



Leading Harvest Standards Management

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I. Introduction and Scope

Leading Harvest's inaugural Farmland Management Standard (FMS) is a universal, outcomes-based sustainability standard focusing on farm management and continual improvement. Conformance to the Standard through independent, third-party certification verifies that an operation is being managed sustainably through documentation of outcomes-based evidence broadly organized around 13 outcome areas.

In April of 2021, the Leading Harvest Board of Directors adopted a five-year revision cycle for the FMS. Revisions will be an essential part of Leading Harvest's own process of continual improvement and will help to ensure that its standards evolve with both societal expectations for sustainability as well as scientific and agronomic knowledge. Such revisions will be guided by a Standards Committee and approved by the Board. In addition, the Board initiated the creation of the Independent Review Panel (IRP) that is comprised of experts and advisors responsible for ongoing review of and reporting on the assurance programs established by Leading Harvest. As part of their mandate, the IRP will provide input to the regular revision process of Leading Harvest standards as part of a continuous improvement framework.

Leading Harvest Standards Management also includes the following topics:

- Optional modules that supplement the FMS (i.e., Group Certification)
- Guidance documents

- Interpretations
- Variance requests
- Stakeholder feedback

II. Roles and Responsibilities

Different Leading Harvest stakeholder groups have roles and responsibilities in the standards management system, primarily in the revision process. All roles listed below have representation on the Standards Committee. They are as follows:

Staff: oversee daily operations of the standards management system, assembling stakeholder groups, facilitating meetings, and leading revision discussions.

Board of Directors: final vote on revised standards and overall direction of standards management.

Resource Group (RG): works closely with the staff, providing guidance regarding operational decisions. The individual that represents the RG on the Standards Committee will serve as chairperson.

Independent Review Panel (IRP): periodic review of Leading Harvest operations and adherence to established processes.

Certification Bodies: provides audit data and technical feedback regarding standard language and format.

Program/Standard Users: Leading Harvest certificate holders (and applicants) that have first-hand experience with implementing requirements of the standards and provide feedback based on these experiences.

Program Supporters: provides agriculture industry perspective as a service provider and technical expert.

General Public: members of the public that have interest in Leading Harvest (and the work of Standard Users) to a degree of which they participate in the revision process (Standards Committee or provide feedback during public consultations).

Standards Committee: *an assembly of individuals representing the above stakeholder groups that meet regularly during the fourth year of the revision cycle to work through draft standard changes based on data, feedback, opinions, industry shifts, and other factors. The composition of the committee will also balance representation of social, economic, and environmental interests. The individual that represents the Resource Group on the Standards Committee will serve as Chairperson, as their connection to the Board of Directors will increase understanding and efficient communication with the Board regarding the revision process. The committee will have a charter that all participants agree to, covering time commitment, responsibilities, and conflict resolution. The committee size will not exceed 12 people.*

III. Standard Revision Cycle

The FMS will be revised on a five-year cycle, with the below timeline serving as an example of the process.

Timeline example:

- **Launch of Farmland Management Standard** (April 2020)
- **Monitoring Period** (April 2020 - December 2023)
 - IRP and staff monitor the use of the Standard, collecting data on stakeholder feedback, complaints, approved variances, and requests for interpretations brought to their attention about the Standard. Data will also be collected from Certification Bodies regarding trends in nonconformities, as well as exemplary User performance.
 - Staff shares applicable results of the annual Leading Harvest membership survey with IRP
 - IRP, RG, and staff make note of changes in the agricultural landscape and areas in the Standard that need growth along with industry shifts.
 - IRP and staff analyze the data and make note of any additional expertise needed during the revision year, identifying experts to fill gaps.
 - During the third year of the Monitoring Period, the Standards Committee members are recruited, selected, and organized.
- **Revision Year** (January 2024 - December 2024)
 - Staff creates the first draft of revision on behalf of the Board, with input from the Standards Committee, taking into account what was learned during the monitoring period (by March 2024).
 - Standards Committee reviews the first draft of revision and submits comments to staff and Board (by April 2024).
 - Staff and Board review feedback from the Standards Committee and create the second draft of revision (by May 2024).
 - Staff opens the second draft revision to the public for two months (June 1 - July 31, 2024). Confidentiality will be ensured by giving the option for anonymous feedback, though anonymity will eliminate the chance for dialogue.
 - Staff makes the draft revision available publicly on the Leading Harvest website and hosts webinars as an opportunity for public comment, along with a public form for the submission of comments.
 - Staff announces the ability to comment on all platforms (newsletter, social media, Leading Harvest Community Platform).
 - Staff contacts Program Users and Supporters to request a review of the draft revision and alert membership to potential changes in Standard requirements.
 - Public submits comments on the draft revision.
 - Staff closes the public form for comments, removes the draft revision from the website, and announces the end of public comment period.
 - Standard Committee reviews feedback from the public, considers recommendations received during the comment period, creates the third draft of revision, and catalogs all public comments and responses (by middle of August 2024).

- IRP reviews the catalog of public comments and LH responses to ensure all input was considered. Staff posts log of comments and responses on the website so stakeholders can see how their comments were addressed. Board, RG, and IRP review third draft of revision and submit comments to staff (By end of August 2024).
- Staff finalizes revisions to the Standard to be approved by the Board (by October 2024).
- Board approves revisions to the Standard (by October 2024).
- Staff contacts Program Users and Supporters to inform membership of changes in Standard requirements and their effective dates before the annual renewal process begins (early November 2024).
- Staff prepares internally for announcing the launch of the revised Standard (November - December 2024).
- IRP creates a public report summarizing the process and how it was conducted transparently and fairly (by December 2024).
- **Launch of Revised Standard** (January 2025)
 - Staff makes the revised FMS available on the Leading Harvest website.
 - Staff makes the public report of transparency available on the Leading Harvest website.
 - Staff announces the launch of the revised Standard on all platforms (newsletter, social media, Leading Harvest Community Platform).

Effective Dates

The FMS and other normative documents (Group Certification module, for example) will be effective immediately upon the new version release date. New Program Users who have not begun the audit process must use the newest version, while existing Program Users may still be audited to the previous version for up to 12 months.

IV. Modules that Support the FMS

Separate modules such as Group Certification are often applicable to Program Users and supplement the FMS. Regardless of when modules are launched for use, they will all be included in the Standard revision cycle described above. This will ensure consistent expectations among all stakeholders.

V. Guidance Documents

Guidance documents are meant to help users and auditors understand the FMS, modules, and other normative documents. Since guidance documents are not normative, they do not follow the same revision cycle as the FMS and modules. Guidance documents may be released and/or revised at any time, and all substantive guidance will be announced and posted publicly.

VI. Interpretations

From time to time, a formal process may be needed to interpret the FMS or supporting normative documents. Such interpretation requests shall be submitted promptly to Leading Harvest. It is neither the intent nor the responsibility of Leading Harvest to resolve complaints or disputes arising through certification; nevertheless, Leading Harvest will provide opinions and direction to assist parties in answering interpretive questions. Through this process, Leading

Harvest will maintain a publicly available record of interpretations available to both Leading Harvest Certified Program Users and certification bodies to assist with certification planning.

Interpretation requests will be acknowledged within *5 business days* and decided upon within *30 calendar days*. Approved interpretations will be posted publicly and considered during the Standard revision process. **Interpretation requests can be sent to info@leadingharvest.org or directly to a Leading Harvest staff member.**

VII. Variance Requests

If a Standard user or certification body is unable to fulfill a normative requirement, a variance request may be made to Leading Harvest. A variance will only be granted if the reasons presented in the request are justified and meet the spirit of the normative requirement. The justification must be documented and submitted to info@leadingharvest.org with the email subject "Variance Request for Indicator(s) xxx," or something similar that clearly indicates the intent of the message.

Leading Harvest may include Standard Committee members, Resource Group members, Board Members, or outside technical experts to help make variance decisions.

Variance requests will be acknowledged within *5 business days* and decided upon within *30 calendar days*. Approved variances will be posted publicly. **Variation requests can be sent to info@leadingharvest.org or directly to a Leading Harvest staff member.**

VIII. Stakeholder Feedback

Leading Harvest often receives feedback from stakeholders that relate to farmland management, sustainable agriculture, or other topics relevant to Leading Harvest activity. Such feedback will first be vetted internally, typically through a Leading Harvest team meeting agenda item. This internal vetting process will determine whether or not the feedback should be cataloged for consideration during the Standard revision process.

Stakeholders that wish to submit a complaint to Leading Harvest should follow the process described in the Leading Harvest Complaints Procedure.