

# the *Communicator*

Organic Crop Improvement Association International || Winter 2024

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# President's Message

Greetings! I hope everyone had a safe and festive holiday season. Your OCIA board of directors wish all of you a prosperous and fruitful upcoming new year! This past year has presented us with many opportunities and a few challenges. As always, we are always striving to make OCIA the premier place for your organic certification.

One of our main objectives is to grow our membership. You will find many of our staff members out and about this upcoming year. Some of the trade shows we plan to attend include: Guelph Organic conference in Guelph, Ontario; Natural Products Expo West in Anaheim, California; Expo East in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Northern Plains Food and Farming conference in Aberdeen, South Dakota; Great Plains Growers conference in St. Joseph, Missouri; and Marbleseed Organic Farming conference in La Crosse, Wisconsin. If you happen to be at any of these events, please stop at our booth and say 'hi'. As always, we would certainly appreciate it if you could refer a friend to OCIA!

The board of directors and

members of our staff also took time this past November to travel to Huatulco, Mexico. We were able to conduct a semiannual, in-person board meeting and visit some of our farmers and processors in the area. Even though farming practices in Mexico are completely different than what I'm familiar with, the end goals are the same – having your crops certified as quickly and as efficiently as possible all within organic guidelines. A special thanks goes out to Julia Perez for organizing the meeting site, conducting the conference with our local members, acting as a translator, and facilitating the excursions we took out in the countryside. Turnout was good and we hope to do more in person board meetings like this in the future. It certainly is great when OCIA producers can meet directly with the people running the organization and address their cares and concerns face to face.

Please be aware that our annual OCIA AGMM (Annual General Membership Meeting) will be taking place on February 8th, 2024 in Council Bluffs, Iowa. This meeting

will be conducted using a hybrid format which will allow members to participate either in person or via Zoom. Whatever way you decide to partake, please plan to attend so your voice is heard. Remember, we are a farmer led organization that listens to and values your input! I look forward to seeing many of you in person or virtually at the meeting.

Lastly, I would like to thank our staff for the great work they do. Executive director, Amanda Brewster; Director of Accreditation and Inspector Services, Cindy Elder; Director of Finance, Deana McKinstry; and Director of Marketing, Kelsey Sejkora are always engaged behind the scenes making OCIA run as smoothly as possible. Organizations are as good as the people behind them, and I firmly believe OCIA is in good hands to assist you!

*Chris Jaworski  
OCIA International  
Board of Directors  
President*

# Executive Director's Report



Greetings OCIA International Membership!

OCIA International Wishes you a Very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

This time of year is busy at International as we prepare for renewal information to be sent to all OCIA Chapter Member Operators. Cycle one files are due to the International Office on March 1st, Cycle 2 April 1st and Cycle 3 June 1st. We appreciate timely submission to keep the process running smoothly. Late fees will be billed for applications received after the deadline indicated.

Our goal is to make a decision on each file within 60 days of receiving the inspection report. We do the best we can to achieve this goal. We are currently training new reviewers. We appreciate your continued patience during this transition. Please contact us with any concerns you may have.

The Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) is a USDA Program investing up to \$100 Million over five years in cooperative agreement with non-profit organizations across the United States who will partner with others to provide technical assistance and wrap-around activities. In 2023, OCIA collaborated with 18 Regional TOPP partners, and we are seeking to grow the number to 20+ in 2024/2025. There are 52 TOPP events scheduled to be completed by January 1, 2024.

TOPP is a collaborative effort involving many partners working together towards a common goal of providing mentoring services, technical assistance, community building and organic workforce development. OCIA International is actively forming partnerships to serve transitioning and existing organic farmers.

Finally, the USDA will implement Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) on March 19, 2024. The new regulations will impact all segments of the organic industry. Please refer to our website [www.ocia.org](http://www.ocia.org) for updated information.

OCIA International works hard to provide our certified operators with excellent support and customer service. We thank you for your continued support and look forward to serving you in the future. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

I wish you a happy, healthy, and prosperous 2024.

*Amanda Brewster  
OCIA International  
Executive Director*

# Treasurer's Report



Greetings to everyone,

The harvest season was warm and dry here in Northeast Nebraska. I had a great corn yield with a whole field average of just below 200 bushels! Hope everyone had a safe harvest.

Looking at the financial picture of OCIA International, on the income side of the ledger other operator fees are above last year and close to budget. Membership and certification fees are running behind year ago levels by 8% and 5% respectively. The bright spot is the other income category is coming in at 18% above last year. Accounts receivables are running about 8 – 10% above year ago levels.

Secondary inspections and testing costs are up 15% over last year.

One of the largest increases in expenses this year was accreditation and government relations. It has almost doubled, going from \$30,700 to \$57,500.

The net income for the year is below budget at the present time.

Hope everyone has a safe and blessed new year.

*Randy Mosel  
OCIA International  
Board of Directors  
Treasurer*

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**OCIA International Members are welcome to submit items for inclusion in the quarterly issue of the Communicator.**

Please direct submissions, article ideas, letters, address changes, advertisements, inquiries, and/or comments to info@ocia.org.

Articles and advertisement deadline for the Winter 2024 Communicator is March 1, 2024.

# OCIA Board of Directors and Committees

## 2023 OCIA International Board of Directors

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Carolyn Lane, Secretary, USA  
Randy Mosel, Treasurer, USA  
Jack Geiger, Chair, USA  
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Carolyn Lane, EO

## Research & Education welcomes new Operations Director



The OCIA Research & Education board of directors welcomed new Operations Director, Dr. Sarah Diamond, in November. Dr. Diamond comes to OCIA Research & Education with extensive experience managing and leading non-profit organizations. Her areas of expertise include volunteer development and philanthropy in

community-based non-profits.

Dr. Diamond holds a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Education and a Master of Agriculture in Agricultural Education from Oklahoma State University. She obtained her Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership from Kansas State University. Her area of study for her master's degree included adult education and organic agriculture. The focus

of her doctoral research encompassed volunteer leadership development and the motivation and retention of volunteers in community-based non-profit organizations.

In addition to her interest and background in leading non-profit organizations, Dr. Diamond has a passion for education and fund development. More recently, she has discovered a desire to help guide families who hope to start small farms or are interested in experienced farm living.

In 2016, Dr. Diamond established the non-profit, The Heart of MFB, to raise awareness and support for families impacted by congenital heart defects.

Additionally, Dr. Diamond founded Diamond Grans and Consulting where she provides grant writing services to non-profits and small businesses. She is working to develop tools and resources that will be valuable for those wanting to form or grow their own organizations.

Dr. Diamond and her family live in south central Kansas. The OCIA Research & Education board of directors is pleased to have Dr. Diamond joining the team, and they look forward to growing OCIA Research & Education with Dr. Diamond's leadership.

Dr. Diamond can be reached at [ocia04.re@gmail.com](mailto:ocia04.re@gmail.com) or by calling 402-477-2323 ext. 102.



# USDA UPDATE **STRENGTHENING** SOE is coming.

**The USDA will implement Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) on March 19, 2024. The new regulations represent the largest update to organic standards in the last two decades, and they will impact all segments of the organic industry.**

**Many operators wonder how SOE will impact their operations. While the impact will vary based on an operation's scope and complexity, the following frequently asked questions provide a basic guide for how SOE might impact your operation.**

## ***What is Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE)?***

Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE), the largest update to the USDA organic regulations since 2002, will go into effect on March 19, 2024. The comprehensive update will impact all aspects of the organic supply chain, with handlers and processors experiencing the most significant changes. New SOE rules will require almost all handlers and processors of organic products to obtain organic certification to continue using the USDA Organic Seal on their products. This is a marked change from previous organic regulations which included little oversight for this segment of the organic industry.

## ***What is the purpose of SOE?***

The goal of the sweeping update is to strengthen the oversight and enforcement of organic regulations to ensure the integrity of the organic supply chain. Guaranteeing organic integrity requires:

- Transparent supply chains
- Trusted interactions between businesses
- Tools to verify product legitimacy

Prior to SOE, mechanisms for guaranteeing these necessary elements were inconsistently implemented. Increasingly complex supply chains that crossed large geographic areas added to this difficult task.

## ***Why is SOE necessary now?***

The organic industry has experienced massive growth since the USDA first implemented organic regulations in the 1990s. Between 2012 and 2021 alone annual organic sales increased by nearly \$30 billion. While other sectors of the economy stagnated during the Covid-19 pandemic, the organic sector continued to see growth due to ever increasing consumer demand.

Meeting this growing consumer demand has required increasingly complex organic supply chains. In the 1990s when organic regulations were first implemented, most organic products were produced and sold in local and regional markets.



# ORGANIC ENFORCEMENT

## Is your operation ready?

Today, the organic supply chain often crosses countries and continents.

Consider the supply chain associated with an organic egg.

In the 1990s, the supply chain for an organic egg almost always existed within a small geographic area:

- A certified organic farmer produced organic corn.
- The farmer transported organic corn to a neighboring certified egg producer.
- The organic egg producer used the organic corn as part of their organic chicken feed.
- The egg producer collected their organic eggs and transported them to a local farmers' market where the producer sold the eggs.

While supply chains like the above still exist today, many supply chains are incredibly complex. Consider one potential supply chain for an organic egg as outlined on page 3550 of the final SOE ruling:

- A certified organic farm produces organic corn.
- The farmer transports organic corn by uncertified truck to a local grain elevator and aggregates the corn with other organic corn from nearby producers.
- An uncertified commodity trader buys the corn.
- The corn is transported via uncertified truck to an

uncertified storage facility; both transport and storage are subcontracted and are not owned by the commodity trader.

- The commodity trader sells the corn to a certified organic grain supplier; the two parties remain anonymous because they use an uncertified broker to facilitate the transaction.
- The corn is transported via uncertified rail and river barge to the grain supplier; it is transloaded and stored temporarily several times before being delivered to the certified grain supplier.
- The certified organic grain supplier stores the corn and combines it with imported organic corn purchased from an importer via an uncertified broker.
- The certified grain supplier sells the corn to a certified organic feed processor; the corn is transported via an uncertified truck.
- The certified processor combines the corn with several other ingredients to create organic chicken feed.
- The certified processor sells the feed to a certified organic egg producer and transports it via an uncertified truck.
- The certified organic egg producer sells organic eggs to an uncertified distributor.
- The uncertified distributor sells the organic eggs to a retailer prior to final sale to the consumer.

*Continued on page 8*

Although opportunities for mishandling of organic products existed in the 1990s, simpler supply chains made mishandling less likely and easier to trace than today’s complex, multi-regional supply chains. The above example illustrates the challenges associated with maintaining organic integrity. Without clear handling and record keeping standards, tracing the journey of a product to ensure organic integrity becomes nearly impossible.

**Who qualifies for an exemption under SOE?**

USDA will provide very few exemptions for organic certification under SOE, and only operations conducting low-risk activities will be eligible to receive an exemption.

Operations eligible for exemptions include:

- Retail establishments that sell certified organic products directly to consumers without alteration, such as a grocery store with an organic section or a bakery that sells pre-packaged organic goods.
- Restaurants that prepare raw and ready-to-eat food from products that were originally labeled as “100 percent organic,” “organic,” or “made with organic”.
- Warehouses and cold storage facilities that exclusively handle tamper-proof packaged organic products.

*Additional information about Strengthening Organic Enforcement can be found on OCIA International’s website at <https://ocia.org/2023/10/27/faq-strengthening-organic-enforcement/>. If you have a specific question, feel free to contact OCIA directly.*

**What if my supplier isn’t certified by March 19, 2024?**

Unless an uncertified supplier is exempt from certification, certified organic operators will not be able to work with uncertified suppliers after March 19, 2024.

If you work with an uncertified supplier and wish to continue working with them after March 19, 2024, they must begin the organic certification process now. Remember that the organic certification process can take several months, and certification agencies are likely to see an increase in last minute applicants as we draw closer to the implementation of SOE.

**I’ve purchased imported ingredients, but I don’t actually import the ingredients myself. Do I need to maintain an NOP Import Certificate? need to be certified?**

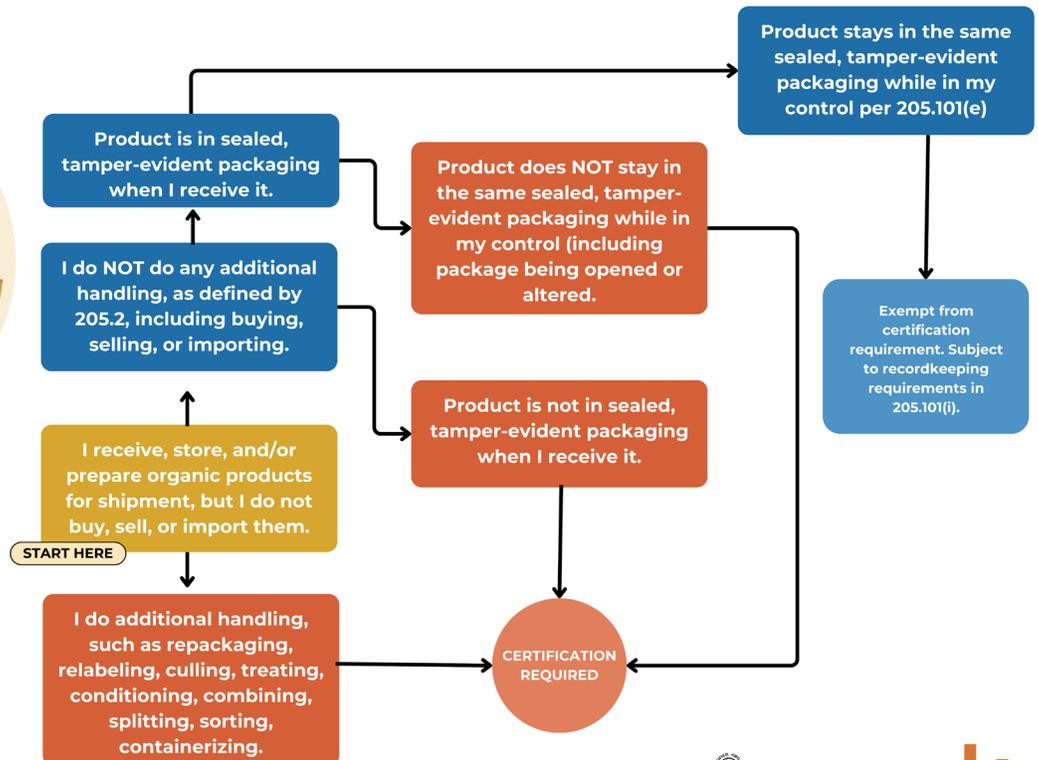
You will not need to maintain an NOP Import Certificate. However, it will be necessary to maintain a thorough audit trail back to your certified supplier showing the source transfer of ownership and transportation of the product/ingredient. The operation who imports the ingredients will need to have a way to receive and maintain the NOP import certificates.



**Strengthening Organic Enforcement**

**Does my handling operation need to be organically certified under SOE?**

ADAPTED FROM ACA (ACCREDITED CERTIFIERS ASSOCIATION, INC.)



# Annual General Membership Meeting

Join OCIA International February 7-8 in Council Bluffs, Iowa

OCIA International's 2024 Annual General Membership Meeting will be held at the Holiday Inn & Suites at Ameristar February 7-8 in Council Bluffs, Iowa. The two-day event will provide OCIA operators opportunities to connect with peers, board members, and OCIA International staff. Attendees will also have the opportunity to learn about microgrant and scholarship opportunities.

Attendees with voting rights will have the opportunity to vote on proposed changes to OCIA International Bylaws and to elect the 2024 Board of Directors.

Comprehensive informational packets are available on the OCIA website under "Events". The packets, available in both

English and Spanish, include information about:

- AGMM Agenda
- Hotel Reservations
- Transportation from Omaha's Airport
- Registration
- and more!

Members who plan to attend the AGMM should be sure to register no later than January 7, 2024. Registration information is included in the linked information packets.

Room reservations are available at a block rate until January 16, 2024. Email [info@ocia.org](mailto:info@ocia.org) with questions.

**TWO STRONG LEGACIES.  
ONE STRONG LINEUP.**



See the strength in our numbers.  
[alseed.com/ocia23](http://alseed.com/ocia23)

**100% ORGANIC. 100% STRONGER.**

## Board visits Mexico

In-person meeting provided learning opportunities for all



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## OCIA Field Signs for Sale

Aluminum "No Spray Zone" signs are currently for sale at \$18 each plus shipping/handling. There are three convenient ways to order:

- Visit [ocia.org](http://ocia.org)
- Call us at 402-477-2323
- Email [info@ocia.org](mailto:info@ocia.org)



# MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

## Transition to Organic Partnership Program

*In 2022, the USDA announced plans to invest up to \$100 million to build partnership networks in six regions across the United States. The Plains Transition to Organic Partnership Program (Plains TOPP) is a coalition of organizations providing technical assistance and wrap-around support for transitioning and existing organic farmers.*

**The goal of TOPP is to make the transition from conventional farming to organic farming easier and more accessible. To that end, a robust mentorship program has been developed. The mentorship program will:**

- Connect transitioning operators with an experienced organic operator who will provide guidance throughout the transition process.
- Mentors will receive training, guidance, and support to ensure a successful relationship.
- Transitioning operators will set goals with mentors, and mentors will actively assist transitioning operators in working toward their goals.

### **Mentors will:**

- Receive training prior to beginning mentorship
- Have at least 4 years experience with organic production and certification.
- Understand organic rules and certification requirements
- Meet with mentee at least 45 hours/year
- Communicate challenges and benefits of organic certification to mentees

*Stipend of \$3,000/year provided to mentors (multi-lingual mentors and mentors with more than one mentee may be eligible for additional compensation)*

**For more information, or to become a mentor, visit [www.ocia.org/plains-topp](http://www.ocia.org/plains-topp), or email Brandon Hill at [bhill@ocia.org](mailto:bhill@ocia.org).**



the  
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