

IOAS Inc.



IOAS Operating Manual

**Information and requirements specific to
assessment and accreditation against procedures and requirements of**

Better Cotton Initiative

Valid from: January 2026

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1. Introduction

This operating manual contains specific information and requirements of the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) Accreditation scheme implemented by IOAS on behalf of the scheme owner, Better Cotton Initiative (BCI). It should always be read in conjunction with IOAS General Operating Manual, which contains a full description of IOAS and its overall approach to its work conducting accreditation and surveillance of certification bodies working in the field of sustainable agriculture and related fields, which is performed in line with ISO/IEC 17011:2017.

It is IOAS' approach to harmonize the assessment process for the increasing range of schemes offered so as to reduce the burden of accreditation on all certification bodies (CBs). We are also continually working to gain recognition or equivalence of our work with scheme owners and government authorities such that we can offer 'one assessment, many accreditations.'

The manual is intended for:

- Certification Bodies applying for or maintaining BCI accreditation.
- IOAS assessors
- Representatives of BCI as the scheme owner

2. Scheme Owner

Better Cotton Initiative is a non-profit, multi-stakeholder governance group, founded in Switzerland in 2005. It promises better standards in cotton farming and its supply chain, with the mission of transforming cotton production worldwide, developing BCI as a sustainable mainstream commodity, and inspiring and equipping people to accelerate sustainable practices in the textile value chain.

Originally focused on farm-level cotton improvement until 2011, from 2012 onward it extended its services into the cotton supply chain by introducing traceability and chain of custody requirements. In 2024, BCI launched the physical chain of custody model, and by mid-2027 third party accreditation will become mandatory for all BCI approved CBs.

Accreditation of the CBs to the BCI scheme is essential to ensure rigorous, impartial, and reliable evaluation of compliance with BCI standards. IOAS, as an independent accreditation body, is authorized to assess, accredit, and monitor CBs operating under the BCI framework, thereby supporting transparency, trust, and credibility in the scheme.

Please find more detail on Better Cotton Initiative's history here:

<https://bettercotton.org/who-we-are/history/>

3. Scope Standards

The BCI accreditation applies to Certification Bodies undertaking BCI certification activities against the following standards:

- BCI Principles & Criteria: Producer level standard that involves certifying cotton producers (Farms, Groups of Farms, or Producer Units) with global geographical coverage.

- BCI Chain of Custody Standard: Supply Chain level standard that involves certifying ginners, traders, manufacturers, retailers or other supply chain entities and brands, with global geographic coverage.

4. Better Cotton Initiative Accreditation

BCI Accreditation is a voluntary accreditation. BCI scheme is governed by its Council, which consists of elected and appointed members. It is open to any CB which meets the requirements of the scheme and has received application approval by the scheme owner.

IOAS is responsible for granting accreditation in line with its normal procedures. The accreditation decision is notified to Better Cotton Initiative at compliance@bettercotton.org. Under its agreement with BCI, the CB shall only perform work within the scope of their BCI Standard.

4.1 BCI accreditation requirements, against which a certification body is assessed, are the 'General Certification Requirements for Certification Bodies,' which can be downloaded from <https://bettercotton.org/documents/general-certification-requirements-for-certification-bodies/>. These requirements are based upon and in addition to ISO/IEC 17065:2012.

Certification bodies accredited to the BCI scheme are required to certify against the relevant BCI Standard and abide by all relevant normative documents, interpretations, and guidance provided by BCI.

4.2 Application

4.2.1 Application to Better Cotton Initiative

Only Certification Bodies (CBs) that meet the general and scheme-specific requirements set by Better Cotton Initiative and IOAS are eligible to apply.

CBs must first obtain approval from BCI by submitting an application to compliance@bettercotton.org and receiving a signed agreement with Better Cotton Initiative. A signed agreement is a prerequisite before seeking BCI application under the ISO/IEC 17065:2012 accreditation to IOAS.

4.2.2 Application to IOAS

4.2.2.1 IOAS will provide an application form to be completed by the applicant CB. The general application, assessment and surveillance procedures detailed in Section 7 of the IOAS General Operating Manual apply.

4.2.2.2 The applicant is made fully aware of its rights and obligations before application through the provision of this Operating Manual, IOAS General Operating Manual and having access to sample copies of the Contract for provision of IOAS assessment and surveillance (PL0502) and the fee schedule (LS0503).

4.2.2.3 The completed application form must clearly indicate the scheme, the scope standard(s) and geographical scope. The applicant CB must provide evidence that BCI has approved the application as stated in 4.2.1.

4.2.2.4 ISO/IEC 17065:2012 accreditation with IOAS is a pre-requisite for BCI accreditation.

- If the CB is already accredited with IOAS for ISO/IEC 17065:2012, this application will be considered as a scope extension to the existing accreditation.
- If the CB is not yet accredited with IOAS for ISO/IEC 17065:2012, the CB will need to apply for this accreditation with the scope of BCI scheme.

4.2.2.5 If the application form review is satisfactory, the applicant is offered to sign the referred contract (PL0502) (in case, the CB is not already accredited with IOAS) and IOAS proceeds with the certification body document review.

4.2.2.6 After the document review is completed and found to be satisfactory, IOAS carries out an on-site visit (office and operator sites) as described in 4.4.

4.2.2.7 If the visit result is positive, IOAS will address the case to its Accreditation Committee for an accreditation decision.

4.2.2.8 If the accreditation decision is positive, the CB will be issued a certificate as per 5.2.

4.2.3 Scope Standards

Please, refer to section 3 above.

4.2.4 Geographical Scope

BCI accreditation may be granted globally, for a specific list of countries, or for another defined geographic region.

IOAS assesses the CB's demonstrated competence to certify and conduct audits in the countries / regions applied for, considering:

- At minimum one auditor and one reviewer / decision maker, both qualified for the specific scope, demonstrate sufficient knowledge of relevant local laws, as well as scope specific processes, issues, and risks.
- CB has in place effective measures to ensure local operators understand applicable scheme requirements.
- CB has in place effective measures to ensure accuracy, impartiality, and confidentiality in all communications with local operators and personnel, including requirements related to the use of interpreters/translators.

In principle, each country to be added to the accreditation scope is assessed individually by IOAS.

However, a CB may also apply for a 'global' scope, in which case IOAS applies the following additional criteria for assessment:

- BCI must clearly allow global geographical scope.
- CB must demonstrate having in place a robust and reliable system to ensure auditing and certification quality meets competence and scheme requirements in all cases, regardless of audit location.

After approval of the global geographical scope, IOAS must be able to verify that the system is continuously effective. Any finding indicating malfunction, even if country-specific, may lead to scope reduction, returning the CB to approval on an individual country basis.

4.4 Assessment

IOAS assessment and surveillance service for BCI accreditation is conducted in line with BCI General Certification Requirements for Certification Bodies, as well as IOAS ISO/IEC 17011:2017 and General Certification Requirements for Certification Bodies.

4.4.1 The initial assessment of a CB includes, at a minimum, the following:

- A desk review of the certification procedures (following ISO/IEC 17065:2012) that now incorporates Better Cotton Initiative certification.
- On-site assessment of the headquarters / main office of the applicant CB.
- On-site assessment of at least 20% of critical offices with focus on risk as determined by the AB.
- Witness audit (shadow audit) at one organization per BCI Standard in the scope of accreditation. In cases where the CB has no operators at the time of initial assessment, a mock audit may be witnessed.
- A desk review of the operator files relating to the witness audits mentioned above.

4.4.2 Surveillance assessments of a CB include, at a minimum, the following:

- **Certification File Review:**
Certification files are reviewed to assess the process from application to decision. This is done every 2 years for at least 1 company per relevant BCI Standard. For CB with over 100 certificates, at least 1% of all certificates are reviewed.
- **Certification Procedures Check:**
Certification procedures are checked to confirm alignment with BCI requirements and ISO/IEC 17065:2012. This review is conducted annually or whenever there are substantive changes to public procedures.
- **Certification Body Main Office Audit:**
An onsite audit of the main office is conducted every 4 years, covering all certification processes, including appeals, complaints, auditor training, and oversight.
- **Certification Body Affiliate Office Audit:**
This is an onsite activity triggered only when other findings indicate a risk, focusing on relevant certification processes (e.g., auditor training and oversight).
- **Witness Audits (Shadow Audits):**
At least one witness audit per BCI Standard is conducted every four years.

4.4.3 Technical Experts

IOAS reserves the right to require additional assistance from a technical expert as it deems necessary and depending on the industry/sector the standard is applied to. The cost of such experts at on-site visits is borne by the certification body. Such a need and a cost estimation will be communicated before proceeding with the visit.

4.4.4 Translators / Interpreters

IOAS reserves the right to require assistance from translators/interpreters as it deems necessary and depending on the country/ies the CB operates in. Translators / interpreters shall be independent from the certification bodies and their certified clients. The cost of translation/interpretation is borne by the certification body. Such a need will be communicated before proceeding with the visit.

4.4.5 Combined Assessment / Surveillance

Under IOAS procedures, surveillance or assessment of the CB can be combined with surveillance and/or assessment for other schemes.

4.5 Scope Additions

4.5.1 Adding Better Cotton Initiative Accreditation

Applicant CBs that are already IOAS clients for other schemes may apply for BCI accreditation at any time in their accreditation cycle (always first obtaining application approval from BCI) and IOAS will endeavor to conduct the assessment linked to ongoing surveillance procedures. However, if the timing of the application does not fit with existing schedules, additional visits may be required, and corresponding fees will be charged. The duration of the initial accreditation contract in such circumstances will be synchronized with all other schemes which means that the initial BCI accreditation cycle may be shorter than five years.

4.5.2 Adding Scope Countries to Better Cotton Initiative Accreditation

4.5.2.1 CBs that are already BCI accredited by IOAS for a given scope may apply for additional countries (or global scope) for that given scope, at any time in their accreditation cycle and IOAS will conduct the assessment as a document review. In case of approval, verification is conducted as part of ongoing surveillance procedures. See section 4.2.4.

4.5.2.2 Regardless of geographical scope amplitude, the contractual requirement for informing the accreditation body of relevant changes to the system (accreditation contract PLO502, Clause C.12) always applies. Relevant changes such as new branch offices / local representations or new inspection bodies shall be informed in a timely manner to IOAS.

5. Reference to Better Cotton Initiative Accreditation and the Scheme Owner

5.1 The accredited certification body may refer to being accredited by IOAS in accordance with the requirements described and referred to in the General Operating Manual.

5.2 Upon accreditation, the CB will receive a formal accreditation certificate which states that the organization has been found to be in compliance with the General Certification Requirements for Certification Bodies. The relevant standard scope/s will be indicated. IOAS will also publish the name of the CB on a public list indicating full details of the accreditation, the current scope and countries of activity. It is this list which takes precedence over any other source.

5.3 Only Approved Certification Bodies listed on BC's website shall use Certification Body Claims. The Certification Body shall ensure the text Claim that is used is applicable to their Certification scope. Refer to <https://bettercotton.org/what-we-do/claims/>.

6. Fees

6.1 IOAS fee schedule is available at <https://ioas.org/resources/document-library/>.

IOAS is able to provide a quotation of fees for the requested services but due to the many variables involved, these can only be used for orientation.

End

References for Further Reading:

- IOAS General Operating Manual: <https://ioas.org/resources/document-library/>
- BCI Chain of Custody Standard: <https://bettercotton.org/standard/chain-of-custody/>
- BCI Certification Claims: <https://bettercotton.org/what-we-do/claims/>
- IOAS Fee Schedule: <https://ioas.org/resources/document-library/>

For any specific questions on the Better Cotton Initiative accreditation scheme, please contact your assigned Client Service Manager.

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