Accredited Certifiers Association, Inc.
Accredited certifying agents working together to ensure the integrity of organic certification in the United States

March 19, 2013

Ms. Michelle Arsenault, Special Assistant
National Organic Standards Board
USDA–AMS–NOP
1400 Independence Ave. SW.,
Room 2648-So., Mail Stop 0268
Washington, DC 20250–0268;

Re: Docket AMS-NOP-12-0070
NOSB Crops Subcommittee **Petitioned Material Proposal for Oxytetracycline**

Dear Ms. Arsenault:

We thank you for this opportunity to provide comment on the Crops Subcommittee proposal on oxytetracycline. The debate surrounding this issue is not just particular to the organic tree fruit industry; your decisions on how this synthetic material may or may not be used for the control of a devastating crop disease will set precedent and impact future considerations in the organic community.

The Accredited Certifiers Association (ACA) represents 48 foreign and domestic USDA accredited certifying agents. Our comments were developed through a Working Group of interested ACA members with input solicited from our entire membership.

Support of Majority Recommendation
The Crops Subcommittee *proposes to remove the existing expiration date of October 21, 2014, for oxytetracycline and replace that with a new expiration date of October 21, 2016. This would be for use in both apples and pears for control of fire blight.*

If effective control tools are not available and fire blight threatens the viability of an orchard despite preventative efforts, ACA believes farmers will prioritize their agriculture livelihood over retaining organic certification and access to the organic market. It is imperative that you develop an understanding of the research challenges, existing tree fruit practices, and the patterns of this destructive disease, so that arbitrary dates or intangible incentives do not result in an unnecessary loss of organic acreage.

ACA supports the Crops Subcommittee's acknowledgement that any expiration date for oxytetracycline must allow time for research on alternatives to draw statistically significant conclusions and for those alternatives to go through the process to become commercially available in the marketplace. By allowing this time, the Subcommittee will ensure growers have adequate tools to remain in organic production and provide consumers access to organic products.

Support of Committee Resolution
The Crops Subcommittee has also put forward the following resolution: *The National Organic Standards Board is committed to the phase out of this material. Between now and 2016 the Board urges growers and certifiers to include in organic systems plans an annual increase in the extent and/or number of alternative practices and materials that are trialed for controlling fire blight. In addition, the board strongly advocates to USDA a high priority for increased support for research into these alternative practices and materials.*

Fire blight management has been and always will be a multi-pronged approach. Current USDA organic regulations prohibit producers from relying solely on the use of any material for disease control, and fire blight management is no different. Producers may only apply synthetic materials when physical, biological, and cultural practices are not effective, provided conditions are documented and approved in their organic system plan [NOS §205.206(e)]. The certification process effectively verifies that growers are following their plan, and operating in compliance with organic requirements.

There is undeniable evidence that the tree fruit industry, and organic community on a whole, is committed to developing and implementing a non-antibiotic approach to controlling fire blight in apple and pear production. ACA supports the resolution put forth by the Crops Subcommittee. As certifiers we will do our part to move the resolution forward, and throughout the two year extension the use of oxytetracycline will continue to be highly regulated.

In Conclusion
The organic tree fruit industry is diverse in site selection, acres, varieties grown, climate, elevation, soils, and management practices. The occurrence and risk of fire blight infection varies wildly from year to year and is dependant on many environmental factors. Regardless of this diversity and variation, the current disease management standards and certification process are effectively implemented. The regulation has proven to be a sustainable and sensible approach to managing plant diseases that are prevalent in the larger agricultural communities.

Phasing out antibiotics offers the NOSB an opportunity to engage and lead agriculture experts, growers, and consumers in a public-private effort to cooperatively strengthen the organic label from farm to table. We appreciate your efforts to find solutions in support of the organic grower, handler, and consumer alike.

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia Kane

Patricia Kane
Coordinator