholders

- To stimulate growers to use organic seed it would help when supermarkets show more commitment, e.g. by giving priority to products with organic seed, or by compensating the higher costs due to seed price. The question is how to gain more commitment of supermarkets?
- There are three different categories of companies:
  - committed to organic,
  - waiting along the sideline to step in,
  - against organic principles and will probably never step in.
- It was suggested that at a certain point the organic sector should decide to move forward with those seed companies that are now committed to the organic sector and should stop waiting for those seed companies that will probably never enter this market.
- It was suggested that official variety trials for organic agriculture should not allow varieties that have no future in the organic sector because they come from companies that do not show interest in organic seed production, or because such varieties that do not comply with the values of organic farming (e.g. cms-hybrids based on protoplast fusion).

### 3.6. Derogations

- Competent authorities should take their responsibilities. Some certification bodies within one country are in conflict of interest due to competition.
- Derogations within category of single-derogation can be dealt with by certification bodies, derogations within category of no-derogations should be dealt with by expert groups

(providing guidelines for appropriateness and equivalent varieties). When these expert groups judge that no derogations are needed as there is a sufficient amount of the main varieties available, derogations should not be possible.

- Some countries expressed the fear for court cases when a category with no more derogations will be implemented. However, the ministry of NL said, that they do not fear to loose such a court case since the process of establishing those Cat.-1-lists is comprehensive and based on expert opinion. Besides, in exceptional cases a derogation can still be granted by the competent authority.
- There is a need for evaluation and exchange on how in different member states expert groups work, how certification bodies decide, and how in general national procedures are implemented. It would support the process of learning and improving when such information is part of national report! Harmonising the template of national reports in such a way would make evaluation of derogation policies possible. This evaluation could also lead to defining guidelines for derogations.
- It was concluded that without clear guidelines in fact authorities that deal with derogations have no tools to decide.
- In NL the ministry introduced a 'flexibility rule' within the 'category 1' (no derogations) to allow rapid introduction of new varieties with specific added values, like new resistances. The precondition to allow derogation in this category for one year (two years for biannual crops) is that the involved seed company is prepared to give a written declaration saying that it will produce this specific variety for the organic market in the next year. See appendix.
- It was concluded that derogation rules as such are necessary but are a weak tool to realise an increase in the use of organic seed; the increase should come from the positive commitment to use organic seed to show reliability of the organic sector to consumers.

### 3.7. Expert groups

- It was concluded that expert groups in each country are/should be the basis for discussing the appropriateness of the available assortment and for support to create a category-with-no-derogations. Certification bodies cannot do their work properly without support of expert groups.
- As a consequence, the coordination and facilitation of the yearly expert group meetings should be financially supported by the government as it is a precondition for implementation of national policy on derogations.

### 3.8. Discussion on crops with few derogations and thus near to a category-with-no- derogations, such as lettuce, maize, wheat

Due to shortage of time the discussion was limited to Lettuce, concerning the division in crop groups and possibilities to escape in case downy mildew resistance breakdown.

- NL will show criteria for their 'category 1', and will show their 'flexibility rule' for downy mildew resistance. See appendix.
- Agreement to divide lettuce in subgroups, in order to make it easier to have subgroups in different derogation categories.
- Move lettuce at least from general derogation to the single derogation category!
- Rijk Zwaan notes that lettuce is easy to produce, so with more communication between growers and seed companies on desired varieties, they can be provided.

- Nevertheless, the majority of organic growers use organic lettuce seeds despite or due to the system!
- Steps are needed to reduce number of derogations; creating a category 1 could be a solution.

### **3.9. Crops with missing main varieties, such as red beet, carrot**

- One of the problems to arrive at an appropriate assortment of varieties is that in some cases specific hybrid varieties do not produce seeds organically in sufficient quantities.
- Start with growers to make required/recommended lists of varieties. Don't include varieties from companies that will not produce organic seed when making inventory of required/recommended varieties.

### **3.10. Follow-up of this meeting.**

- The participants urged for continuing such meetings on a yearly base. UK (Elm Farm) will consider hosting such a meeting in 2009.
- The participants advised to include countries such as Spain and Italy, and to include both horticultural and arable crops.
- The participants would like to receive pdf's of the power point presentations
- The participants would like ECO-PB to send a letter with clear recommendations to the SCOF based on a common view from the meeting.

## Appendix 1. Dutch interpretation of Appropriateness

**Dutch criteria for assessment by the expert groups of the available assortment of varieties per species to advice on category 1 (no derogation), see yearly LBI-report from the expert groups to the Dutch ministry of Agriculture, Food quality and Nature:**

- Are the main varieties available?
- Does the assortment cover all cultivation and use categories?
- Is subdivision in subspecies required?
- Are varieties within a (sub)species equivalent enough?
- Are there more than two suppliers within a (sub)species?
- In case of a small crop (area) with only one supplier but with appropriate varieties, confirmed by the derogation list of the previous year(s), than the (sub)species can nevertheless be listed in category 1.
- When the assortment for a (sub)species is considered as not appropriate, what is needed (which varieties) to achieve an appropriate assortment of the coming year(s)?

## Appendix 2. Dutch flexibility rule for the use of conventionally produced seed of (sub)species listed in category 1

### *Rationale:*

The life cycle of varieties in the organic agriculture may be longer than in conventional agriculture, nevertheless farmers want to be able to switch to a new and promising variety as soon as possible. New varieties can always be tested with a derogation for trails for the use of conventionally produced, untreated seed. However, when a new variety of a (sub)species in category 1 (with no derogation) has been tested and proven to be of interest for several farmers the use on a larger scale than merely for trials can be delayed by one or two years because first seed of such a variety need to be produced organically.

The Dutch ministry recognises this problem and has implemented the so-called ‘flexibility rule’ for category 1, to allow growers under certain conditions, to get a derogation for the use of conventionally produced, untreated seed of a specific variety.

### *Conditions:*

- The involved seed company must be prepared to produce organic seed on a short term so that seed will be available in the next growing season (in case of a biennial crop within two seasons), and must give a written confirmation to the control body.
- The grower involved must add a motivation to his/her derogation request to show that the new variety has an added value compared to the existing organic varieties.
- It must concern a new variety (no longer than 1, 5 year ago on the national list).

### Appendix 3. Suggestions for a template for national report (see Thommen et al., 2007. Report on criteria list and evaluation guide for derogation regime, Organic Revision)<sup>2</sup>

#### template for annual seed reporting

Subject	Recommendation
<b>Format</b>	Excel file for internal use Protected Pdf-file for publication
<b>Species denomination</b>	Latin name, based on the common catalogue of varieties additional English common crop names Local Denomination
<b>Variety denomination</b>	Entry of variety names according the common catalogue of varieties Quality check: the variety names should be proofed and smoothened by an expert before reporting to Brussels
<b>Subsummaries</b>	Subsummaries for seed quantity and number of authorisations should be made on variety <u>and</u> on species level, eventually on crop group (e.g. vegetables) level >< Not in the same tablesheet! Can be done centrally by Pivot-Table as well
<b>Units</b>	If possible the subsummaries should be straighten to two units (number of seeds and kilogram)
<b>Reasons</b>	The reasons for derogation calls should be clearly indicated and also be counted and subsummarized.

#### dataset for annual seed reporting

Raw data as excel-file = easy pivot tables  
One row = one dataset = one individual call

Excel table with the following columns (parameters):

Species/crop Name	Scientific name (latin) according given list (e.g. organicXseeds)
Species/crop Name	English name
Species/crop Name	Local language
Subspecies variety group	Local language and eventually in english
Variety name	Original data entry by farmer or derogation body
Variety name corrected	Acc. European Catalogue or with appendix CV (for non-listed Conservation Varieties)
Justification	reasons a, b, c (1- 10), or d according article 5 (1) EU Reg 1452/03 for seed)
Quantity	2 Units: kg or number of seeds
Acreage	Unit: Hectares
Derogation Status	"Granted" or "not granted"

<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.organic-revision.org/pub/D\\_5\\_3\\_European\\_seed\\_report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.organic-revision.org/pub/D_5_3_European_seed_report_FINAL.pdf)

## Appendix 4. Participants list

Manfred Weinhappel	Austrian Agency for Health and Food Safety- Institute for Seed	Austria
Femke Temmerman	PCBT vzw	Belgium
Svetla Bossolova	Executive Agency of Variety Testing, Field Inspection and Field Control /EAVTFISC/	Bulgaria
Zlatan Aleksandrov	Executive Agency of Variety Testing, Field Inspection and Field Control /EAVTFISC/	Bulgaria
Inger Bertelsen	Danish Agricultural Advisory Service	Denmark
Lars Holdensen	The Danish Plant Directorate	Denmark
Richard de Visser	Dansk Landbrugsrådgivning	Denmark
Rey Frederic	ITAB	France
Eckhard Reiners	Bioland e.v.	Germany
Christoph Stephan	BDP - Bundesverband Deutscher Pflanzenzüchter e.V.	Germany
Gebhard Rossmann	Bingenheimer Saatgut AG	Germany
Klaus-Peter Wilbios	FIBL Deutschland E.v.	Germany
Paul Rubitschek	Hild Samen	Germany
Rudolf Regnat	Forschungsring	Germany
Jonathan Hyams	Hazera Genetics	Israel
Velta Evelone	State Plant Protection Service	Latvia
Asta Ramaškevičienė	State Enterprise Agri-information and Rural Business Centre	Lithuania
Neda Jakubauskiene	Ministry of Agriculture of republic of Lithuania, Food Safety and Quality Department	Lithuania
Coen ter Berg	Louis Bolk Instituut	Netherlands
Heleen Bos	Rijk Zwaan	Netherlands
Chris van Winden	Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality	Netherlands
Lianne Kersbergen	Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality	Netherlands
Edith Lammerts van Bueren	Louis Bolk Instituut	Netherlands
Nanne Veldhuyzen van Zanten	Nickerson-Zwaan	Netherlands
Raoul Haegens	Naktuinbouw	Netherlands
Maike Raaijmakers	Biologica	Netherlands
Jan Velema	Vitalis Biologische Zaden BV	Netherlands
Fred van de Crommert	Bejo Zaden	Netherlands
G. Ekblad	Swedish Board of Agriculture	Sweden
Andreas Thommen	FiBL, Research Institute for Organic Agriculture	Switzerland
Niall Arbuckle	Greenvale AP	United Kingdom
Phil Sumption	Garden Organic	United Kingdom
Robin Fransella	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)	United Kingdom
Roger Hitchings	The Organic Research Centre	United Kingdom
Vincent Andrew	Elsoms Seeds Ltd.	United Kingdom

