

United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program
Transition to Organic Partnership Program



**Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP)
Request for Proposal**

Workforce Development Needs Assessment for the Organic Industry

April 2024

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Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP): contact@organictransition.org

1. Introduction

The Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) is a new program funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), overseen by the National Organic Program. To meet the continued and increased consumer demand for organic products in the marketplace, the entire domestic supply chain must expand. A larger and more diverse organic sector workforce is necessary for this growth. We plan to work with companies, educational and training institutions, and other partners to support workforce training and education focused on the organic supply chain. We have put together this RFP to solicit a **Workforce Development Needs Assessment for the organic industry** within the United States, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands. The purpose of this RFP is to provide a fair evaluation for all candidates, and to provide the candidates with the evaluation criteria against which they will be judged. Please see the following table for definitions.

The primary objective of this needs assessment, evaluation, and summary report is to isolate measurable gaps in training opportunities for future inspectors and reviewers. This should include university programs, the Organic Integrity Learning Center, International Organic Inspectors Association (IOIA) and offerings by both certification agencies and the Accredited Certifiers Association (ACA) as well as other training opportunities. This will build on the extensive work the ACA, IOIA, and OILC have accomplished including but not limited to the 2022 Inspector Retention Working Group Report and a Job Task Analysis of the organic industry.

	Inspector Definitions outlined by the Strengthening Organic Enforcement Rule
205.501(a) (4)	Certifying agents must demonstrate that all inspectors, including staff, volunteers, and contractors, have the relevant knowledge, skills, and experience required to inspect operations of the scope and complexity assigned and to evaluate compliance with the applicable regulations of this part.
	Certifying agents must demonstrate that inspectors continuously maintain adequate knowledge and skills about the current USDA organic standards, production and handling practices, certification and inspection, import and/or export requirements, traceability audits, mass-balance audits, written and oral communication skills, sample collection, investigation techniques, and preparation of technically accurate inspection documents.
	All inspectors must demonstrate successful completion of training that is relevant to inspection. Inspectors with less than one year of inspection experience must complete at least 50 hours of training within their first year and prior to performing inspections independently. Inspectors with one or more years of inspection experience must annually complete at least 10 hours of training if inspecting one area of operation (as defined at § 205.2) and an additional 5 hours of training for each additional area of operation inspected.

	<p>Certifying agents must demonstrate that inspectors have a minimum of 2,000 hours of experience relevant to the scope and complexity of operations they will inspect before assigning initial inspection responsibilities.</p>
	<p>Certifying agents must demonstrate that all certification review personnel, including staff, volunteers, or contractors, have the knowledge, skills, and experience required to perform certification review of operations of the scope and complexity assigned and to evaluate compliance with the applicable regulations of this part.</p>
	<p>Certifying agents must demonstrate that all certification review personnel continuously maintain adequate knowledge and skills in the current USDA organic standards, certification and compliance processes, traceability audits, mass-balance audits, and practices applicable to the type, volume, and range of review activities assigned.</p>
205.501(a) (5)	<p>Sufficient expertise must include knowledge of certification to USDA organic standards and evidence of education, training, or professional experience in the fields of agriculture, science, or organic production and handling that relates to assigned duties.</p>
205.501(a) (6)	<p>Witness inspections—Certifying agents must ensure that each inspector is evaluated while performing an inspection at least once every three years, or more frequently if warranted. Inspectors with less than three years of inspection experience must undergo a witness inspection annually. Witness inspections must be performed by certifying agent personnel who are qualified to evaluate inspectors.</p>
SOE Sec H	<p>Certification Review Personnel - Personnel who perform the act of reviewing and evaluating a certified operation or applicant for certification and determining compliance or ability to comply with the USDA organic regulations.</p>
	<p>Inspector Definitions as cited in the ACA IOIA Inspector Retention Working Group Report</p>
Sect 1; pg 19	<p>Independent Contract Inspectors - In this model, inspectors are independent entities who contract with certifiers to conduct inspections. They may operate as a sole proprietor or set up a separate business such as an LLC, S-Corp, or other structure. Independent contractors do not benefit from employer-paid medical leave, paid time off, or other benefits from their contracting certifiers. Contractors cover the costs of their work equipment, medical and professional insurance, and continuing education.</p>
Sect 1; pg 20	<p>Certifier Staff Inspector - Inspectors who are hired by a certifier as an employee. They may be hourly or salaried, full-or part-time. The certifiers are responsible for income reporting and tax withholding requirements, employee rights, and</p>

	legal protections including access to unemployment benefits for staff inspectors.
Sect 1; pg 21	Inspector Cooperative - Independent inspectors join to form a cooperative organization (co-op). Co-ops are member-owned and operated for the benefit of the members. The purpose of an inspector co-op is to provide contract inspectors with many of the benefits, legal protections, and stability of employment provided to staff inspectors, while still allowing for an independent and flexible career.
TOPP Definition	Agriculture Professionals - Any person that offers expertise on a particular subject matter germane to farming, agribusiness, and unique needs that serve farmers, ranchers, producers and handlers.
From the Organic Trade Association	Organic Sector - Organic refers to the way agricultural products are grown and processed. It includes a system of production, processing, distribution and sales that assures consumers that the products maintain the organic integrity that begins on the farm. The Organic Sector refers to all mechanisms that facilitate these agricultural products reaching the consumer.

2. Background

The Transition to Organic Partnership Program was launched in the fall of 2022 to provide technical assistance and support for transitioning and existing organic farmers, and to a limited extent processor/handlers. TOPP is a collaborative effort involving many partners working together towards a common goal of transitioning conventional producers to organic production. The TOPP network covers six regions: the Mid-Atlantic/Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Plains, Northwest, and West/Southwest. Organizations in these regions are actively forming partnerships to serve transitioning and existing organic farmers. TOPP regions are set geographically and form a mix of states that are well-represented in organic and states that are currently underserved.

The six regional leads across the United States will implement this program through direct farmer training, education, and outreach activities. Each region will work with state and local partners to create resources and implement programs that support transitioning and existing organic farmers. Find more information about the TOPP on USDA’s website:

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/organic-certification/topp>.

In 2022, the International Organic Inspectors Association and the Accredited Certifiers Association convened a working group to assess organic inspector retention. From the Spring 2021 National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) acknowledgement arose: “...there is a decreasing number of qualified individuals who desire to be organic inspectors and reviewers, leading to a potential crisis in the inspection/reviewer pool of qualified individuals” (IOIA ACA, 2022). Furthermore, “the organic sector is experiencing an acute shortage of well-qualified and trained inspectors. In recent years, there has been a significant exit of experienced inspectors

from the organic sector and a dearth of new inspectors entering the industry” and “as the industry has grown, regulations have changed, supply chains are more complex, and fraud is an increasing threat. Current expectations for qualification have not kept pace” (IOIA ACA, 2022). More in depth coverage of the obstacles facing the field of inspection in the organic sector can be found in the [IOIA and ACA Inspector Retention Working Group Report](#).

3. Proposal Guidelines and Requirements

This is an open and competitive process to vendors within the United States, including Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

Project Timeline

- Proposals will be accepted starting 12:00pm/noon PST, April 1, 2024
- Proposals received after 12:00pm/noon PST, May 30, 2024, will not be considered.
- The start date of needs assessment and announcement of our chosen consultant would be on or before 12:00pm/noon PST, July 15, 2024.

We would like this assessment to have **3 PHASES**:

PHASE 1

- **Information gather** - study goals, target audience(s), market analysis, engage community, determine scope of work and data collection tools, and establish priorities;
- **Survey and outreach plan development** - survey tool, pilot testing, survey administration, general scoping exercise of the current organic sector for careers, inspector professionals and their career paths
- **Additional data collection** - possible focus groups and/or one-on-one interviews, university outreach, consult institutions such as the USDA, universities, IOIA, and the ACA, CBO's (more as needed).
- **Attend monthly meeting with Workforce Development Committee** - to discuss progress

PHASE 2

- **Analyze** - results, findings, and recommendations. Please provide a description of how you propose to analyze the results and findings as well as provide recommendations.
- **Attend monthly meeting with Workforce Development Committee** - to discuss progress

PHASE 3

- **Report** - complete and present findings. Please provide a description of how you

propose to create your report and present your findings.

- **Attend monthly meeting with Workforce Development Committee** - to discuss progress

Budget Range

Total development cost for proposals must come in under \$80,000 for 6 months. Proposal pricing should be inclusive of all fees, charges, travel and subcontractors. Pricing should be reasonable to the deliverables completed under the proposal.

Subcontractors

This RFP prohibits the use of additional subcontractors. All work must be completed by the primary applicant's organization.

4. Contract Terms

Please include proposed contract terms and conditions in the proposal. TOPP will negotiate contract terms upon selection, and a project will be awarded upon signing of an agreement or contract - which outlines terms, scope, budget and other necessary items.

5. Description, Objectives and Guidelines

The primary objective of this project is to deliver an informative, engaging, optimized report that will serve as a guide for identifying the career journey of inspectors, reviewers, and other organic certification jobs. This will serve as a road map for future workforce development in the area of Organic Inspection and other related professions for the TOPP program and for the National Organic Program more broadly. The findings will be public and will be shared amongst the six TOPP regions and with the United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service, National Organic Program; the Accredited Certifiers Association, and the International Organic Inspectors Association, among others.

Objectives to be achieved via the final report:

This report should be holistic, informative, engaging and thoughtful in its approach of analysis. Please consider a collective impact assessment focused on the normative needs of the industry using exploratory research.

- Headcount of current organic inspectors, organic certification agriculture professionals, and students in agriculture degree programs that would feed into organic inspection/certification careers
- Current careers in the organic inspection and review sector (include general job titles, basic very simplified responsibilities, and pay scales)
- Current landscape of organic certification agencies and their hiring practices, and demographic content of the current workforce;

- Understanding of where most organic inspectors currently receive their training
- Understanding current and future capacity of current organic inspection career training organizations/entities/programs - analyzed to understand if/how these current training opportunities can/will scale to meet increased demand.
- Current inspector mentor availability based on the findings of the ACA job task analysis
- Options for potential new methods/programs/certifications/degrees for credentialing and training for inspectors
- Cost-analysis by type of certificate/degree program to train organic inspectors
- Creating a library of current university curriculum that would fulfill requirements for becoming an organic inspector and assessment of gaps in said library
 - Please reference the National Organic Program Human Capital Projects (e.g. “Growing the Organic Workforce”, “Experiential Organic Agriculture”, “Organic Education Curriculum Resources”, etc)
- The report should provide policy and advocacy recommendations.

Guidelines

Discovery

Confirm research plan, audiences, objectives, issues and assumptions, phasing, and budgetary constraints, resulting in a creative proposal.

Development Guidelines The report conducted by the successful candidate must meet the following criteria:

- Information is grouped and presented in a logical manner;
- The report should be visually appealing. The use of photography, layout, font and sizing should be consistent with the brand identity of the www.organictransitions.org website (TOPP Regional Leads will provide brand guideline books for layout)
- The report should be developed to meet all current federally-mandated ADA access requirements;

6. Audience

The report needs to serve several audiences; such as industry professionals, legislators, and federal institutions.

7. Timeline

- Proposals will be accepted starting 12:00pm/noon PST, April 1, 2024.
- Proposals received after 12:00pm/noon PST, May 30, 2024, will not be considered.
- Proposals will be evaluated immediately thereafter. During this time we may require interviews (via videoconference) with our evaluation team. You will be

notified if this is requested.

- Negotiations will begin immediately with the successful candidate.
- The start date of needs assessment and announcement of our chosen consultant would be on or before 12:00pm/noon PST, July 15, 2024.
- All other candidates will be notified once a candidate/firm has been chosen.
- The completion and delivery dates of the project and its phases will be mutually agreed upon prior to signing a contract.

8. Proposal Requirements

The budget and proposal must include all design, production, software acquisition, integration and necessary development of the report. Proposals must address the following:

Executive Summary

1. Summarize proposed development plan for conducting this report and analysis .
2. Give company details that include:
 - **Company Overview** - Tell us more about your company, length of business, your experience in needs assessments, the organic industry, and production for projects similar to ours, and your experience in working with clients in higher education. Provide links to your agency website and online portfolio.
 - **Team** – Identify your firm’s organizational capacity to produce the TOPP Workforce Development Report. Describe the team who will work on this project. Include name, title/role, and brief background/experience of each. Include subcontractors if applicable. Describe the workflow process and method of contact.
 - **Communication** – Communication between the TOPP Committee and consultant/firm will be negotiated upon deliverable schedule and contract signing.
 - **References** – Provide a list of three references who can speak to services requested in this RFP. Please include contact information and a brief description of work done for those clients.
3. Provide a summary of pricing for the proposed services and products.
 - **Solutions Menu with Pricing** – Based on the elements included in the Project Scope/Objective section, tell us about your proposed creative design strategy, methodology, plan, and other important aspects of the design process. Please be sure to address the following:
 - **Project Management** – Describe your project management process including how you will track and document project status.
 - **Deliverables** – Outline the data, services, and reports that will be delivered.

- **Schedule** – Provide a timeframe for completion. Detail the time required for each major step or phase of the project. This will be evaluated and will be part of the contractual agreement, so a realistic time frame for completion is essential. Detail your development style - typically agile - and how reviews will be held after development cycles.
 - **Payment** – Include any requirements or preferences regarding invoicing and payment.
- Include all terms and conditions.
 - Anything else deemed relevant/important to the vendor.
 - The proposal must contain the signature of a duly authorized officer or agent of the company submitting the proposal.

9. Format for Proposals

Please use the following guidelines to format your proposal:

Length and Font Size

Please use fonts no smaller than 10 point. Include a title page, cover letter, proposal, qualifications and costs.

Title Page to Include

Your company name, address, website address, telephone number, e-mail address and primary contact person.

10. Evaluation Criteria

The following criteria will form the basis upon which TOPP will evaluate proposals. The mandatory criteria must be met and include:

Proposals received after 12:00pm/noon PST, May 30, 2024, will not be considered. Your proposal must include a cost proposal as described above. All costs associated with the delivery of the project should be presented in a flat rate, fee for service format.

Submit proposals to contact@organictransition.org.

Proposals meeting mandatory requirements will be evaluated with the following criteria:

- The proposal meets the needs and criteria set forth in the RFP.
- The proposal is presented in a clear, logical manner, is well organized and has the appropriate information the RFP calls for.
- The candidate has successfully completed similar projects and has the qualifications necessary to undertake, and be successful with this project.
- The candidate firm has an appropriate number of staff and necessary expertise to develop the site in a timely manner.

- The price is appropriate for the value being offered by the proposer.