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Filling the gap

As the organic beauty market continues to thrive, does the industry need a clear certification procedure? *by Claire Thévenin*

Unlike the agriculture and food industries, there are currently no official regulations governing organic cosmetics. In Europe, only the Cosmetics Directive—currently being revised and soon to become a regulation, taking effect in all 27 member states—has any legal force. However, it “does not include any specific regulations on a European level concerning organic and natural cosmetics,” explains a European Commission spokesperson.

The situation in the US is identical. Organic farming is regulated by the Department of Agriculture (USDA) but cosmetics are not. That is why certain cosmetics brands use NOP (National Organic Program) certification as a standard to confirm the organic quality of their ingredients, pending the adoption of specific legislation.

Private gets proactive

On the other hand, a number of private and national initiatives are being undertaken for organic and natural labels and certification systems, the best-known being Ecocert in France. According to Ecocert Cosmetic Department manager Valérie Lemaire, the label's prominence is explained by its history: “Ecocert was created in 1992 for agriculture and has gained recognition outside France through our international network. We are established in 85 countries.”

The international situation is especially complex because each label has its own definition of ‘organic’ and the philosophy and vision of the market. For the past four years, Europe's five major organic associations (Ecocert in France, BDIH in Germany, the Soil Association in the UK, AIAB in Italy and Ecogarantie in Belgium) have been meeting in an attempt to harmonize their standards. “We should arrive at a [common]

standard in June,” reports BDIH managing director Harald Dittmar. This dual (natural and organic) standard should be presented at the IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements) world congress in Modena, Italy, in mid-June. There is even talk that it may be used as the basis for a worldwide standard.

Lemaire, who has actively promoted this harmonization effort, admits: “It's not always easy to reach an agreement.” The five entities involved have rather different structures and labeling systems. Ecocert is a French certification body whose specifications (defined in cooperation with manufacturers and consumer associations) are registered with the national government. It delivers two levels of certification: “Bio” (organic) or “Eco” (ecological), which guarantee that 95% of the ingredients used are of natural origin. So far, more than 5,000 cosmetic products have been certified by Ecocert, both in France and in other countries.

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Ecocert cosmetics department manager Valérie Lemaire

BDIH is an association of German manufacturers (not just of cosmetics), which displays its label on natural products. Rather than the calculation of percentages, it relies on a strict positive list of ingredients. Therefore it is not a certification body, but its logo is shown on more than 3,000 products, mostly in Germany. The Soil Association is a British non-profit organization geared

toward organic products. Like Ecocert, it has its roots in organic farming and its cosmetics activity dates from 2002. Since then, over 2,600 products have been certified in two categories: 70% or 95% organic ingredients. Of the five entities, The Soil Association has the most “purist” philosophy.

Tracking the stumbling blocks

The negotiations in Europe, which focused first on acceptable ingredients and then on processing methods, continue to stall on calculation methods, in particular on how to define the percentage of organic ingredients in a given product. Each group has its own method. The Soil Association marketing and corporate relations director Helen Taylor points out another difficulty: “Consumers will have to understand that 100% organic is not always possible [for example, for nail polish, hair dyes, fragrances].” But all five bodies share the same goal, which is to establish a common label and an equivalent of European certifications. This can only be beneficial for both manufacturers and consumers, who must now sort through a confusing plethora of different labels. One question remains: will the national logos disappear, to be replaced by the (future) European logo? Taylor adds: “We'll recommend that both appear on the packaging.” Others are afraid of ending up with cartons bearing as many logos as the number of countries where the products are sold. And once the logo is established, one must “be clear about harmonized inspection,” BDIH's Dittmar warns. “We'll need the same rules for all five.”

However, some consider that this harmonization effort is not sufficient. A number of major German and Swiss manufacturers have joined forces to create the first





European lobby for natural cosmetics, called NaTrue. The announcement of this initiative triggered shockwaves at the Natural Beauty Summit in Paris last November. “We want to have a voice in Brussels and defend high-quality organic cosmetics,” explains NaTrue Weleda managing director and president Moritz Aebersold. “The Seventh Amendment of the Cosmetics Directive and REACH have been a wake-up call for all of us. We are interested in harmonization but we must make a distinction between a European logo [which is private] and an official regulation,” he adds. Ecocert’s Lemaire agrees: “The ultimate goal is not private harmonization but a European regulation. We’ll need the support of the big companies, which can make things happen.”

In the US, also in November 2007, US manufacturers including Aveda and Hain Celestial launched OASIS: Organic and Sustainable Industry Standards. They are also keeping an eye on what the Europeans are doing. “The Americans don’t want to create their own standard [...] They know [that] continuity with one global standard is crucial for avoiding great consumer confusion,” comments Wuttke group principal Mark Wuttke (see article p. 34). However, he admits that “the Europeans must hurry”—an opinion shared by all.

Drafting the standards

Last January an American NGO called NSF International The Public Health and Safety Company launched its “Draft standard 305 for organic personal-care products.” It invited all parties involved to give their opinion on the draft before April 3 in order to define the first US reference system for organic cosmetics. Once again, this is a private, non-governmental initiative. Accord-

ing to Wuttke, the US market is consumer-driven, whereas in Europe, governments and companies both play the role of arbiter.

But in that case why does the European Commission seem unproactive in this area? According to Aebersold: “Until two or three years ago, the natural cosmetics market was a small niche, and there were other more urgent matters [for the EC to deal with].” All this is likely to change when Brussels finally

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Wuttke group principal Mark Wuttke

acts. “The beauty industry will mirror the food industry,” the Soil Association’s Taylor predicts, “Look at the 1991 European Food regulation. The market has really grown tremendously, by 22% per year on average since then.”

No one can deny that organic products are generating a lot of consumer interest. But the situation is still confusing, and progress is hindered by protectionism and other opposing factors. The market is still too young and will no doubt experience some beneficial “house-cleaning” over the next few years. As Wuttke notes: “This industry is starting to attract significant investment. It’s becoming a serious business. I believe that certification will become the basic point of entry, since consumers want third-party verification and transparency. It’s OK not to be 100% organic, but don’t pretend that you are. Consumers are becoming very aware of what is blatant ‘greenwashing,’ and they vote with their checkbooks.” Brands should take note. ■

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