



April 3, 2020

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National Organic Standards Board  
USDA-AMS-NOP  
1400 Independence Ave., SW.,  
Room 2642-S., Mail Stop 0268  
Washington, DC 20250-0268

Submitted via [Regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov).

**RE: Docket # AMS-NOP-19-0095**

**NOSB Subcommittee Proposal on Paper-based crop planting aids**

Dear NOSB members:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Proposal for Paper-based crop planting aids. MOSA certifies approximately 2155 organic operations throughout the United States, including about 500 vegetable and transplant growers. Many of these certified operations use paper production aids and would be negatively impacted by a requirement to discontinue use in organic production. We appreciate the continued effort to reach a recommendation for an addition to the National List.

MOSA continues to support the addition of paper pots and other paper crop production aids, though we still have a few requests for clarifications outlined below, regarding the underlined portions of the proposed additions.

Motion to add to 205.2 Terms Defined: *Paper-based crop planting aid. A material that is comprised primarily of cellulose-based paper, including pots, seed tape, and collars that are placed in or on the soil and are intended to degrade into the soil. Contains no less than 85% biobased content with biobased content determined using ASTM D6866 (incorporated by reference; see §205.3).*

Add to 205.601 (o) Production Aids: *Paper-based crop planting aids as defined in 205.2. Virgin or recycled paper without colored or glossy inks. If these paper-based crop planting aids are commercially available with 100% biobased fiber content, these must be used.*

We appreciate the new terms used and feel that “paper-based crop planting aids” meets the intention to allow production materials such as paper pots, seed tapes, collars and similar materials. However, the definition does not seem inclusive of other paper-based crop planting aids that we may come across in our work. The proposal includes cloches or hot caps, and leaves the door open for other similar products, now or in the future. “*There could be other uses of paper currently used as crop production aids, or there may be other uses developed over time.*”

*The composition of the paper allowed in paper pots and other planting aids, as well as the adhesives approved, would meet the manufacturer needs of these other paper planting aids.”*

**Requested Clarification #1:** Revise the definition to state: “..... *including but not limited to pots, seed tape, and collars.*”

The proposal noted, “*the Crops Subcommittee has narrowed the use from a “production aid” to a “planting aid” to limit the use of this paper to that time of the crop production, and to those aids that would decompose into the soil.*” We appreciate the focus on planting aids, rather than production aids. This refinement of language is important to eliminate confusion and is in line with our understanding of these materials.

The new definition stipulates that such materials be *comprised primarily of cellulose-based paper* and that materials *contain no less than 85% biobased content*. These two lines blur our understanding. We believe the intention of these requirements is to allow only materials that are almost entirely composed of paper, but can include a minimal amount of up to 15% of other materials, such as adhesives and synthetic strengthening fibers. Assuming this is the intention, certifiers could easily verify the composition percentages for each ingredient used in the manufacturing to verify that the primary material is cellulose-based paper. The addition of biobased testing would seem unnecessary to determine that paper composes 85% of the product. We’ve all heard NOSB comments from current manufacturers stating that their products contain approximately 15%-20% of other synthetic fibers and adhesives. However, if the NOSB is trying to define which fibers (biobased vs nonbiobased) and adhesives can be used, further clarification is needed. We have more related comments further down in this letter.

The proposal says, “*The annotation of no less than 85% biobased content meets the needs of current manufacturers, with the possibility of hemp or other fibers capable of providing the strength needed to meet this annotation.*”

The intention of the addition of the ASTM D6866 biobased testing is not clear to us. The NOSB’s summary noted, “*These non-paper synthetic fibers can be biobased and made from cellulose or they can be non-biobased and made from a number of other materials such as petroleum-based plastics. In general, many of the biobased, cellulose derived synthetic fibers used in paper pots are expected to biodegrade whereas the same might not be true of other petroleum-based fibers. Thus, it is important to distinguish not only between synthetic paper fibers and other non-paper synthetic fibers but also between whether these non-paper fibers are biodegradable (as referenced to some recognized standard) or might persist in the soil.*”

ASTM D6866 biobased testing does not measure product biodegradability, though we agree that the persistence of synthetic fibers in the soil should be considered. However, as we anecdotally stated in previous comments, we do not see refuse in fields when inspecting operations using paper pots. Additionally, the NOSB has acknowledged that paper contains many of the same ingredients of concern and has no known adverse effects on the soil. Synthetic fibers may either be biobased or not, but again we are not sure the relevance that biobased testing has in this proposal. It does not seem the *initial* intent was to require that fibers be biobased, but rather to limit the inclusion of synthetic fibers (and adhesives) to no more than 15% of the product.

To support this thinking, we were sent ASTM D6866 test results for a biobased plastic product conducted by the University of Georgia, one of the two labs (as noted on [this page](#) of the [USDA's BioPreferred program](#)) qualified to do the ASTM D6866 testing for the USDA's Biopreferred program. The test result clearly showed 100% biobased content for a non-paper synthetic product, but did not disclose composition of the material. The manufacturer who sent in the test also noted that, in addition to any testing requirements, the composition would also have to be verified, since ingredients could be wood-based or biobased plastics, yet still be considered 100% biobased. We looked up a few products we see in our line of work on the USDA's BioPreferred Program [Catalog](#). A quick search on "Ellepot" finds results for two products, both of which have a 100% biobased content, but are not described as paper products.

Without a percentage attached to the composition requirement - "*primarily cellulose-based paper*" - we could theoretically see coming across a product with 51% cellulose-based paper and 49% biobased synthetic fibers. Would the product be permitted? Our answer as a certifier would be yes, since the overall product would test over 85% biobased and would be *primarily* cellulose-based paper.

**Requested Clarification #2** Revise the definition to state: "*Paper-based crop planting aid. A material that is comprised of 85% cellulose-based paper, including [but not limited to] pots, seed tape, and collars that are placed in or on the soil and are intended to degrade into the soil. 15% of the ingredients can be strengthening fibers and adhesives.*"

The goal to use 100% biobased fibers is stated in the very last part of the recommended standards addition, not to be confused with the 85% biobased content requirement of the final material, as required in the proposed definition.

205.601 (o) Production Aids: *Paper-based crop planting aids as defined in 205.2. Virgin or recycled paper without colored or glossy inks. If these paper-based crop planting aids are commercially available with 100% biobased fiber content, these must be used.*"

This addition is noble and we'd agree with the principle. Though we do support the reduction of synthetic ingredients in *generally all situations* in organic agriculture, we are not clear how a farmer will document a lack of commercial availability for this material, which drills down to the biobased content of the fibers specifically, which, as noted above, we assume to be limited to no more than 15% of the overall composition of the paper planting aid. How would a farmer begin to know if the final product is compliant without manufacturer test results of ingredients? Furthermore, how would a certifier make a determination on information received? In order to determine the biobased content of the fibers, each fiber used in paper planting aids would require ASTM D6866 testing, and any fiber with 100% biobased content (or close to that) should be used. Farmers would not likely be informed of the manufacturing process, ingredients, fibers available, or the biobased content of available fibers. Having farmers need to conduct a commercial availability search for 100% biobased fibers seems pretty far out there. We are talking about requiring a commercial availability search for a minor ingredient (fibers) in the overall product. In addition to the lack of clarity for farmers, asking certifiers to verify that the farmer conducted an adequate search is difficult to imagine. How are we to know all the biobased fibers that would work in various paper planting aids? Perhaps specific products could be earmarked from the BioPreferred catalogue of products noted above? We appreciate the

intent, but suggest that this thinking be struck from the recommended addition to the standards.

In support of this, we have all heard during NOSB public comments that manufacturers, at least of the paper chain pot and the Ellepots, are continuing to conduct research and development testing for different fibers for strength and efficacy characteristics. Their goal as we understand it is to reduce synthetic fiber usage.

**Requested Clarification #3** Delete the second part of the addition to 205.601 (o) Production Aids: *Paper-based crop planting aids as defined in 205.2. Virgin or recycled paper without colored or glossy inks. ~~If these paper-based crop planting aids are commercially available with 100% biobased fiber content, these must be used.~~*

**Requested Clarification #4** There is one last detail for which we request clarification on, but we do not have a specific revision to request. Regarding the NOSB meaning of “*cellulose-based paper*,” what is meant by this phrase? Does it include modified or regenerated cellulose? We’d assume that since cellulose is generally regarded as synthetic, that any form of cellulose would also be acceptable. Please clarify the NOSB’s intention.

In summary, we support the addition of paper-based crop planting aids to the National List. We agree with the general thinking that these materials can contain a small amount of synthetic fibers and adhesives. We agree that these materials can be made from either virgin or recycled paper, but should not contain colored or glossy inks. We appreciate the intention to require that such paper products are biobased but would like to focus our energy on verifying the composition of products. If there is a desire to focus on biobased content, further clarity in the recommended additions will be necessary. If our suggestions are not taken up, we think this recommendation should be taken back to the subcommittee for further work. It is imperative that farmers, manufacturers and certifiers are given a standard that is workable.

Thank you for your continued work on this challenging topic.

Respectfully submitted,

The MOSA Certification Team