Certification and Alternative Agriculture:

Third-party certification has emerged as a primary means of promoting different, purportedly more socially responsible approaches to agriculture. Markets for organic and fair trade food products have expanded dramatically since the early 1990s, and numerous other labels have followed in their footsteps. A wide array of smaller certification programs have also been established well. While the theory of certification has been deeply examined, as have the details of large programs, 3rd-party agricultural certification as a whole has received relatively little empirical investigation.

Agricultural certifications seek to solve multiple problems caused by imperfect information and common-pool resources within agri-food markets. Certifications such as organic target multiple consumer demands, including for produce free of transgenic organisms and pesticide residues, the desire to protect farmworkers and environmental attributes such as water quality, soil-health and on-farm biodiversity as well as perceptions of higher food quality. Producers and regulators have long sought to ameliorate imperfect information about food safety, quality, and quantity to allow markets to function better (citations).

Agricultural certification faces large conceptual and logistical problems, however. Turning complex context-dependent agricultural strategies into simple Boolean (True/False) classifications is no easy task. Even ideas as conceptually straightforward as “no-till” can be confusing to implement in this way, and adaptive strategies such as agroecology, management-intensive grazing and the system of rice intensification have all faced substantial boundary disputes (Gerrish & Ohlenbusch, 1998; Glover, 2011). It is likely no coincidence that the most widely-used alternative agriculture certification, organic, has scaled by reducing a philosophical perspective to largely a list of prohibited materials (Dube, forthcoming). Additionally, certification inserts bureaucratic culture into farming communities (Mutersbaugh, 2002) and can privilege already well-off and well-connected farmers (Bacon, 2010; Getz & Shreck, 2006; Renard, 2005).

As certification grows as an approach to governing the environmental, health and social aspects of agrifood systems, more analysis of the structure and diversity of certification programs is warranted. This paper attempts one aspect of this. Here, I examine a set of 22 different certifications, and how they attempt to promote and certify the same framework: integrated pest management. This paper intends to characterize the diversity and commonalities between a wide range of programs claiming to pursue similar aims through certification.