



Guidelines for Sustainability Standard Group Certification

Updated 11/28/2023

Note: This document is not a Sustainability Standard normative document; rather, it is additional information to help guide potential clients through the process of Group certification. In all circumstances, the General Regulations supersede additional guidance documents when interpreting requirements of the Sustainability Standard.

Overview

Group Certification is an optional approach for the Sustainability Standard audit and certification process. It is designed for organizations (e.g., packers/shippers, importers, exporters) that source product from multiple farms and facilities and wish to demonstrate sustainability efforts to their customers. This option can streamline the audit process and reduce costs.

Establishing a Group

A “Group” is a self-designated set of farms and facilities with a shared set of policies and practices. Every Group must have an Internal Management System (IMS) that defines the Group’s shared policies and practices and is managed and maintained by the Group leader. The Group leader will typically be an organization that sources products from multiple farms and/or facilities.

Strategies for establishing a Group may include, but are not limited to, selecting group members:

- Within a particular source region
- With similar sustainability practices
- With similar production practice, and/or
- That provide products to certain customers that require adoption of sustainability practices

There is no limit on the size of the Group as long as all other requirements are met.

Establishing an Internal Management System

Designate a responsible staff member within the Group leader organization to create, implement and manage the IMS. It is ideal that each Group member also designate a staff member that is knowledgeable in the IMS and Sustainability Standard requirements.

Strategies for establishing an IMS may include the following:

- Review the expectations in the Sustainability Standard Checklist and Audit Guidelines (or request a training) to understand the sustainability best practices.
- Review the sustainability practices in place or being adopted within the Group in order to support IMS alignment with existing sustainability practices. Group members can complete a Self-Assessment in the Azzule App to support this effort.
- Discuss with the established Group members what practices will be feasible for all Group members and operations.
- Document these practices into an IMS and establish and communicate these policies/practices to all Group members.

- Review the IMS checklist to ensure that the IMS meets all minimum requirements.
- Maintain open communication within the Group about IMS implementation and help troubleshoot where necessary.

Once the IMS is established, the Group leader will conduct internal audits of Group members to ensure conformance (see “Internal Audits” below for details).

Internal Audits

Internal audits of Group members must be conducted by the Group leader to ensure that all farms and facilities in the Group follow the policies and practices set out by the IMS. All farms and facilities must receive an internal audit upon joining the Group, and before third-party audits by the Certification Body occur. Internal audits must be conducted on-site for farms, however, they may be conducted virtually for facilities to reduce travel costs. After a Group achieves certification, internal audits of each Group member (farms and facilities) must occur at least once every three years to ensure continued conformance to the Group IMS. The Group leader selects internal auditor(s) based on qualifications outlined in the [General Regulations](#).

IMS Evaluation

The Group’s IMS is evaluated annually by the Certification Body using the IMS Checklist. This checklist is a series of Y/N questions, some of which are minimum requirements. If minimum requirements are not appropriately met during the third-party audit, the Group may adjust the IMS to meet these requirements during the corrective actions phase. It is strongly recommended that the IMS holder (Group leader) review the IMS checklist during the creation of the Group IMS, so that it does not need to be substantially edited during the corrective actions phase. **If any minimum requirements in the IMS checklist are not met following the corrective action phase, the Group will not achieve certification.** For questions in the IMS checklist that are not minimum requirements, the Y/N score will not affect the Group audit; rather, they are intended as guidelines for improvement of the IMS.

Third-Party Audit Process

Audits performed by an auditor of an approved Certification Body, otherwise known as third-party audits, will occur for the Group leader, the square root of the total number of facilities in the Group, and the square root of the total number of the farms in the Group. For example, if there are nine farms and two facilities in the Group, three farms and one facility would receive third-party audits. Farms and facilities that receive third-party audits are chosen by the Certification Body. All third-party audits of farms will be on-site; facility audits may be on-site or virtual at the discretion of the Certification Body, with priority for on-site audits at the more complex, resource-intensive facilities.

For third-party audits of the Group leader, the auditor reviews the Group IMS against the IMS checklist and reviews the operation’s practices against the Sustainability Standard checklist. The audit of the Group IMS includes reviewing the records from internal audits. For farms and facilities selected for a third-party audit, the auditor evaluates and scores the operation’s sustainability practices using the Sustainability Standard checklist. Audits for all operations in the Group must occur within a 12-month window. Group third-party audits may be conducted by multiple auditors to improve efficiency.

Adding Farms to a Group

Case 1: Adding farms or facilities into an existing Group.

Farms or facilities may be added to an existing Group after the initial on-site Group audit provided that the new farms or facilities do not exceed 20% of the total number of farms in the initial group. All farms or facilities added to the Group should receive an internal audit upon joining the Group. New farms or facilities may be added in excess of the 20% threshold only if they receive an on-site audit from the Certification Body within 12 months of being added to the Group.

Case 2: Adding certified farms or facilities into a new Group.

An individual farm or facility that is certified may be added into a new Group and may count as one of the required audits, so long as the audit of the individual operation occurred within 12 months prior to submitting the Group audit application. If the audit occurred more than 12 months prior to the Group audit application, the operation may still be added to the Group, however, the individual audit may not count towards the number of audits required for the Group and the operation is eligible for selection to be audited again. When an individual operation joins a Group, the three-year certification cycle for that operation adjusts to adhere to that of the Group, i.e., it starts over at year one since the Group is in year 1. For certified operations that obtained an audit in the last 12 months, an internal audit is not necessary. For certified operations that obtained an audit more than 12 months prior to the Group application, an internal audit must occur when it joins the Group.