

A FRENCH STANDARD to raise the profile



The new NF V30-001 standard, “Cereals and maize - Good cropping and on farm storage practices” has just been published. The five ARVALIS/IRTAC Quality Assurance Charters for cereals and maize are now combined in a single officially approved standard. The aim is to consolidate this quality initiative’s status as a reference and to raise its profile among actors involved in this sector.

« The new standard will be easier to implement, both for grain storage companies and farmers. »

“From field to plate” Quality Charters

The ARVALIS/IRTAC Quality Assurance Charters provided the cereal sector with a solution to safety quality, nutritional and sustainability concerns. They apply to bread wheat (bread, cakes), durum wheat (semolina, pasta), malting barley (beer), sweetcorn (canned vegetable, pop-corn), and grain and forage maize (animal feed). The specifications include good cropping practices: sowing, fertilisation, plant protection against diseases, weeds and pests, irrigation, harvest, drying and on-farm grain storage. This scheme requires an annual inspection by the cooperative or trader company to check each registered farmer’s practices. An audit must also be carried out by an independent inspection body. Those Quality Assurance Charters provide the consumer with a quality guarantee, as well as traceability of the cereals from the field to the end product: 100% French provenance of the grain with a transparent production process.

ARVALIS/IRTAC Quality Assurance Charters are turning over a new leaf in 2016. Drawn up at the end of the 90s, they have derived from French cereal and maize farmers' will to acquire a national quality assurance frame of reference that reconciled the public's, the manufacturers' and the farmers' expectations. They define good practices for cereal and maize production and on-farm storage (*see insert*).

This scheme has been supported for nearly 15 years by ARVALIS, who leads the development and is responsible for the technical formulation of those frames of reference, and by IRTAC (1), who leads their implementation. They are reviewed every 4 years, and there have now been 4 versions since their inception. They currently boast nearly 8700 farmer participants through 44 cooperatives and traders. Over 290,000 hectares are complying with them, spread out though most regions of France.

The farmers who subscribe to them through their grain storage organisation (cooperative or trader), commit themselves to implementing specific cropping techniques, to selecting practices that favour safety quality and the environment, and to keeping crop records. This frame of reference serves as a basis for the specifications followed by many private businesses, as well as for wheat, flour and bread quality assurance schemes ("Label Rouge", certification conformité produit, etc.). It also serves to advise the different sectors of the agricultural industry.

Ongoing changes

In order for this tool to remain useful and to strengthen its role, it was decided in conjunction with AFNOR (2), that the ARVALIS/IRTAC Quality Assurance Charters should be standardised. One of the advantages of this scheme is that it is constantly evolving, taking technical innovations and societal expectations into account. It aims to help manufacturers who need to identify "sustainable cereal" suppliers in order to fulfil expectations as regards their own corporate responsibility. A new "V30D - Cereals - Good cropping practices" standardisation commission was therefore created within AFNOR in October 2014, at the joint request of FranceAgriMer, Intercéréales and ARVALIS. The standardisation commission, chaired by ARVALIS, is composed of around thirty members representing all the different branches of the cereal sector. After only 16 months of work, the French NF V30-001 standard was published last January.

It will be rolled out for the 2017 harvest and will take over from the ARVALIS/IRTAC Quality Assurance Charters. The standard is, as it were, the fifth version of this technical frame of reference. It will be revised at least every 5 years. ARVALIS is currently supporting all the cooperatives and agricultural traders involved, through the transition from the Charters to this new standard. The "French Agricultural Quality Assurance Charter" brand will still be used in communications on this scheme.

In 2015, 8700 farmers complied with the ARVALIS - Institut du végétal/IRTAC Quality Assurance Charters.



Recognition, simplification and flexibility

This technical frame of reference will stand out more than other existing specifications. The standard consolidates its role as a reference when establishing a quality assurance scheme. The creation of the five ARVALIS/IRTAC Quality Assurance Charters has been gradual since the beginning of the 2000s. The first one focussed on bread wheat, then durum wheat, malting barley, sweetcorn, and finally on grain maize/forage maize.

All the technical frames of reference are now regrouped under a single standard, which is easier to implement, both for storage companies and for farmers. The standard's stipulations do not mention the regulatory requirements that were included in the Quality Assurance Charters, although some of its technical points will actually be more stringent. It also spells the end of the pre-listing and listing phases of farmers' groups towards ARVALIS-Institut du végétal. Grain storage organisations will be able to implement the standard without any administrative support from the Institute, by establishing a direct relationship, based on trust, with their buyers. The paperwork associated with the implementation of this standard will also be noticeably lighter. Grain storage organisations who seek recognition for practices traceability will still be able to use certification bodies. The fact that its specifications are now public will strengthen its renown within the agricultural sector, but also with the general public. "NF" standards indeed benefit from a positive image and are recognised by consumers.

An information pack on the standard will soon be made available to all on ARVALIS's website. It will provide users with all the information they need regarding this scheme, its monitoring, checks on farmers' practices (auto-diagnosis, registration and documentary evidence control grid, third party audit grid, etc.). The 2016 harvest will be the last time the cooperatives and traders currently complying with the ARVALIS/IRTAC Quality Assurance Charters for the 2015-2016 season will be listed under those. ARVALIS will remain the main point of contact for grain storage organisations and farmers concerning technical matters.

Producing cereals under a Quality Assurance Charter provides buyers and food brands with the guarantee of a 100% French product.



(1) IRTAC: information sharing platform bringing together the professional organisations, the private businesses and the cooperatives of the cereal sector. It includes farmers, seed producers, input manufacturers, storage organisations, primary and secondary processing companies, technical institutes and labs. IRTAC is now refocussing on the cereal safety quality monitoring plan, which has evolved in order to meet the expectations of the businesses involved. This monitoring plan has been named Hypérion, Observatoire de la qualité sanitaire des céréales et des produits céréaliers (cereal and cereal product safety quality monitoring centre) and IRTAC has become Hypérion.

(2) Association Française de NORmalisation (French standardisation association).

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Assessing technical and environmental performance

Since 2012, some of the grain storage organisations complying with the Quality Assurance Charters have been calculating technical and environmental performance indicators of fields under a Charter. Those indicators are calculated using the SYSTERRE® computing tool created by ARVALIS: overall nitrogen balance, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, treatment frequency index (TFI), energy produced per parcel, etc. For the 2015 harvest, the grain from around 800 bread wheat and 500 malting barley fields stored by 17 different storage organisations was analysed. This working group will remain in place as the standard is rolled out, and will widen the types of parcels analysed to include those under any sort of quality scheme.