



EcoSocial Certification Adds Fair Trade Values to Organic Products in the U.S. Market

by Jackie Bowen, General Manager of Agriculture and Organic Programs at NSF International



EcoSocial certification promotes ethical trade by integrating organic, economic, social and environmental criteria in a single verification program, which is now available in the U.S. The certification verifies total traceability and assures consumers that rigorous standards were met in the production, processing and trade of organic agricultural, body care or textile products, throughout the entire supply chain. Previously, U.S. companies interested in multiple certifications, such as “fair trade” and “certified organic,” had to pursue separate certifications.

EcoSocial certification allows organic handlers (traders, distributors and processors) in the U.S. to demonstrate that their products or ingredients (such as organic sugar, oil, cocoa, soybeans and honey) are ethically and traceably sourced. Certification may also apply to U.S. organic producers with contract workers.

EcoSocial certification complements organic certification and builds on the fair trade commitment many consumers support. An independent survey conducted on behalf of global public health and safety organization NSF International showed that 76 percent of consumers prefer a product that

EcoSocial in a Nutshell

- Applies only to certified organic products
- Integrates organic, social, environmental and fair trade criteria in a single certification
- Aligns with the world’s most important development agreements
- Encourages continuous improvement
- Connects conscious consumers and organized farmers and workers

has been independently tested and certified as sustainable or “green.” The same survey found that independent certification marks on organic products are important to 39 percent of all consumers and 50 percent of safety-conscious consumers.

The EcoSocial certification program was launched in 2004 by Brazil-based certifier IBD, and was brought to the U.S. in 2011 through a partnership with Quality Assurance International (QAI), the only approved EcoSocial certification body in North America. This joint initiative streamlines the auditing process and reduces certification costs for the growing number of companies opting for both organic and EcoSocial certification. The program allows flexibility to accommodate best practices for a specific region, culture or product, and applies exclusively to certified organic products.



How the Program Works

The EcoSocial program empowers farmers and workers in developing countries, whose products and ingredients are exported to the rest of the world, to assess their situation, identify opportunities, develop goals and implement solutions. Goals are determined collaboratively with input from workers at all levels through a management committee of stakeholders. After prioritizing the demands facing the organization, the committee selects at least two environmental and two social improvement projects to promote better quality of life and increased conservation. For example, a rice producer in Thailand chose to guarantee access to drinking water for the community and improve children’s education. Annual on-site audits ensure the continuity of these ongoing improvement programs.

The EcoSocial program was developed in Brazil from the ground up, by and for farmers. It was the first fair trade program based on a “south to north” view — Priorities are set by growers in emerging countries based on self-identified goals, not by developed countries based on external evaluations. It is also a program that includes participatory management (where workers are represented in decision making).

What’s Behind the Label?

EcoSocial certification ensures organic products and ingredients were produced in compliance with all country labor, environmental and human rights laws as well as International

IBD

CERTIFICATIONS

Labour Organization (ILO) standards. This includes offering fair wages and working conditions; providing adequate housing, medical care and educational opportunities; and protecting soils from erosion and waterways from pollution. Specific critical criteria are:

- Zero gaps in traceability
- Legal and traceable land ownership
- Documented procedures for contract labor
- No social, cultural, political, religious, ethnic, racial, sexual or age discrimination
- No child or forced labor
- Healthy and safe working conditions
- Only planned, legal and justified land clearing
- No unauthorized contamination of rivers with irregular solid or liquid disposals
- No hunting, capture or trade of wild animals
- No use or handling of genetically modified organisms (GMOs)

Operators must also meet environmental, social and economic development criteria, such as soil management, biodiversity, worker education and training, support for working women and the elderly, and fair trade principles. The program does not regulate product price, which is linked to production costs and market value, and profits and premiums are re-invested in the project.

EcoSocial certification is based on standards and recommendations established by organizations such as the International Labour Organization, International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International and the Social Accountability in Sustainable Agriculture Project. Additionally, principles established by international cooperation agreements related to social and environmental management, such as Agenda 21, Global Pact Program, Millennium Development Goals, Earth Charter and Human Rights Declaration, as well as standards like SA8000, ISO 14000 and BS 8800, were taken into consideration in creating EcoSocial standards.

Credibility of the Seal

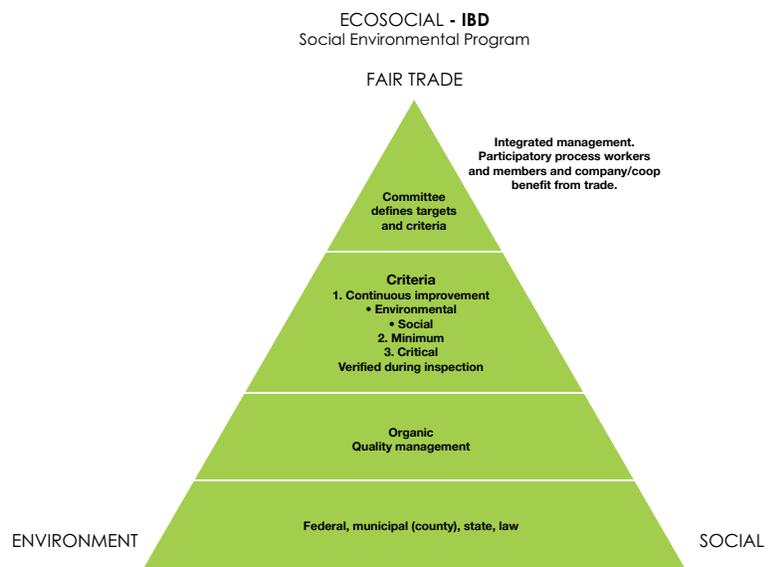
EcoSocial certification embodies total traceability and assures consumers that the product is grown, produced, handled and

shipped in compliance with strict standards throughout the entire supply chain. It is the first certification that requires organic producers and their partners to make their projects and funding transparent to the public.

QAI is the only approved EcoSocial certification body in North America. IBD, based in Botucatu, Brazil since its founding in 1983, has a deep understanding of developing countries and a solid network of auditors worldwide. IBD has inspected over 5,000 farmers on more than 520,000 farming hectares and 2,500,000 wild crop harvest hectares. IBD certification is recognized worldwide. It is the only Brazilian certification body with IFOAM, ISO 65 (EEC 834/2007), Demeter and USDA/NOP accreditations. It operates within the scopes of Demeter, EcoSocial, Non-GMO, Cosmetics and Textiles.

The Certification Process

EcoSocial certification requires producers to meet minimum criteria, including organic certification, environmental and social audits for compliance to standards, and additional improvement projects. Handlers can obtain EcoSocial certification for products that have already been certified as organic, or get organic and EcoSocial certifications at the same time.



Organic certification requires annual inspections of organic production and handling sites to ensure that all USDA organic standards are followed. The process reviews every step of the supply chain to verify that organic integrity is maintained: from the land on which the product is grown to the producers and post-harvest, processing and packaging facilities handling the product.

EcoSocial inspections differ for producers and handlers. Certification for U.S. handlers requires a document review verifying that all product ingredients are legitimately certified and traceable back to the supplier, and were produced without comingling. Certification for producers worldwide involves onsite inspections to verify compliance with all organic, fair trade, environmental and social criteria (including completing a corrective action plan if needed) as well as auditing the results of continuous improvement projects. Inspections review working conditions, health and safety, infrastructure, equipment, and training and business records. Environmental management of forestry and water resources, liquid and gas effluents, and solid waste is also audited.

Labeling Options for Handlers

Similar to organic regulations, EcoSocial certification has multiple classification and labeling options:

- Products containing at least 95 percent certified EcoSocial ingredients can display the EcoSocial seal on the front or back panel.
- Products made with 50 to 94.99 percent EcoSocial ingredients may display the EcoSocial seal on the front or back panel with the wording “Made with EcoSocial ingredients.”
- Products containing 49.99 percent or fewer certified EcoSocial ingredients may not use the seal, but can use the expression “IBD EcoSocial certified product” next to the certified ingredient.

For more information, contact Jonathan Lackie at 858-200-9708 or QAI@qai-inc.com.



About the Author: Jaclyn Bowen is the General Manager of Quality Assurance International (QAI), part of the NSF International family of public health and safety companies. NSF develops American National Standards through a transparent, consensus-based process with representatives from industry, consumer groups, regulatory bodies and academia. For more information, contact consumer@qai-inc.com.