

CERES Policy

Ecosystem Destruction and Burning

1	Aim	Avoid environmental damage for obtaining or managing organic farmland.
2	Background	<p>Cutting and burning woodland is common practice in many countries, to obtain new farmland, or to destroy fallow vegetation. Besides, burning is used for weed control on field margins, to promote grass re-sprouting on natural grassland, and for destruction of crop residues.</p> <p>These traditions may be time-efficient and help to release in a short-term considerable amounts of plant nutrients, but they involve serious environmental damage, like species extinction, global warming, and loss of soils. Destruction of primary forests is the most outstanding environmental problem all over the tropics. Besides timber exploitation, slash and burn aims basically at obtaining farm and pasture land. Consumers, who pay higher prices for organic food, tend to have a high level of environmental consciousness, and expect organic food to be produced without such damaging practices.</p>
3	Normative framework	<p>EU-Regulation: Reg. (EC) 834/07, Preamble (1): "<i>Organic production is an overall system of farm management and food production that combines best environmental practices, a high level of biodiversity, the preservation of natural resources, ...</i>"</p> <p>NOP:</p> <p>§ 205.2 (Definitions) Organic production: <i>A production system that is managed in accordance with the Act and regulations in this part to respond to site-specific conditions by ... practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity.</i></p> <p>§ 205.200: <i>Practices implemented in accordance with this subpart must maintain or improve the natural resources of the operation...</i></p> <p>§ 205.203: (e) <i>The producer must not use: (3) Burning as a means of disposal for crop residues produced on the operation: Except, that, prunings from perennial crops may be burned to suppress the spread of disease.</i></p> <p>Also refer to the NOP Handbook 5020 which further specifies the requirements regarding biodiversity and natural resource conservation.</p>
4	Terms, clarifications, abbreviations	<p>Shifting cultivation: Traditional farming system, especially in the tropics, where forest areas are slashed, burned, and cultivated during some years, and then left for regeneration of secondary forest vegetation, before the land is subject to re-cultivation.</p> <p>Ecological value: Is defined by biodiversity (mainly number of plant and animal species), age, specific functions, and scarcity. In regions with rapidly shrinking forest resources, the same type of forest may have a higher ecological value than in countries with stable or even growing forest areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Especially primary forests have a high ecological value in all climatic regions of the world. In countries, where primary forests have become scarce, developed secondary forests have to be considered as of high ecological value. • Forest belts along riversides or on steep slopes have an especially high ecological value, due to their function for bank protection and erosion control, respectively.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The same is the case for diverse and developed hedgerows or forest patches surrounded by farm or grassland, which prevent wind erosion and function as important corridors for animals between other habitats. <p>Sustainable: A system is sustainable, when it can be maintained in the same form for a very long time. In the case of forestry, this means, e.g., that soil fertility must be preserved or improved, and that the amount of extracted timber must not exceed the biomass, which grows up in the same period.</p>
5	Policy	
5.1	Shifting cultivation	Organic farming must be sustainable. Shifting cultivation may have been sustainable in former times, when human populations were low. Under current conditions, fallow periods, remaining forest areas and soil fertility in shifting cultivation decrease constantly. Shifting cultivation is thus not acceptable in organic farming. Fallow periods must be replaced by green manuring ("intensive fallow"), and other forms of organic and mineral fertilisation accepted by organic standards.
5.2	Cutting and burning of ecologically valuable forests	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Burning and cutting of forests with a high ecological value by organic farmers is not allowed, be it to obtain farm or grassland, or for other purposes. After logging and/or burning such forest areas, the land must undergo a three years conversion period, until organic certification can be achieved. Farmers, who have destroyed such forests, must reforest a similar area, using native tree species. They must take care of reforested plots during at least five years. Loss of high numbers of trees due to a lack of care during this period, may lead to suspension of certification or other sanctions. Exceptions can be made in cases, where a combination of the following factors is given: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Logging is highly selective, leaving a very considerable number and diversity of trees, e.g. as shade trees for low-input coffee, cocoa, cardamom, or similar plantations; Smallholders are extremely scarce of land; Selective extraction of trees is part of a long-term and wide ecological management plan, which must include considerable areas, that remain untouched, or are reforested; commitment to such a plan must be in a long term and sanctioned by internal or external authorities; specialists in forestry or ecology must cooperate in working out and supervising the implementation of these plans. In case of disagreement concerning the ecological value of a given forest, specialists must be consulted.
5.3	Cutting and burning of forests of lower ecological value	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary or fallow vegetation of lower ecological value can be cut to obtain farmland in areas, where sufficient other forest or similar resources exist, provided that local authorities permit this practice. In case of burning of such vegetation, the respective plot has to undergo at least one year of (additional) transition. Exceptions can be made, where smallholders have definitely no technical alternatives to burning, like chainsaws and/or tractor ploughing.
5.4	Burning of field margins and crop residues	Field margins, weeds and crop residues must not be burned for other reasons than avoiding the spread of plant diseases and pests. Time efficiency in weed control is not sufficient as an argument for burning.

5.5	Specific case ginger production China	<p>A very common system for ginger production in China is to cut down forests, plant ginger for 1 or 2 years, and then re-forest the area again. Such a system can be certified organic only under the following conditions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The forest that is planted on the area, after harvesting the ginger, has at least a similar ecological value as the forest that was cut down. E.g. a <i>Pinus</i> or <i>Abies</i> or <i>Eucalyptus</i> plantation does not have the same ecological value as a mixed stand of broad leaf and conifer trees. The ginger production does not contribute to soil erosion. Even if the land is reforested immediately after the ginger crop, in the short period of ginger cropping, a very significant amount of soil can be lost on steep slopes. To prevent this, e.g. contour lines with shrubs and/or individual trees should be maintained at adequate distances, instead of destroying the entire original vegetation. Wood, including branches and leaves and other forest vegetation, that are not used for other purposes (timber, fuelwood), must be left to decompose, and must not be burned.
6	Government authorisations	<p>Confirmations from forest authorities in the different countries can be considered, but are ultimately not critical to the decision making by CERES. We do not certify compliance with national forest legislation, but with international organic farming standards.</p>
7	Related documents	<p>4.1.10 Policy Crop Rotation (Pol) 4.1.23.3 Policy Organic Quinoa (Spanish only) (Pol) 4.5.1.3 Additional Checklist Ginger China (T)</p>