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## THE WORLD OF SEEDS

# Organic seeds: towards a transparent European market

The use of organic seeds and propagating material is one of the fundamental principles of organic agriculture. This is reflected in current European regulations which stipulate that the use of organically produced plant reproductive material is mandatory if a crop is to be sold as organic produce.

## Derogations

However, in Europe, demand for organic produce has historically outstripped organic seed supplies. In response, the current European regulations allow for exceptions, or 'derogations', from the organic seed requirement if certain conditions are met. In order to ensure the integrity of such a system, the regulations mandate the use of a computerised database in each national territory, which must keep a regularly-updated list of all organic seeds which are available at any given time.

An authorisation to use non-organic

untreated seeds or seed potatoes may only be granted: (i) where no organic variety of the species the user wishes to obtain is registered in the database, and no alternative varieties of the same species would be appropriate for the user's production, (ii) where no supplier in that area is able to deliver seeds before seeding time, or (iii) where the use is justified for research or conservation purposes, in agreement with competent Member State authorities.

Consequently, the effective and accurate implementation and use of these databases is of paramount importance to the organic seed supply chain, and in ensuring the integrity of the organic sector.

## New Organic Regulation

In June 2018 the European Commission published the new organic regulation 2018/848, to take effect from 1 January 2021. The new regulation aims to phase out the existing system of der-



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ogations for untreated conventional seed and planting material, and continues to mandate the use of a database containing information about organic and in-conversion plant reproductive material. The new regulation extends this requirement to organic animals, which are to be categorised by sex, species or breeds, age and any other relevant information. For aquaculture juveniles this should include their health status and the production capacity for each aquaculture species.

The regulation further stipulates that Member States must make this information public, free of charge,

together with the names and contact details of suppliers. Operators of these databases are obliged to ensure that the information is updated regularly.

## Organic Seed Databases

Member States have to ensure that measures are taken in order to comply with the European regulations with respect to organic seed. The Commission publishes links to Member States' databases on its website, which shows that member states at present have adopted a range of tools from simple spreadsheets to fully computerised tools. The most popular computerised



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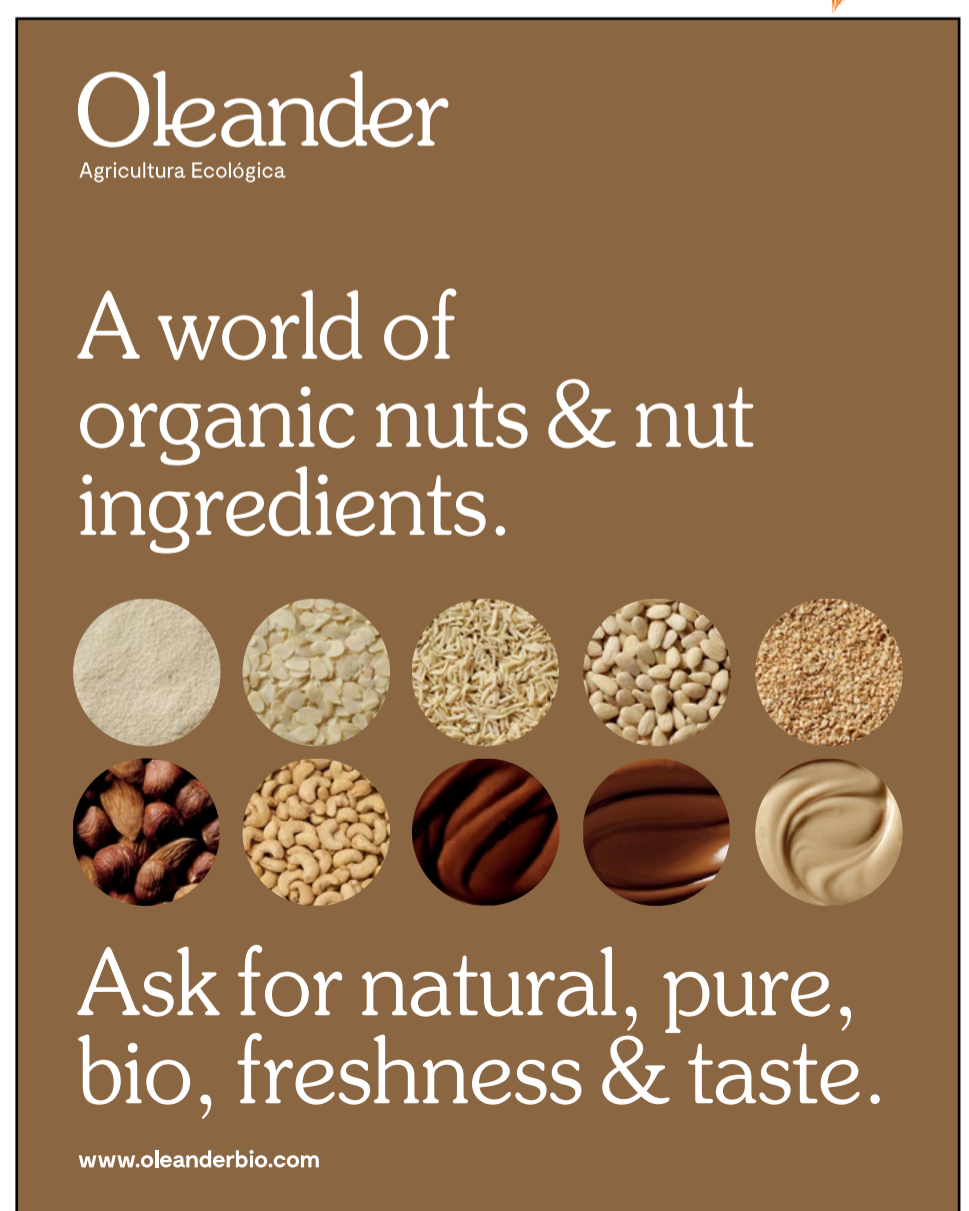
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tool is **organicXseeds**, a tool that integrates all the requirements of the European organic regulations into a single platform. It is presently running in seven countries and was developed by the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL). Such a system can be used by all relevant stakeholders across the organic sector, including seed suppliers who use it to publish their available organic seed, farmers searching for organic seeds, inspection bodies who will receive and determine derogation requests, and competent authorities who need to monitor and report to the European Commission.

**A European market for organic seeds?**

The new regulation acknowledges the importance of developing the organic seed market, and stipulates that the current derogation regime will expire by 2036. As such, Member States will need to harmonise implementation across the European Union.

One way this could be achieved would be through a harmonised com-

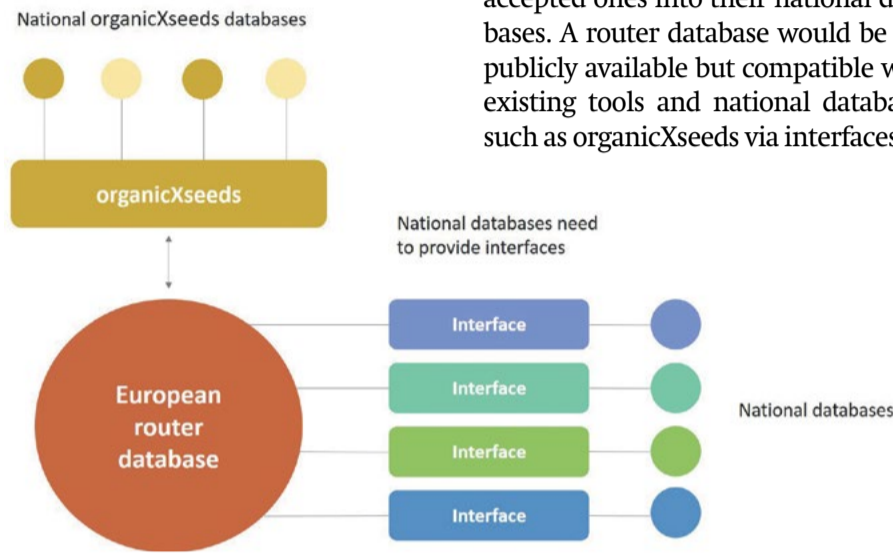
puterised database. Another would be through the development of a **European router database**. A router database would essentially mean that Member States would be free to manage their own national databases and systems while having an interface with the

router database. Suppliers would be able to access a unified European on-line platform where they can manage their seeds and decide to which European countries they are able to deliver. The national authorities can accept or decline these offers and integrate the accepted ones into their national databases. A router database would be not publicly available but compatible with existing tools and national databases such as organicXseeds via interfaces, as

demonstrated in the figure below.

A European router database is already under development in the LIVESEED project; a European Horizon 2020 project coordinated by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements EU (IFOAM-EU) and with partners including the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL). By linking national databases, LIVESEED additionally aims to establish a level playing field in the organic seed market, and improve transparency and performance.

While organic seed databases can deliver transparency on what is produced and available, farmers and seed suppliers need to have a role and actively participate in this process. Increased investment in seed databases is necessary to improve the situation of the organic seed sector. Establishing or utilising existing national expert groups could help to stimulate dialogue between stakeholders, in order to increase organic seed production and support the implementation of the new regulation. ■



**For more information:**  
 DG-AGRI Organic: <https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/organic/>  
 Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL): <https://www.fibl.org>  
 LIVESEED: <https://www.liveseed.eu>  
 organicXseeds: <https://www.organicxseeds.com>  
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(1) Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007; Commission Regulation (EC) No 889/2008; Commission Regulation (EC) No 1235/2008.

(2) Commission Regulation (EC) No 889/2008, s.30.  
 (3) Ibid., Art 45 (5).  
 (4) Regulation (EU) 2018/848, s.66.

(5) Ibid., Art 26 (2).  
 (6) Ibid., Art 53 (1).  
 (7) Döring, T., et al. (2012). The organic seed regu-

lations framework in Europe—current status and recommendations for future development. *Organic Agriculture*, 2(3-4), pp.173-183.

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