

Name of PGS: Nature & Progrès (N&P)

Location: France (with local groups in Spain and Portugal)

Production method: Organic (requirements go beyond the EU Organic Regulation, Nature & Progrès standards are approved in the IFOAM Family of Standards)

Number of producers involved: 1151 certified producers

Number of eaters involved: 821 consumer-members

Type of products: Plant and animal products, honey, oysters, processed food, wine, beer, bakeries, sea salt, cosmetics, cleaning products, organic fertilizers

Type of market: Farm-gate, farmers markets, organic fairs, organic retailers and processors

Starting date of the PGS: 1972

Rationale and Context

Nature & Progrès (N&P) is a French association of producers and consumers, who work together to promote an agricultural model that respects the environment, people and animals. Founded in 1964, by agronomists, doctors, farmers and consumers united by a concern about the increased use of agrichemicals and related damages to human health and the environment, N&P is a pioneering organization for Organic Agriculture.

In 1972, N&P drafted the first standards for organic agriculture, with contributions from various stakeholders, as a technical reference document that would facilitate the application of the organization's own founding principles. The standards lay the foundation for a certification system, developed to be transparent and to encourage cooperation and mutual support, that grants producer members access to the N&P label. N&P's participatory approach to certification emerged long before national organic regulations were passed, and before third party certification became the prevalent approach to ensure conformity with standards for organic agriculture.

The PGS was developed under the lead of N&P agronomists and technicians, who formed an association of organic agriculture advisors (Association de Conseillers en Agriculture Biologique- ACAB). These advisors reviewed the practices of producers and reported to an approval and verification committee (Commission Mixte d'Agrément et de Contrôle - COMAC) composed of consumers and producers, and responsible for deciding on certification. The ACAB was dissolved in the 1990s, when it became clear that N&P's certification model would not be recognized in the EU organic regulation that was under development. In absence of the ACAB, the local groups took up a leading role in the PGS operation, which they still have today.

Common reasons why producers engage in N&P are the opportunities for mutual assistance and technical exchanges that are practiced within the network, as well as the shared agricultural, social and economic practices and values. N&P stands for a holistic approach to farming, encouraging a human scale of operations, solidarity among stakeholders and a focus on local networks and markets. The N&P label is a tool for producers to communicate about those values and the quality of their products to consumers.

Stakeholder Involvement in the Set-up and Operation of the PGS

N&P's governance model is based on horizontality and collective decision making. Following a people-centered approach, this PGS has been built through knowledge sharing, solidarity and collectively improved practices. The initiative relies on the experience and know-how of farmers and processors, the professional skills of technicians as well as the demands and external perspective of consumers. They draw strength from the fact that they know each other and have close relations: producers and consumers regularly meet and discuss practices at fairs and markets, through agricultural and equipment cooperatives, association meetings and collective work projects.

Local groups of stakeholders are at the core of the organizational structure. There are currently 35 active local groups, composed of local consumers, producers and processors who are members of N&P. Most local groups maintain their own local approval and verification committee (COMAC) and coordinate the certification of the group's members.

Representatives from all the local groups come together in the Federal Council of N&P, while delegates from the local COMACs sit at the Federal COMAC.

These two federal bodies have different functions. The Federal Council of N&P, on one hand, makes decisions related to the general policies of the Federation. The Federal COMAC, on the other, approves local COMACs, verifies the certification reports produced at the local level and can be consulted in cases of disputes or disagreements. The Federal COMAC also coordinates the certification of producers on behalf of local groups that do not run their own COMACs and for producers that are located in regions without local groups.

N&P also has a Federal Office where 8 employees take care of all the administration and coordination required on the national level. Three of the employees are exclusively responsible for general coordination and management of the N&P label and PGS certification.

The most important decision-making body is the General Assembly (GA) that takes place annually and to which all N&P members are invited. The GA decides on the general direction of Federation.

The task of writing and revision of standards is given to technical committees which are formed whenever need arises. Committees are open to all members. Their work is supervised by the Internal Technical Committee, a permanent structure composed of professional members representing their specialties (market gardening, bakery, beekeeping, salt, cosmetics, etc.) and consumer members.

Consumers play an important role in this PGS initiative, as they are considered essential for ensuring transparency and impartiality. Consumers may take an active part in the guarantee process by attending site visits and joining the deliberations of local and national committees, but also by seeking to understand and contribute to the organization, operation and development of the PGS.

Production, marketing, philosophy and production principles

Nature & Progrès places particular emphasis on short distribution circuits and neighborhood markets and many producers sell their products directly to consumers on through farmgate sale, farmers markets or organic fairs.

One of the major retailers of organic products in France, Biocoop, has also become an important marketing channel. Since 2011 N&P PGS-certified products are accepted and sold in Biocoop shops without additional third-party certification. In order to sell to other organic retailers or processors, though, N&P producers usually need additional organic certification by a third-party certification body.

The range of produce is broad and N&P standards have been developed for the following scopes: plant production; fragrant, aromatic and medical herbs; animal husbandry; beekeeping; oyster farming; food processing; wine and beer production; bakery, sea salt production; cosmetics, cleansers and detergents; and fertilizer production.

N&P considers Organic Agriculture as a holistic farming method that preserves the fertility, health and diversity of the living environment and takes also social solidarity into account. Therefore, topics such as the socio-economic equity in trading practices or the autonomy of farmers are considered important and assessed through the PGS.

One of the most important differences between this PGS initiative and third-party certification is the strong notion for progress and improvement. Producer members of N&P do not only commit to following the requirements in the standards, but they also enter into a process of development and continuous improvement of their practices. In 2003, the association adopted a charter which goes even further beyond organic regulation than the N&P standards, covering topics such as working conditions, energy, waste and packaging or eco-construction. During annual field visits to verify conformity with the standards, producers visited also reflect on their practices and improvement needs related to topics from the charter, with help of a tool called "NESO compass".

Functioning and Structure

The certification process is comprised of three main steps: the annual field visits, the deliberations in the local COMAC meetings and the issuing of the certifications by the Federal COMAC.

All producer members receive annual field visits, usually arranged by the local groups and conducted by small teams, composed of at least two persons: a producer (usually a peer-producer) and a consumer, both members of N&P that have completed a field visit training. During these visits, the team reviews and discusses the practices with the producer using various tools, including checklists for each type of production and the “NESO compass”. The purpose of the visits is not only to assess compliance with the standards and commitment to the N&P charter, but also to accompany the producer in the process of continuous improvement. After the visit, the team prepares a report with their observations and findings.

During local COMAC meetings, producers and field visit teams gather to review and discuss all the visits conducted. The teams report on their visits, on efforts made by the producers concerned, on any difficulties they have encountered and on any issues they found, regarding compliance with standards or with the Charter. The producers concerned may answer questions from COMAC members or argue their own point of view. These meetings are also an opportunity for people to discuss their problems and for members to receive technical advice.

Finally, participants of the COMAC meeting decide, per vote, whether they find that the producers adhere to the standard and can be granted PGS certification. The results and opinion about certification are registered in reports that the local COMACs prepare for each producer and send to the Federal COMAC. These reports also highlight any strengths and weaknesses identified, referring to the Charter, and any improvements required. Although the files are never anonymous, the actual voting takes place in absence of the producer concerned.

Lastly the Federal COMAC verifies the adequacy of the opinions of the local COMACs and issues the official certification. In cases where the reports show discrepancies, or when the when the COMACs request an intervention, the Federal COMAC deals with it directly in consultation with the local members. If a COMAC has been unable to issue an opinion, or if a dispute arises, the local parties may ask the Federal COMAC to take a decision or give a ruling.

This separation of responsibilities between the local and Federal COMACs has multiple advantages. The local COMAC can deal with technical issues locally without the burden of handling any conflicts of interest that might arise from the final deliberation, thus enabling the Federal COMAC to fulfill its mission of guaranteeing that decisions on certification are consistent.

The process is a bit different for producers that are located outside the area of activity of any local COMAC. In these cases, the Federal COMAC plans the field visits, selects and instructs inspectors, who then conduct the visit instead of the field visit team. The dates are announced and communicated in advance, to enable local consumers and producers to join the inspector during the visit, if they wish to do so. The review of the field visit reports prepared by the inspector and the decision-making about the certification of individual producers takes place afterwards, directly in Federal COMAC meetings.

Costs and funding of set-up and funding of the program

The N&P system relies heavily on volunteer work and the engagement of stakeholders. The main expenses for the operation of the PGS are composed of salaries, meeting and travel expenses as well as fees paid for special services (e.g. the inspectors commissioned to visit individual farmers are usually paid). All eight employees of the Federal office, contribute in some way to the N&P PGS, and three of them are working exclusively on the management of the PGS certification.

The PGS is financed with contributions of the certified members. Each producer pays the annual N&P membership fee (currently 20 Euros for individuals and small organizations) and a flat-rate fee for PGS coordination and field visits (currently 180 Euros). In addition to these annual fees, producers also pay a variable amount which is proportional to their turnover. This income is distributed between the federal and the local COMACs to cover the expenses at both levels.

Other sources of income for N&P are consumer membership fees, magazine subscription, organization of fairs, donations and support from foundations for specific activities.

Legal framework

The Nature & Progrès Federation is registered as a not-for-profit organization since 1964. It created one of the first organic labels long before governments started to develop organic regulations. In the 1980s, the association obtained approval for its standards from the French government, but the PGS was never officially recognized. In 1995 the European Union regulated Organic Agriculture and established the first European Organic Regulation. N&P took the deliberate decision not to abide by the confidentiality and independence criteria required for accreditation of third-party certifying bodies, but to stick with the PGS approach in order to maintain the high level of transparency and solidarity.

Consequently, under current French and European regulations, producers who are only certified by N&P are not allowed to make organic claims, are not entitled to receive subsidies from public funds for organic agriculture (e.g. regional inspection grants, tax credits, conversion support, investment support, etc.) and may sometimes experience difficulties with market access (rejection by some organic shops, fairs or trade fairs; raw materials not recognized officially as organic by other operators).

Today, only about one third of N&P PGS certified producers are also certified organic by a third-party certification body, precisely because it is required to make organic claims in the European Union (EU). The N&P standards exceed what is required in the EU organic regulation, including additional scopes (e.g. cosmetics) and criteria (e.g. lower stocking rates, prohibition of landless animal husbandry systems, lower number of treatments, restrictions to the wine-making methods), and with a strong aspirational component: N&P producers commit to continuous improvement and best practices.

Any additional information or advice?

Make sure to start with a good understanding of your situation including a good reflection whether PGS can actually work in the given context. Do stakeholders have a common vision? Which needs does the PGS address? What criteria are important to the stakeholders? What needs to be done to promote participation? Will everybody be ready to be transparent about their practices? How to manage the decision-making? Make sure to also develop a clear framework for working together.

Sources:

- N&P Website: <https://www.natureetprogres.org/>
- Participatory Guarantee System. Case studies from Brazil, India, New Zealand, USA, France, IFOAM – Organics International 2008
- Interview and additional information obtained from Lise Guillermin, Administrative and Finance Manager of Nature & Progrès.