



PROVISIONAL APPROVAL SCHEME FOR CERTIFICATION BODIES

FOR

NCCF ECOTOURISM STANDARD AND CERTIFICATION SCHEME

NCCF-ET-PA-STD-01/2023

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1. INTRODUCTION:

- 1.1 The Certification Bodies (CBs), to operate under the **Voluntary Ecotourism Standard** of the **Network for Certification and Conservation of Forests (NCCF)**, herein after referred to as the scheme, shall need to primarily comply with the requirements specified in ISO 17065 and the additional requirements prescribed by NCCF, as the scheme owner.
- 1.2 The CBs would not get an applicant and would not be able to offer their process for witnessing as part of accreditation process to the accreditation body to get accreditation or to get the relevant scope added in their accreditation, if already accredited, unless they are approved under the scheme.
- 1.3 Further, in order to launch the scheme, it is necessary that some CBs are available at the beginning.
- 1.4 Therefore, it is necessary to establish a procedure for provisional approval of CBs under the scheme till such time they can get the relevant scope added in their accreditation or get formally accredited from the National Accreditation Board for Certification Bodies (NABCB) and approved by NCCF.
- 1.5 This document sets out the requirements to be fulfilled by CBs desirous of operating under the scheme pending formal accreditation and approval.

2. SCOPE

This document defines the process for Certification Bodies (CBs) to obtain provisional approval to operate under the scheme pending formal accreditation for the scheme by NABCB as per the prescribed international standard(s).

3. CRITERIA FOR PROVISIONAL APPROVAL

The CBs desirous of operating under this scheme shall meet the criteria as prescribed in clauses 4 and 5 of this document.

4. ADMINISTRATIVE REQUIREMENT

- 4.1 Legal entity:** The CB shall be a legal entity in the economy in which it is located or shall be a defined part of a legal entity, such that it can be held legally responsible for all its certification activities. A governmental certification body is deemed to be a legal entity on the basis of its governmental status. A CB, that is part of an organization involved in functions other than certification, shall be separate and identifiable within that organization.
- 4.2 Organizational structure:** The CB shall define and document the duties, responsibilities and reporting structure of its personnel and any committee and its place within the organization. When the certification body is a defined part of a larger legal entity, documentation of the organizational structure shall include the line of authority and the relationship to other parts within the same legal entity.
- 4.3 Integrity:** The CB and its product shall maintain integrity at all times. The CB shall implement adequate measures to ensure integrity.
- 4.4 Impartiality:**
- 4.4.1 The CB shall be impartial.
 - 4.4.2 The CB shall be so structured and managed as to safeguard impartiality.
 - 4.4.3 The CB and its staff shall not engage in any activities that may conflict with their Impartiality.
 - 4.4.4 The CB shall act impartially in relation to its applicants and certified entities.
 - 4.4.5 The CB shall have a process to identify, analyze, evaluate, monitor, and document the threats to impartiality arising from its activities including any conflicts arising from its relationships on an ongoing basis.
 - a) This shall include those threats that may arise from its activities, or from its relationships, or from the relationships of its personnel. Where there are any threats to impartiality, the CB shall document and demonstrate how it eliminates or minimizes such threats and document any residual risk. The demonstration shall cover all potential threats that are identified whether they

arise from within the CB or from the activities of other persons, bodies or organizations.

- b) Top management shall review any residual risk to determine if it is within the level of acceptable risk. When a relationship poses an unacceptable threat to impartiality, then certification shall not be provided.
- c) The risk assessment process shall include identification of and consultation with appropriate interested parties to advise on matters affecting impartiality including openness and public perception.

Note 1: Sources of threats to impartiality of the certification body can be based on ownership, governance, management, personnel, shared resources, finances, contracts, training, marketing and payment of a sales commission or other inducement for the referral of new clients, etc.

Note 2: One way of fulfilling the consultation with the interested parties is by the use of an impartiality committee.

4.4.6 The CB shall not impart education and/or training in ecotourism/sustainable tourism, or any other training related to this scheme within the same legal entity.

4.4.7 The CB shall not certify a system on which it has provided consultancy, carried out internal audits or provided in-house training, for a minimum of two years following the completion of consultancy/ internal audits / in-house training. The CB shall have a process to ensure that they do not use personnel in audits or other certification activities if they have been employed by or involved in consultancy/ internal audits / inhouse training towards the client, for a minimum of two years.

4.4.8 The CB shall have a process to eliminate or minimize risk to impartiality if consultancy/ internal audits / inhouse training of any entity/client is carried out in a related body which is linked to the CB by common ownership etc.

4.5 Confidentiality: The CB shall ensure confidentiality of information obtained in the course of its certification activities by having a suitable system.

4.6 Liability and Financing:

- 4.6.1 The CB shall be able to demonstrate that it has evaluated the risks arising from its certification activities and that it has adequate arrangements (e.g., insurance or reserves) to cover liabilities arising from its operations in each of its fields of activities and the geographic areas in which it operates.
- 4.6.2 The CB shall evaluate its finances and sources of income and demonstrate that initially, and on an ongoing basis, commercial, financial or other pressures do not compromise its impartiality.

5. TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

5.1 General Considerations

- 5.1.1 The CB shall employ, or have access to, a sufficient number of personnel to cover its operations related to the scheme and other normative documents.

Note: The personnel include those normally working for the certification body, as well as persons working under an individual contract or a formal agreement that places them within the management control and systems/procedures of the certification body.

- 5.1.2 The CB shall ensure that all personnel carrying out the key activities, such as technical review, auditing, granting of certification, monitoring of auditors, etc. have the relevant and appropriate competencies corresponding to these activities.
- 5.1.3 Personnel, including any committee members, personnel of external bodies, or personnel acting on the certification body's behalf, shall keep confidential all information obtained or created.

5.2 Management of competence for personnel involved in the certification process:

- 5.2.1 The CB shall establish, implement, and maintain a procedure for management of competencies of personnel involved in the certification process. The procedure shall require the CB to:
- Determine the criteria for the competence of personnel for each function in the certification process, considering the requirements of the scheme.

- Identify training needs and provide, as necessary, training programs on certification processes, requirements, methodologies, activities, and other relevant certification scheme requirements.
- Demonstrate that the personnel have the required competencies for the duties and responsibilities they undertake.
- Formally authorize personnel for functions in the certification process.
- Monitor the performance of the personnel.

5.2.2 The CB shall maintain the following records for the personnel involved in the certification process:

- name and address,
- position held,
- educational qualification and professional status,
- curriculum vitae,
- experience and training,
- the assessment of competence as per section 7.4,
- performance monitoring,
- authorizations held within the CB,
- date of most recent updating of each record.

5.3 Contract with the personnel

5.3.1 The CB shall require personnel involved in the certification process to sign a contract or other document by which they commit themselves to the following:

- To comply with the rules defined by the CB, including those relating to confidentiality and independence from commercial and other interests.
- To declare any prior and/or present association on their own part, or on the part of their employer, with:
 - a provider or developer of services, or
 - an operator or developer of processes
- To the evaluation or certification of which they are to be assigned.
- To reveal any situation known to them that may present them or the CB with a conflict of interest.
- CB shall use this information as input into identifying risks to impartiality raised by the activities of such personnel, or by the organizations that employ them.

5.4 Requirements for Personnel involved in the certification activities:

5.4.1 Requirements for Ecotourism Auditors

5.4.1.1 Educational and professional experience:

- i. Tertiary education (college or university qualification) in tourism/ ecotourism/ NRM/ forestry/ agriculture/ agroforestry/ life sciences/ environmental science/ natural resources or related/relevant subjects.
- ii. 5 years of work experience in the tourism sector, if the experience specifically involves ecotourism, a period of 3 years would be adequate.
- iii. Training in auditing techniques (based on ISO 19011/ 17021) OR any LA Course based on it; (ISO 9001/14001/45001).
- iv. Successful completion of NCCF Ecotourism Auditor Training. Please refer to Note 1 and 2. Training in Ecotourism Standard of NCCF by NCCF; until NCCF starts providing such training, training on any equivalent training like GSTC Auditor Training or GSTC benchmarked scheme auditor training is acceptable.
- v. To qualify as a lead auditor, auditors should have experience in the tourism sector based in the ISO 14001 scope 30, specifically 10 man-days of experience. On the other hand, to be considered an Auditor in the particular sector, 5 man-days of experience would suffice.
- vi. Participation in audit for first time qualification
 - a) As observer in one complete initial evaluation audit
 - b) As observer in one surveillance audit
 - c) As Trainee auditor under supervision of CB's approved Lead Auditor in at least one evaluation audit

5.4.1.2 For maintaining the qualification of auditor, the CB shall ensure that auditor participated in two (2) on site audits or 3 person-days of audit every year for NCCF Ecotourism Standard or equivalent scheme.

Note 1: CBs are required to contact NCCF regarding the training.

Note 2: Auditors will be required to undergo mandatory NCCF Training as and when available, to become eligible as auditors for NCCF schemes and continue their auditor status for the same.

5.4.1.3 CB shall be responsible both for ensuring that the training programme remains current with scheme changes, and for updating it, as needed, to improve its effectiveness.

5.4.1.4 **Competencies:** The CB shall ensure that each Ecotourism Destination Auditor demonstrates ability to apply knowledge and skills in the following areas:

- i. Principles, requirements, criteria or indicators of the Ecotourism standard, as applicable.
- ii. Knowledge of the socio-demographics and cultural issues in the region of application of the Ecotourism standard.
- iii. Audit principles, procedures, and techniques: to enable the auditor to apply those appropriate to different audits and ensure that audits are conducted in a consistent and systematic manner.
- iv. Organization situations including organizational size, structure, functions and relationships, general business processes and related terminology and cultural and social customs such as knowledge of the client organization working language: to enable the auditor to comprehend the organization's operational context.
- v. Legislation, regulations, or other relevant requirements – enabling the auditor to operate in the right legal framework and to be aware of the legislative requirements applicable to the client organization which is the subject of the audit.
- vi. The principles of Ecotourism management based on techniques involving inventories, local communities, key issues, planning, protection, and other management of basic ecotourism principles. – to enable the auditor to examine the ecotourism management scheme and to decide whether it is being adequately applied.
- vii. Natural environment science, environmental technology, and the economic principles applicable to Ecotourism management.

Note: In case an auditor is deficient in any of the areas above the same may be supplemented by a technical expert.

5.4.1.5 **Performance Review:** The CB shall provide evidence of annual monitoring of auditors applying methods such as audit witnessing, reviewing audit reports or client organizations' feedback, etc. based on the frequency of their usage and the level of risk linked to their activities. In particular, the CB shall review the competence of its personnel in the light of their performance in order to identify training needs. The auditors shall be witnessed onsite at least once in 3 years.

- 5.4.2 **Audit Team:** The audit team shall comprise of auditor(s) fulfilling the requirements. In some cases, technical experts may be required to support the required auditor competency in a particular technical area by providing appropriate technical expertise.
- 5.4.3 **Other CB personnel:** Other CB personnel involved in the NCCF Ecotourism certification activities shall have at least basic knowledge of the NCCF certification scheme and competence as per their roles and responsibilities.

6. PUBLICLY AVAILABLE INFORMATION

- 6.1 The CB shall maintain a website for providing information about the scheme and its certification activities under the scheme including the following:
- a) The CB shall maintain and make publicly available information describing its certification processes for granting, maintaining, extending, renewing, reducing, suspending, or withdrawing certification, and about the certification activities and geographical areas in which it operates.
 - b) The CB shall make publicly available information about applications registered and certifications granted, suspended, or withdrawn under the scheme.
 - c) The CB shall make publicly available its process for handling appeals and complaints.

7. CERTIFICATION PROCESS

- 7.1 The CB shall manage the process of certification as per the documented 'Certification Process' prescribed under the scheme - NCCF-STD-ACR-01/2023.
- 7.2 The CB shall maintain records to demonstrate that the certification process is effectively implemented.
- 7.3 The CB shall ensure the requirements of the scheme are met at any point in time.
- 7.4 The CB shall have written agreement with the certified clients on the use of the certificate issued to them.
- 7.5 The CB shall have a process to handle appeals by the applicants/certified clients against any of its decisions.

- 7.6 The CB shall have a process to handle complaints from the stakeholders.
- 7.7 **Certification agreement:** The CBs shall have a legally enforceable agreement for the provision of certification activities. In addition, the CBs shall ensure its certification agreement requires that the certified entities comply at least, with the specific requirements as prescribed in the relevant accreditation standard (ISO 17065) and the scheme document.
- 7.8 **Responsibility for decision on certification:** The CBs shall be responsible for, shall retain authority for, and shall not delegate, its decisions relating to certification, including the granting, maintaining, recertifying, expanding, and reducing the scope of the certification, and suspending or withdrawing the certification.

8. APPROVAL PROCESS

8.1 Application

- a) Any organization interested in provisional approval as a CB for the purpose of the scheme may apply to NCCF in the prescribed application format available on NCCF website along with the prescribed application fee. The applicant shall also enclose the required information and documents as specified in the application form.
- b) The filled application form for provisional approval shall be duly signed by the authorized representative/s of the organization seeking approval.
- c) On receipt of the application form, it will be scrutinized by the secretariat at NCCF and those found complete in all respects will be processed further.

8.2 Assessment process

8.2.1 On review of the application for completeness, an assessment team comprising a team leader and member(s)/technical expert(s) will be nominated by NCCF for the purpose of assessment at applicant's office or remotely, as decided and other locations, if required.

Under normal circumstances, the assessment at head office will be for a total of 1 or 2 Person Days (PD). The assessment team composition and PDs would be decided on following basis:

- 1) If the applicant CB is accredited for ISO 17065, scheme other than NCCF Ecotourism scheme. In this case, max 2 PD of assessment (desk and onsite) including 1 PD by TE would be done. Consideration shall be given if the CB is accredited for forestry or tourism related scheme.
- 2) If the CB has no prior accreditation or provisional recognition/approval. In this case an assessment will be carried out for 2 PD (desk and on site) including 1 PD for TE.

Note: NCCF would have an option to conduct a witness assessment of the first audit after grant of provisional approval. The team members and person-days of witness assessment would depend on actual person -days of CB audit.

8.2.2 The names of the members of the assessment team along with their CVs will be communicated to the applicant giving it adequate time to raise any objection against the appointment of any of the team members, which will be dealt with by NCCF on merits. All assessors/experts nominated by NCCF shall have signed undertakings regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest.

8.2.3 The assessment team leader shall provide an assessment plan to the applicant in advance of the assessment.

- a) The date(s) of assessment shall be mutually agreed to between the applicant and NCCF/assessment team.
- b) The Office assessment will begin with an opening meeting explaining the purpose and scope of assessment and the methodology of the assessment. The actual assessment process shall cover review of the documented system of the organization to assess its adequacy in line with the assessment criteria as specified. It will also involve verification of the implementation of the system including scrutiny of the records of auditors' competence and other relevant records and demonstration of auditors' competence through means like interviews, etc. In short, it will be an assessment for verifying technical competence of the applicant for operating under the scheme.

- c) At the end of the office assessment, through a formal closing meeting, all the non-conformities and concerns observed in the applicant's system as per the assessment criteria and the assessment team's recommendation to NCCF, shall be conveyed to the applicant.
- d) Based on the report of assessment, and the action taken by the applicant on the non- conformities/concerns, if any, NCCF shall take a decision on granting provisional approval to the applicant as CB under the scheme.

9. VALIDITY OF PROVISIONAL APPROVAL

- 9.1 This approval shall be valid for a period of two (02) years within which the approved CBs would have to obtain formal NABCB accreditation. In special circumstances, if the CB is unable to get accreditation from NABCB for justifiable reasons, an extension of provisional approval may be granted after an onsite and/or witness assessment as decided by NCCF.
- 9.2 NCCF would carry out an annual surveillance assessment at the office of the CB whose duration would be decided based on estimation of work done and may also witness CB audits during this period.
- 9.3 The CB shall obtain formal accreditation as per ISO 17065 from NABCB within two (02) years of provisional approval by NCCF to formalize its approval.
- 9.4 The provisional approval shall be subject to suspension/withdrawal with due notice of 15 days in the event of any non-compliance to the requirements of the scheme.
- 9.5 The provisionally approved CB shall inform NCCF without delay about any changes relevant to its provisional approval, in any aspect of its status or operation relating to:
 - a) Its legal, commercial, ownership or organizational status,
 - b) The organization, top management, and key processes,
 - c) Main policies, resources, premises, and scope of provisional approval, and
 - d) Other such matters that may affect the ability of the CB to fulfill requirements for provisional approval.

NCCF shall examine such information and decide on the issue on merits with or without an on-site verification.

- 9.6 The CB shall send data of the certified clients every 3 months after issue of the certificate to NCCF. The data shall be submitted in the specified format for maintaining the registry of the certified clients.

9.7 NCCF as part of its surveillance activity can pick up any client for witness assessment. The number of these witnesses will depend on number of certified clients of CB.

10.FEE

10.1 The following fee structure shall apply:

- a) Application fee: INR 30,000
- b) Person-day charges: INR 20,000/-
- c) Travel, stay on actuals.

10.2 NCCF at its discretion may revise/levy any other fee necessary with due notice to the CBs.

Annexure-I

Terms and Definitions

1. **Auditor:** Person who conducts an audit.
2. **Accreditation Body:** An accreditation body is an organization delegated to make decisions about the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of a Certification Body (CB). In the case of NCCF Ecotourism Standard and Certification Scheme, an accreditation body should be signatory of the IAF Multilateral Recognition Arrangement (MLA).
3. **Audit:** Systematic, independent, documented process for obtaining records, statements of fact and other relevant information and assessing them objectively to determine the extent to which applicable requirements are fulfilled.
4. **Certification Body:** A Certification Body (CB) is an accredited third-party organization that audits and issues certificates to companies seeking certification to various ISO Standards. CB's obtain accreditation to be able to certify to a specific ISO Standard(s). CB's are audited by Accreditation Bodies (AB) to ensure impartiality and conformity of their work and processes.
5. **Competence:** The demonstrated ability to apply knowledge, skills and personal attributes in order to achieve intended results.
6. **Concern:** Matter of interest or importance to a stakeholder.
7. **Conflict of Interest:** Situation in which a party has an actual or perceived interest that gives, or could have the appearance of giving, that party an incentive for personal, organizational, or professional gain, such that the party's interest could conflict, or be perceived to conflict with, the conduct of an impartial and objective certification process.
8. **Corrective Action:** Corrective action is meant to identify the root cause for the Nonconformity. Once the root cause is identified, the motto of the company should be initiating an action to eliminate it: corrective action.
9. **Major Non-Conformity:** The absence of, or failure to implement and maintain, one or more applicable requirements of the standard, that may result in a systemic risk to the function and effectiveness of the ecotourism destination management and/or effects confidence in the client organization's claims on certified raw material.
10. **Minor Non-conformity:** A single failure to fulfil the requirements of the standards that may result in no systemic risk to the function and effectiveness.
11. **Observer:** Person who accompanies the audit team but does not audit.
12. **Technical Expert (TE):** Person who provides specific knowledge or expertise to the audit team. Specific knowledge or expertise is that which relates to the organization, the process or activity to be audited.