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March 19, 2013

Ms. Michelle Arsenault
National Organic Standards Board
USDA-AMS-NOP
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 2648-So, Ag Stop 0268
Washington, DC 20250-0268

Re: AMS-NOP-12-0070

Dear Ms. Arsenault:

Pennsylvania Certified Organic (PCO) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments to the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) regarding the **Crops Subcommittee's** proposal on **Oxytetracycline**. PCO is a NOP-accredited certifying agent that certifies more than 700 operations, including around 165 crops operations, 385 livestock operations, 120 processor/handler operations and various combinations of these categories.

PCO supports the subcommittee's majority position to extend the expiration date for oxytetracycline to October 21, 2016. Furthermore, PCO would support an even longer extension, such as reinstating the sunset process for this material, to ensure that enough research and education of alternatives is available to organic apple and pear producers.

An extended expiration date of the allowed use of oxytetracycline is needed for researchers to continue exploring and testing alternatives for fire blight disease control. Research has been under way at the request of NOSB and NOP, but proven alternative practices are not yet available for producers in all geographic regions or for each commodity (apple and pear). Recent funding cuts resulting from the partial 2008 Farm Bill extension are sure to stall current research efforts by organizations like the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI). Also, the subcommittee must consider that even after an alternative is demonstrated to be effective, it will take time for producers to be educated on the alternative and for the alternative to become commercially available to organic apple and pear producers. Researchers and educators will not have much time to complete these steps in time for a 2014 expiration date as the minority position wants, and may even be a challenge to accomplish by 2016.

Assuring the Integrity of Organic Products in the Marketplace

While the research into alternative fire blight controls continues, the subcommittee should be reminded that current use of oxytetracycline is neither widespread nor unrestricted. Synthetic disease control materials are only allowed to be used after an operator has implemented cultural and non-synthetic disease control methods and those methods are unsuccessful at controlling the disease. Also, the current listing of oxytetracycline on the National List limits its use only to control a single specific disease, fire blight, and only to treat two specific crops, apples and pears.

Ending the use of this material before alternatives are proven would have significant effect on organic apple and pear production. Oxytetracycline as a last resort keeps orchards in business when other means of physical, biological, and cultural practices are not effective. Operators might choose not to be organic if they fear they might lose their organic certification to fire blight by not having oxytetracycline or streptomycin to use as a last resort. At least one of PCO's certified apple producers reported they would not likely continue organic certification if they do not have a reliable tool to prevent fire blight from destroying their orchards in order to preserve their organic certification. The subcommittee must be aware of the potentially significant effect that allowing oxytetracycline to expire before alternative disease control methods are available would have on the production of organic apple and pears. Therefore, the subcommittee should not vote to remove oxytetracycline from the National List until an economic impact review by the USDA is performed and available for review by the subcommittee.

PCO supports the resolution presented by the subcommittee that commits the organic community to phase out this material, provided that the step down is in a gradual fashion and allows operators to transition their production practices to utilize alternative methods of controlling fire blight. PCO educates our members about the regulatory status of currently listed synthetic substances, and has informed our members of the impending expiration of oxytetracycline and streptomycin and the need to find alternatives.

PCO appreciates the opportunity to provide comments and thanks the NOSB members for their careful consideration.

Sincerely,



Johanna Miranda
Policy Director