

Better Cotton Remote Assessment Process

Applicable for US Farms 2024

V1.2 March 2024

Overview

The remote assessment should generally cover similar content as an on-site assessment; however, it requires key documents to be shared by the grower ahead of time, and then a follow-up interview with the grower/ farm manager along with a sample of workers.

The remote assessment consists of the following elements:

1. Planning and Preparation
2. Documentation Review
3. Grower Interview
4. Worker Interviews
5. Analysis and Reporting

Step-by-step approach

Planning and preparation:

1. The assessor (verifier, Better Cotton staff, or Implementing Partner representative) will reach out to the grower approximately three weeks in advance of the assessment and inform them of the upcoming Better Cotton assessment and the fact it will be carried out remotely
2. The assessor will share this process document and any additional relevant information with the grower in advance of the assessment to help ensure the process is clearly understood
3. The assessor and the grower will decide a mutually agreeable date for the main grower interview to take place [note this must allow enough time for documents to be shared via email in advance, see point 4 below]
 - a. It is estimated that 2 hours should be booked for the interview session. Less time may be needed depending on the scale of the farm and context
 - b. Skype or videoconference is recommended where possible; if not possible the interview may be carried out via phone
 - c. The assessor should ensure he/she has up to date contact details for the grower and has shared the date and time and connection information for the remote grower interview [skype or WhatsApp, etc]
4. The grower should be notified that the assessor will need to speak with a sample of workers as a part of the assessment process
 - a. The grower should share the names, roles, and direct contact information (usually mobile phone number) for any workers who are employed at the time of the assessment.

- b. Due to the remote nature of the assessment, short calls with workers can be carried out before or after the grower interview, at a time convenient for the worker
5. At least 14 days in advance of the scheduled interview, the assessor should request the grower to share key documents and photo evidence via email ahead of the assessment – refer to [Annex 1](#) for a suggested list of documents
 - a. The assessor should give the grower a minimum of one week to submit documents
 - b. The assessor should allow a week to review these ahead of the assessment and request any missing documents
 - c. The assessor should clarify that submitted documents will be shared only with the assessor and Better Cotton team, and will be used only for the purposes of checking conformity with Better Cotton requirements.
 - d. Copies of documents (or legible photographs of documents) are generally acceptable, based on the assessor's judgement
 - e. The assessor may request documents that are held by other partners (e.g., gin, irrigation district, USDA office). The assessor and grower can determine the best way to obtain those documents and permissions, whether by email, phone, or in person.

Documentation Review:

1. The assessor should begin by reviewing the farm's most recent completed Self-Assessment and any assessment reports from the previous season (if applicable)
 - a. *Guidance: for LMPs and third-party verifiers, the Self-Assessment will be provided by the Better Cotton Team ahead of the assessment*
2. The assessor should review all documents received from the grower in advance of the assessment interview
 - a. Any missing information can be requested via email ahead of the assessment
3. The documentation review should help feed into the interview process and the assessor should highlight areas that require more explanation or where there are potential conformity gaps to focus on

Grower Interview

1. The grower interview is carried out at a pre-arranged time either by videoconference (recommended) or phone
2. The assessor should open the interview with introductions and a short explanation of the process for the remote assessment
3. The assessor should clarify that the objective of the assessment is to *confirm whether the grower meets all requirements of the Better Cotton standard, which will enable them to be licensed to sell their cotton as 'Better Cotton' this season.*
 - a. If the grower is not familiar with the Better Cotton program, a short overview of Better Cotton programme and the Better Cotton Standard should also be provided
4. The grower interview should follow a similar structure as would be used during an in-person assessment, with the main objectives being to:
 - a. Understand how the farm complies with each relevant Core Indicator of the Better Cotton Principles & Criteria

- b. Identify any potential areas where the farm does not fully meet the Core Indicators and request additional information to assess potential non-conformities
 - c. Validate the growers' responses in the Self-Assessment, especially around current farming practices and future planned improvements
5. At the end of the interview the grower should be informed of the next steps after the assessment, and given a chance to ask any questions or clarifications

Worker Interviews

1. Better Cotton assessments are expected to include worker interviews wherever possible; that means if there are workers employed by the grower at the time of the assessment, at least a representative sample of workers (25%) should be interviewed
2. Worker interviews should be carried out by phone or videoconference. Workers should be informed that if they have any concerns about confidentiality they can be recorded as anonymous
 - a. *Guidance: assessors can ask the grower to supply them with worker names and direct phone numbers during the grower interview (or ahead of the interview) depending on preference. Assessors can use their judgement about the best way of carrying out worker interviews ensuring that workers are comfortable, and information is confidential*
3. Refer to the worker interview guidance in the *Better Cotton Assessment Process* document for additional guidance on topics to cover during worker interviews
4. Workers should be reassured that the calls are not recorded, and information shared will be used only for the purposes of checking compliance with Better Cotton requirements

Analysis and Reporting

1. After the document review, grower interview, and workers' interviews are completed, the assessor should document all findings in the appropriate BCI 2PCC or 3PV reporting template.
 - a. All documents and photo evidence received from the grower should be retained securely by the assessor until licensing activities for the season are completed by Better Cotton (typically December each season); additional evidence may be requested by Better Cotton for further review
2. If additional documents, photos, or clarification are required for the sake of completing the report, the assessor can request these from the grower with a clear timeline for submission (recommended 2-3 days); these can be taken into account in the final reporting process
3. In cases where the assessor was unable to fully evaluate the farms' conformity with Better Cotton requirements due to the remote assessment (for example, key documents or evidence were unavailable) this should be **noted in an email to the Better Cotton Team with a clear explanation**
 - a. *The Better Cotton assurance team will discuss these cases individually. In some cases, a one-year license may be granted with a follow-up onsite assessment the following season; in other cases the license may be denied depending on the extent of evidence available.*

Annex 1: Suggested documents to be shared ahead of the assessment

This list can be adapted by the assessor as required.

The grower should share any of the following documents or photos if available (or examples if they are ongoing records) :

1. List of all pesticides used (e.g., receipt from supplier, written or electronic spray record)
2. Scouting records and recommendations
3. Pesticide applicator licenses and training records
4. Photo/ video evidence of irrigation practices (if applicable)
5. Photo/ video evidence of any biodiversity measures implemented (e.g. hedgerows, cover cropping. etc) or other habitats on the farm (including field edges)
6. Photo/ video evidence of any other sustainable improvements you've made on the farm
7. Photo/ video evidence of pesticide storage and preparation area including sprayer, PPE, and mixing, handling, and runoff/ rinsate disposal
8. Photo/ video evidence of degraded areas/ other areas of concern
9. Photo/ video evidence of any land use changes
10. Soil maps
11. Recent soil, tissue, and water tests and recommendations
12. Soil/ nutrient management plans
13. Fertilizer application records
14. Irrigation/ water use records
15. Any farm-level sustainability or improvement plans, such as an NRCS plan, or a written Better Cotton improvement plan
16. Relevant documents from other certification or licensing programs such as Cotton Trust Protocol, E3, or USDA Organic
17. Map or list of your local water sources including wells, surface waters, and groundwater
18. Map or list of local biodiversity [plant/ animal/ insects/ microbes]
19. If you have hired labor:
 - a. Employee records with names and age
 - b. Sample of wage slips and/or payment records
 - c. Child labor policy *[if you have had, currently have, or might hire workers under 18]*
 - d. Any relevant discipline policies
 - e. Training records
 - f. Posted labor policies (minimum wage, non-discrimination)
20. Example of farm level input records covering e.g. pesticide use, water, etc.
21. Any additional farm management plans or records that you think might be useful for the assessor
22. Documents related to annual assessment of fiber quality, variety selection, yield used for planning purposes.