



GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING REMOTE AUDITS

April 2020

**RAINFOREST
ALLIANCE**



OVERVIEW

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May 8, 2020		May 8, 2020		June 30, 2021	
Developed by:			Approved by:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standards and Assurance 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Director, Standards and Assurance 		
Linked to (code and name of documents, if applicable):					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UTZ Certification Protocol, Version 4.3 – November 2018. UTZ Certification Protocol for Brazil, Version 1.1. – March 2019. Code of Conduct for group and multi-group certification, Version 1.1 Code of Conduct for individual and multi-site certification, Version 1.1 All individual Code of Conduct crop specific modules Chain of Custody Standard, Version 1.1 - Dec 2015, including all crop specific annexes 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standard 2017, version 1.2. Certification Rules for Rainforest Alliance Individual Farms and Group Managers July 2017. Version 2.0. Rainforest Alliance Chain of Custody Standard, July 2015. Version 3. Rainforest Alliance Chain of Custody Policy, 2015. Version 3. Rules for Audit Planning and Implementation. Producer Farms and groups involved in agricultural and cattle production, April 2018. Version 1. Rules for Chain of Custody Audit Planning and Implementation, September 2018. Version 1. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> COVID-19 Policy for Audit Exceptions. Review March 17 and 30, May 8 2020. 					
Applicable to:					
All Certification Bodies (CBs) authorized by Rainforest Alliance and UTZ Certified					
Regions:					
All					
Crops:			Type of organizations:		
All			Farm and Chain of Custody entities UTZ and RA approved Certification Bodies		



1. INTRODUCTION

Rainforest Alliance is a growing network of people inspired and committed to work together in order to achieve our mission to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihood. For more information about Rainforest Alliance, visit our website: <http://www.rainforest-alliance.org>.

2. JUSTIFICATION

Rainforest Alliance has developed this guidance to support CHs and CBs to implement remote audits of certified farms, groups and supply chain operations where this is the most realistic option for ensuring the required level of verification within the audit cycle. This is particularly the case in situations where the planned audit schedule for on-site audits is disrupted in specific contexts. This document defines the conditions and steps that certification bodies must follow to conduct remote audits of both Rainforest Alliance and UTZ certified farm and chain of custody entities. This guidance will remain valid until the implementation of the new Rainforest Alliance Standard and its related Assurance system in July 2021.

3. DEFINITIONS

Remote audits refer to the use of ICT to gather information, interview an auditee, etc., when “face-to-face” methods are not possible or desired. (ISO 19011) In its annex A.1, ISO 19011 gives several examples for the application of remote audit methods in combination with on-site methods. For general recommendations on the conduct of remote audits please see [ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group Guidance on: REMOTE AUDITS](#)

For verification of RA Sustainable Agriculture Standard Farm level certification and UTZ Code of Conduct certification Rainforest Alliance recommends the use of Remote Audits in combination with on-site verification as soon as this is realistically possible (Partial Remote Audit). In this case the remote audit is focused principally on documentary review of available data provided by the Certificate holder and a limited set of interviews conducted remotely. The verification is completed through targeted on-site audit. In the case of Partial Remote Audits, the remote audit and the following on-site verification are considered as one single audit process and should be planned accordingly.

However, where it is not possible to conduct an onsite verification in an appropriate timeframe, Remote Audits may be sufficient to issue a certification decision without an accompanying on-site audit provided specific verification of internal inspection results and other data on key risk areas have been undertaken (Full Remote Audit).

4. PROCESS FOR CONDUCTING REMOTE AUDITS

4.1 DETERMINE THE VIABILITY OF CONDUCTING A REMOTE AUDIT

The feasibility of conducting a remote audit using ICT should be considered when deciding whether to conduct a remote audit and establishing the audit plan, at a minimum the CB should verify;



- That the Certificate holder/ audited organization agrees to the conducting of a remote audit and the proposed method for conducting it
- That the appropriate technology is available to share required documentation and connect directly with relevant staff or members as required, this includes appropriate internet connection and bandwidth.
- That full confidentiality, security and data protection is ensured for all data shared during the audit. This may require specific agreements between the Certificate holder and the CB for the use of recordings etc.
- That a risk assessment has been made to identify areas (people, activities, sites) that cannot be adequately assessed by remote audit alone

For best practice guidance on assessing the applicability of remote audits please see [ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group Guidance on: REMOTE AUDITS](#)

4.2 DETERMINE THE SCOPE OF THE REMOTE AUDIT

If it is feasible to conduct a remote audit the CB must determine the most appropriate scope of the remote audit. In all cases the objective of a remote audit is to establish the compliance level of the certificate holder with all of the relevant criteria of the standard/code for the audit year/level corresponding to the Rainforest Alliance and UTZ Certification programs.

4.2.1 PARTIAL REMOTE AUDIT

For verification of RA Sustainable Agriculture Standard Farm level certification and UTZ Code of Conduct certification Rainforest Alliance recommends the use of Remote Audits in combination with on-site verification as soon as this is realistically possible (Partial Remote Audit).

PARTIAL REMOTE AUDIT	
DEFINITION	Audits that are conducted through a combination of remote and on-site checks to verify compliance with the Rainforest Alliance and/or UTZ Standards (<i>ISO 19011:2018, Audit method selection and determination</i>).
METHOD	<p>The remote portion of the audit shall follow the standard course of an audit while using technological tools to access the necessary evidence. Partial Remote Audits are most effective in verifying compliance with standard requirements which require documentary evidence. A limited set of interviews or other visual evidence will also be collected remotely.</p> <p>The aim is to provide preliminary level of verification which is sufficient to allow a certificate to be issued pending further on-site verification whenever possible to confirm the certification decision.</p> <p>The on-site part of the audit is intended to verify the conclusions of the remote audit and conduct additional verification of issues that could not be detected through the remote auditing process.</p>
CERTIFICATION DECISION	<p>A certification decision may take several forms.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Issue no certification decision until the on-site audit has been completed 2) Issue a positive certification decision based on the results of the remote audit and inform the Certificate Holder that an onsite audit will be conducted as soon as possible. If during the on-site audit the CB finds



evidence on nonconformities that were not identified during the remote audit, or of non-conformities that have not been closed, the corresponding sanctions of Utz and RA systems will apply.

- 3) Issue a positive certification decision with a limitation on volume until the on-site assessment is conducted** and inform the Certificate Holder that an onsite audit will be conducted as soon as possible. The volume of the license can be increased after onsite verification if no nonconformities on traceability are found. If during the on-site audit the CB finds evidence on nonconformities that were not identified during the remote audit, or of non-conformities that have not been closed, the corresponding sanctions of Utz and RA systems will apply.

4.2.2 FULL REMOTE AUDIT

In cases where onsite verification is not realistically possible within the current audit cycle, a Full Remote Audit will be necessary. In these cases, CBs can complete the certification process based on the results of the remote audit. These cases include:

- Crops for which the audit window is very short (e.g. herbs, hazelnuts)
- Situations where an onsite audit is impossible due to ongoing contextual disruptions and situations of Force Majeure (e.g. war, civil unrest, natural disasters and public health crises/pandemics such as covid-19 and ebola)

FULL REMOTE AUDIT	
DEFINITION	Audits that are conducted completely remotely using technology to gather information as necessary to confirm compliance with the Rainforest Alliance and/or UTZ Standards. <i>(ISO 19011:2018, Annex A. Supplementary guidance for auditors planning and conducting audits).</i>
METHOD	<p>Remote auditing should follow the standard course of an audit while using technological mechanisms and tools to access the necessary evidence, including interviews using appropriate sampling techniques</p> <p>In addition to the verification of documentary evidence carried out in a Partial Remote Audit, a Full Remote Audit will use additional data to check criteria/checkpoints that cannot be verified in the remote assessment. Where possible this may include interviews with staff and members conducted by telephone or by video link, video footage of sites provided by the certificate holder, remote sensing data (eg satellite data). Where the collection of additional information remotely is not possible the auditor must assess compliance with the internal inspection carried out by the certified organization before making the certification decision. CBs may also use analysis of the results of the previous audit.</p>
CERTIFICATION DECISION	<p>A certification decision may take several forms.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Issue the positive certification decision based on the results of the remote audit alone, after remote verification of the closure of any non-conformities based on the timelines for closure. 2. Issue the positive certification decision with a limitation on volume. The CB may only grant 100% volume if no nonconformities are identified on traceability and the auditor provides a clear assessment of the CH's volume



estimation. The volume may be increased once evidence has been provided that identified non-conformities on traceability are successfully closed.

4.3 ESTABLISH THE AUDIT PLAN

Once the CB has determined the appropriate scope of the Remote Audit, the Audit plan should be developed and agreed with the Certificate Holder.

1. The remote audit option should be agreed with the certificate holder and confirmed at the time of approval of the audit plan. Certificate Holders must agree to provide all requested information required for the audit process.
2. A remote audit plan must be provided by the CB. The audit plan must include the preparation required by both the CB and the certificate holder, the audit plan must also indicate the sampling processes and a description of how the meetings will be conducted (telephone, video link etc).
3. For Partial Remote Audits, the remote audit and the following on-site verification are considered as one single audit process and should be planned accordingly. The audit plan must describe which criteria/checkpoints will be audited remotely and which will be part of the on-site audit.
4. Once the audit plan is finalized, the auditor assigned to the process should inform the certificate holder of:
 - a. the list of documents required for remote audit verification. This list shall be prepared according to the sampling criteria for the records requested (application of supplies, training and workers' payment, transactions, suppliers audit, etc).
 - b. the sampling methods applied to all relevant criteria/control points so that the certificate holder can prepare accordingly.
 - c. The date by when all documentary evidence needs to be sent, which should be at least one week (5 working days) before the actual audit date. The farm, group or operator/ACS should have at least five days to prepare and send the documentary evidence;
 - d. In the case of groups and multi-sites, the auditor shall include the sample of farms/sites to be verified for the administrator to consolidate and submit the full documentary evidence.

4.4 CONDUCT THE AUDIT

1. Hold an opening meeting (by telephone or video connection) with management of the Certificate Holder detailing how the audit will be conducted and referring to all sections of the Rainforest Alliance and/or UTZ standards that will be checked remotely. The auditor shall keep a record of the attendees, and any modifications to the audit plan arising from the opening meeting, in the normal way.
2. The remote audit will be conducted using a combination of documentary review and virtual meetings and interviews. Interviews will include appropriately sampled representatives of management and group member/ workers representatives.



3. Objective evidence of the remote audit will be provided by conclusions from the interviews and document review.
 - a. For Partial Remote Audits - direct interviews with workers, and physical verification of on-site procedures and facilities will be checked during the follow-up on-site portion of the audit.
 - b. For Full Remote Audits as well as reports from the previous audit and/or the results of self-assessment/internal inspection.
4. If a certificate holder refuses to submit some of the required documentation due to valid confidentiality concerns, then information must be checked during an on-site evaluation.
5. For Partial Remote Audits, adjustments may be made to the audit plan at the conclusion of the remote audit to adjust the scope of the onsite audit based on the findings of the remote audit phase. Changes to the Audit plan must be communicated to the Certificate holder.
6. Hold a closing meeting with management following the normal audit process highlighting the findings. For Partial Remote Audits the closing meeting should also confirm the audit plan for the on-site portion of the audit.

4.5 REACH A CERTIFICATION DECISION

On completion of the remote audit (partial or full) the CB will issue a decision based on the options outlined above.