

# AOSCA Long Range Plan

Report Submitted to Members and Associate Members

Prepared by LRP Committee-Bill Foote, Chair

March 11, 2021

## Preface

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The invitation to serve on a strategic or long-range planning committee usually comes steeped in statements that recognize wisdom gained by years of experience, and is garnished with the chance to work with a small group of talented, thoughtful people. Once the participants are gathered, it is best described as attempting to make sense out of chaos. Starting with a firm understanding of the past, the group is expected to predict the future and chart a path for the organization. If that is done by sane, realistic people, then it is understood that there is a reasonable chance of being gloriously wrong.

AOSCA has a long history of people whose prediction of the future, and the path they chose, were right on the money. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of AOSCA celebration was a glorious reminder that the people who crafted what became a method for producing and moving high quality seed around the world did so with amazing creativity and vision. Fast forward many years, and a group of brave souls successfully convinced the membership that AOSCA needed to revise its structural model. A rapidly changing seed industry needed a more responsive organization, and AOSCA needed a leadership model that would ease the individual burden by placing it on more shoulders. A CEO and staff, a Board of Directors, and a Standards Council were the right things at the right time.

It is doubtful that the efforts of this group will be as cathartic as those who boldly created or changed AOSCA. The goal of the committee was not to change the world, but rather to offer a way for AOSCA to remain relevant and for agencies to thrive. A regular theme surfaced throughout discussions; there are significantly different seed industry needs depending on the region and the seed crops that are grown. This is not a new concept, as regional differences have been the strength and the challenge of AOSCA for a long time. If the vision of this group is right, recognizing and thoughtfully finding ways to embrace those differences may be what makes or keeps seed certification relevant in the future.

Mike Moore

A steering committee was formed at the request of Board of Directors (BOD) in August, 2020 for the sole purpose of providing long range planning for the Association of Official Seed Certifying Agencies (AOSCA). The objective of this committee was to develop a strategic plan to provide guidance to the BOD and the association as a whole. The development of this strategic plan includes short and long-term high priority goals. Eight members representing all four regions were selected to serve on the steering committee by the BOD. All committee members are currently or were recently serving as Directors of their seed certifying agencies and represent over 200 combined years of service in an AOSCA affiliated organization. Three current BOD members served as *ex officio* members, and were called upon when specific information was requested. This document will be submitted to the BOD at the mid-winter meeting in March, 2021 for review with the intent to present it to the membership in June, 2021.

The Steering Committee met via Zoom video conferencing six times prior to publication to develop and craft this plan. The committee reviewed comments provided by all agencies that chose to answer the survey sent to all AOSCA members by Doug Miller, BOD President, in September, 2020. The intent of that survey was to query the members regarding their perspective on the state of the seed industry, the status of seed certification, and their agency needs and expectations. The member survey responses were discussed at great length and taken into consideration in developing the Steering Committee's vision. The survey and subsequent committee discussions made it clear that there are a wide variety of opinions and thoughts among member agencies. For instance, one agency believed certification was widely adapted, healthy and growing, whereas another agency experienced long term declining certification activity. The committee members recognized these divergent viewpoints and echoed the similar experiences. The committee attributed these differing viewpoints to a few key areas. Regional differences were key, with crop mixes, including traited crops, being the main driver, but agency structure also generated different perspectives. Despite these obvious differences, the committee believes that they provide opportunities rather than obstacles. In order to make a functional strategic plan, the committee concentrated on common elements of the organization, and provided a prioritized list of goals with suggested methods to achieve these goals. See Addendum A.

In addition to the goal of creating a strategic plan, the Steering Committee was tasked with providing a depiction of what AOSCA's executive management structure should look like in order to support the success of the organization and individual agencies. Again, the committee was surprised to see the range of thought on this subject that came from the member survey. Some members found value in increasing the current role of the AOSCA office staff and structure, some even proposed adding extra personnel to support business development, marketing and promotion efforts. Others suggested that the association staff was exactly right at a 1 ½ FTE effort. The dilemma here is the economic prospects for seed certification and related activities are unknown. The optimistic members believe there are ancillary services to be marketed to potential clients. Other members doubted that the association could find additional business for itself and/or member agencies. Some even expressed the opinion that we don't need more business. Regional differences became more evident with additional discussion. Despite the varied viewpoints, the committee was able to develop a recommended AOSCA administrative office structure. See Addendum B.

Common elements ran throughout all of the discussions that seemed important enough to identify separately from the strategic plan and AOSCA structure recommendations. Common areas of concern include; 1) activities of the BOD and AOSCA staff should be more transparent and communicated regularly, 2) involvement of and input from individual agencies in AOSCA activities was not universal and

perhaps not sufficient, 3) agencies have relied heavily on the CEO for direction and promotional efforts, 4) the financial situation of several agencies has declined, 5) seed company consolidation has impacted our industry, and 5) the seed industry will never be what it once was. The discussions can be best summed up by the following questions; *"We recognize the changing environment. What are we going to do about it? Can we do anything?"* The committee's efforts were an honest attempt to answer them. This document serves as a guide for our organization. Hopefully, embracing the ideas presented will make AOSCA a stronger, more unified association.



The AOSCA Planning Committee presents this document to the Board of Directors for review and consideration of AOSCA long range planning. We, the undersigned, support the contents of this document and recommend that the BOD adopt it as a strategic plan to guide the association in the coming years.

*Bill Foote*

Bill Foote, NCCIA

February 25, 2021

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## Addendum A

### AOSCA Long Range Planning Committee Strategic Plan

#### Goal #1 – Customer Retention and Expansion in a Shifting International, National, and Regional Environment in Order to Deliver Customer-needed Products and Services

- **Customer assessment – Do the following with a distinction/recognition of international, national, and regional differences:**
  - Determine what the customer base is for certification services, and what they want/need/expect from those services. (This could be trait testing, expansion of ancillary services, or promotion of the ACR concept as examples. It could also be to confirm that some customers only want phenotypic trait services.) This answer may be crop/region specific.
  - Determine the likelihood of retention, reduction or addition of the customer base in the next 5 to 10 years.
  - Assess the impact of the current structure, i.e. 45 individual "local" programs, has on the ability to meet the needs of an industry that is increasingly less "local" each year.

#### Goal #2 - Educate seed certifying agency staff and affiliated organizations, and foster collaborative efforts

- **Internal training**
  - Regional-focused training efforts associated with regional meetings
  - Training at the national level – provide insight into other crops and issues
    - New director training
    - Lessons learned training
    - Ancillary services training
    - AOSCA-level online training
- **External training**
  - Communicate deliberately, rather than opportunistically, with stakeholders – seed companies, government agencies, seed industry associations, etc.
  - Emphasize the value of 3<sup>rd</sup> party inspections, testing, audits, trait verification, etc. to a changing seed industry
  - Emphasize the value of AOSCA support of the seed industry, such as variety review boards, agency compliance evaluations, and the relationship/partnership/liaison with seed regulators, the USDA-SRTD, OECD, and AOSA-SCST
  - Promote strengths of SCAs and third-party quality programs
  - Build branding of AOSCA, suggest: **Expert, Responsive and Service Oriented Seed Quality Specialists**

**Goal #3 - Actively Explore and Pursue Business Development Opportunities that Enhance the Use of AOSCA Programs and Related Services**

- **Approach this goal with a conscious effort to form committee(s) with a purpose.**
- **North America**
  - Business Development in Changing Environments; Explore new ways to serve seed producers and consumers
  - Identify new and potential markets/partners
  - Identify shared victories and losses at regional and national level, looking for opportunities for growth
  - Promote dialogue between SCAs, regions, and countries
  - Seek opportunities for pooled resources, i.e. software
- **Actively Encourage and Enhance International Membership and Presence**
  - Consider becoming a member of the World Seed Partnership. This would greatly enhance the image of AOSCA in other parts of the world, which may lead to more international members.
  - Explore opportunities to collaborate with OECD or provide services where OECD does not provide service
  - Promote dialogue between SCAs, regions, countries
  - International trade committee (international members + exporting US members)

**Goal #4 - Staff and Maintain an AOSCA Office that Provides Member Agencies with Administrative Support**

- Provide Governance
- Provide sound financial guidance and oversight
- Provide Organization Leadership and its form – top down or bottom up? Serve as communications hub
- VRB
- External outreach



## Addendum B

### AOSCA Leadership Structure

AOSCA is an association of organizations that have the authority to certify seed. The history, organization, legal status and crops served varies among AOSCA members. Prior to 2005, every agency provided input to the organization through its representative, an elected board member, and was given equal voice in all matters discussed at the Board of Directors (BOD) meeting. The BOD members and the Executive Committee were responsible for fiscal policy, association governance, and standards developments. Day-to-day operation of the association fell under the responsibility of executive vice-president (EVP) elected by members from the general membership. The EVP role was a paid part-time position and moved between agencies several times. The leadership structure fostered a member driven agenda where leadership was shared by all agencies at the level of their interest. Success of the organization was highly dependent on the cooperation and volunteer effort of the agencies as a whole. Some might refer to this as bottom-up style of leadership. In a sense, AOSCA functioned as an employee owned business.

The leadership structure changed significantly in 2005 when a full-time CEO was hired to oversee the daily operations of the association including supervision of one full-time staff plus part-time staff as needed. The CEO took on the responsibilities of the EVP and was further tasked with finding and developing business opportunities for the AOSCA. AOSCA leadership was further changed by doing away with the Executive Committee, and forming two new entities. A Board of Directors, made up of two representatives from each region, was tasked with the fiscal management of the association. The Standards Council was also formed, which assumed the responsibility for managing the organization's certification standards, and consisted of an individual elected by each region. The council chair could be from those four members or not, and was elected by the membership. While both the BOD and the Council receive input from the membership, the success of the organization now has a greater reliance on the leadership of the CEO, the Board of Directors, and the Standards Council.

The role of the CEO changed again in 2020, when the CEO elected to serve in a part-time capacity with diminished responsibility for seeking outside business. This revised role saves the association money; however, it is an opportunity to explore options regarding the form and function of the CEO's position. This committee felt this exploration was an important part of the development of a strategic plan, and offers the following recommendation regarding AOSCA's CEO/Office structure.

We recommend that the leadership structure remain unchanged to what our goal was when AOSCA changed from a part time EVP to a full time CEO. We desire to have the AOSCA office maintained by a full time CEO, a full time Administrative Assistant and part time staff as needed. The day-to-day activities of the CEO may be summarized as follows:

#### CEO's Responsibilities:

- Management of Association office (brick and mortar or virtual) and activities.
- Fiduciary responsibilities commensurate with executive role and consistent with AOSCA policies.
- Supervision and direction of the Administrative Assistant and other support personnel (if needed for special projects, etc.)
- Budget development, management, and reporting.
- Representation of AOSCA at industry meetings and functions.



- Management of Association business including policies, operations, finances, investments, services, committees, and meeting organization.
- Active support of Variety Review Boards and the US Agency evaluation program.
- Provide business/service inquiries and relevant contacts from seed industry partners to share with the BOD, regions, and individual agencies. It is critical to the success of AOSCA that the organization's members be apprised of opportunities arising from the CEO's role as the public representative of AOSCA. In particular, high profile and/or emerging industry issues that affect agencies, or may be serviced by AOSCA certification or ancillary programs, are an essential part of the CEO's responsibility to the organization.

This committee recognizes that not all agencies will benefit directly from new business opportunities, but believes that CEO engagement in business development activity benefits the association and is critical to the growth of AOSCA. We desire a proactive approach; the CEO must be willing to visit members in their places of business and have regular contact with seed trade organizations, seed regulatory agencies, and seed suppliers. The CEO should be willing to call upon board members or member agencies to collaborate or represent the organization at associated events.

Ultimately, the CEO's external relationship-building and business development responsibilities may be as important to the future of AOSCA as his or her financial and administrative duties. Active engagement with seed industry partners on behalf of members, with a focus on prospecting opportunities for both AOSCA and its member agencies, are a critical need for state agencies that otherwise lack connection to national/international agribusinesses.

We also recognize that variety development is heavily dependent on new biotechnology such as gene editing, DNA fingerprinting, marker assisted selection, and bioinformatics. These breeding techniques have changed cultivar development significantly so that certification by visually distinguishable phenotypic traits alone is no longer sufficient for all seed crops. Adaptation of the ACR was an attempt to address this need; however, it was rarely utilized and has not enhanced the appeal of traditional certification. We believe that there may be business opportunities involving biotechnology; therefore, the CEO and the Council should be familiar with new technologies so that the CEO can explore additional opportunities and alternative approaches, and effectively communicate with potential stakeholders.