

CHAPTER NINE

Certifications in the Herbal Supply Chain

Certification has become a central tool in the herbal sector. Done well, certifications open markets, strengthen internal systems, build capacity, and give buyers a basis for trust. Done poorly, or pursued without a clear purpose, they can be expensive, unpredictable, and hard to justify when the promised premium never arrives.

The most useful place to start is not with the question of which certification to pursue, but with a prior question: what do you actually want to protect?

In 2026, the SHI is organizing a members-only series of discussions on the value, challenges and opportunities of certifications. This overview is meant to identify key issues at this time.



The array of certifications a primary processor needs to choose from
This list is not comprehensive

Questions Worth Asking Before Pursuing a Certification

- What market are you actually trying to reach, and is certification the required path to get there?
- What are the underlying issues you care about, and is certification the most effective tool for addressing them?
- Does this fit your company's values and operating reality, or are you chasing a standard in hopes customers will follow?
- What would you do with these funds if you invested them differently?

Real Benefits

Primary processors with whom we spoke all agree that certifications have pushed their companies to strengthen internal systems. Specific tools that emerged from certification requirements and proved valuable in their own right:

- **Odoo ERP**, used to track true costs per kilo and create transparent pricing records
- **QR-coded batch traceability**, linking each product back to its source with photos and timestamps
- **KoboToolbox**, a flexible field data platform used to log technician activities, collect farmer surveys, and document harvest conditions

These systems, though initially built to satisfy auditors, gave companies greater control, transparency, and the ability to make a more credible case to buyers. The discipline mattered even when the certification premium did not materialize.

KOBOTOOLBOX: A FIELD TOOL WORTH KNOWING

KoboToolbox is a free data collection platform built for field use. Forms are built on a computer, deployed to a phone or tablet, and data syncs when you are back online. Available at kf.kobotoolbox.org.

Useful for:

- Farmer and harvester surveys: livelihood data, practices, community feedback
- Technician field logs: daily tasks, materials handled, areas visited
- Harvest and collection records: date, location, quantity, collector name
- GPS mapping: pinning wild harvest zones and collection points
- Photo documentation: conditions at point of collection or intake
- Quality control checklists: intake inspections, sorting, drying conditions
- Certification audit trails: timestamped records exportable for auditors



Preparing for the FairWild audit, Nature Connect, India

Market Access Without Premiums?

For most processors, the primary reason to certify is market access. Without recognized certifications, many international buyers will not consider a supplier at all. The premium, where it exists, is secondary.

"Without certification we won't be able to sell in many markets."

SHI MEMBER • PRIMARY PROCESSOR

Despite the promise of new markets, many primary processors said that there often isn't enough demand for certified materials and that what they are able to sell doesn't justify the investments made to become certified and to maintain the certifications.

"You must be 100% sure there's a buyer asking for it, otherwise, it's a wasted investment."

SHI MEMBER • PRIMARY PROCESSOR

Clash With Community Realities

Certification frameworks often miss or simplify the lived realities of harvesters and smallholders. Two examples from our conversations:

First, fair trade premium rules typically restrict funds to collective projects, prohibiting their use for individual or immediate needs. In practice, this means harvesters are told the premium is their money while being prevented from using it for medical bills, school fees, or food emergencies. The intention behind the rule is understandable, but the gap between the promise and the reality damages trust.

Second, standards like Global G.A.P. require infrastructure, including latrines, signage, and storage facilities, that is simply out of reach for smallholders beginning to move from subsistence to market production. To certify these farmers at all, the primary processing company often has to cover the infrastructure costs itself. This creates pressure to shift attention toward better-resourced farmers who can comply more easily, leaving the most vulnerable producers behind.

A related issue is auditors. Most come from outside the local context, do not speak the languages of the farmers or harvesters they are auditing, and rely on translators provided by the company being audited. The costs of flying in and hosting international auditors fall to the processor. These are significant and often underestimated expenses.



Training for the Wild Stewards Alliance, a point-of-harvest initiative in Appalachia

What This Means in Practice

Taken together, these experiences point to a consistent conclusion: certifications are often necessary for market access, but they are not sufficient for building resilient supply chains. Their greatest value lies in the internal systems and discipline they require you to build. Their greatest risks lie in the hidden costs, the gap between promised and actual premiums, and the potential to exclude the communities they are meant to support.

"We're spending about 10% of our total budget on certifications, and that amount is growing."

SHI MEMBER • PRIMARY PROCESSOR

THE PRACTICAL GUIDANCE WE HEARD MOST CONSISTENTLY:

Do not certify without confirmed buyer commitment. Market access is the goal, not certification itself. If no buyer has committed to purchasing certified material at a price that covers your costs, the investment cannot be justified.

Budget for the full cost. Annual fees are only the beginning. Factor in audit and auditor travel costs, staff time for documentation, infrastructure investment, and the cost of systems that need to be built or upgraded.

Build strong internal systems regardless of certification requirements. Traceability, field data collection, and quality documentation are valuable in themselves. Do not let their value depend on whether the certification they support delivers a premium.

Do not maintain certifications that buyers are not actually buying. Holding a certification that generates no committed purchasing at a fair price is a cost without a return.

Relationships and transparency matter as much as credentials. Every processor we spoke with said the same thing: lasting sustainability depends on trust with producers and buyers, not on the certificates on the wall.



FairWild certified wild harvester, Runo, Poland