

Complaint and Appeal Handling Procedures

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1. Purpose

To establish a transparent, accessible and effective process for receiving, registering, investigating, deciding and closing complaints and appeals related to STEP UP Certification certification, validation and verification activities. The procedure ensures impartiality, independence, confidentiality, competence, timely communication, documented decision-making and continual improvement in accordance with applicable accreditation standards and scheme requirements.

2. Scope

This procedure applies to complaints and appeals arising from activities performed by STEP UP Certification under ISO/IEC 17065, ISO/IEC 17021, ISO/IEC 17029 and, where applicable, ISO 14065, including PEFC, SURE, ISCC and other schemes operated by STEP UP Certification. It applies to clients, applicants, certificate holders, stakeholders and other interested parties, and to all internal and external personnel involved in handling complaints or appeals.

3. Definitions

Complaint

An expression of dissatisfaction, other than an appeal, by a person or organisation concerning STEP UP Certification activities, personnel, a certified client, validation or verification activity, or another matter within STEP UP Certification's responsibility, where a response or resolution is expected.

Appeal

A request by a client or applicant for reconsideration of a decision made by STEP UP Certification in relation to certification, validation or verification, including certification status, scope, suspension, withdrawal, or another formal conformity assessment decision.

4. Responsibilities

Board Member / Management

- Ensures that this procedure is implemented and maintained and that adequate competent and independent resources are available.
- Ensures required communication with accreditation bodies, scheme owners and competent authorities.

- Ensures that corrective actions and systemic improvements resulting from complaints or appeals are implemented and followed up.

Complaint / Appeal Reviewer or Review Panel

- Is appointed on the basis of competence, independence and absence of conflict of interest.
- Investigates the matter, evaluates relevant evidence and documents conclusions and recommendations.
- Shall not have participated in the activity, audit, review, validation, verification or decision that is the subject of the complaint or appeal.

Decision Maker

- Makes or approves the complaint/appeal decision only where independent from the matter under review.
- Bases the decision on documented evidence and the findings or recommendation of the independent review.

All Personnel

- Forward received complaints and appeals without delay and maintain confidentiality.
- Disclose any actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest before participating in handling a case.

5. General Principles

- Complaints and appeals are handled fairly, impartially, objectively and without discrimination.
- Submission, investigation or outcome of a complaint or appeal shall not result in discriminatory action against the complainant or appellant.
- The person(s) investigating and deciding a complaint or appeal shall be independent from the activities and decision being challenged.
- For validation and verification activities, personnel involved in the original validation or verification activity shall not participate in the investigation or decision concerning the same complaint or appeal.
- Information is handled in accordance with the Confidentiality Procedure. Disclosure is limited to authorised personnel and to parties to whom disclosure is required by law, accreditation requirements or applicable scheme rules.
- Decisions are based on objective evidence.
- Applicable scheme-specific requirements take precedence where they establish additional or stricter notification, escalation, reporting or timing requirements.

6. Complaint and Appeal Process

6.1 Receipt and Registration

Complaints and appeals should normally be submitted in writing and should identify the issue, relevant decision or activity, and supporting evidence where available. Upon receipt, STEP UP Certification determines whether the matter relates to activities for which it is responsible.

- Every complaint or appeal is entered in the Complaints & Appeals Register.
- The register records, as applicable: date received, complainant/appellant, organisation, scheme, subject, responsible person, conflict-of-interest check, status, actions, decision, communication dates and closure date.
- Receipt is acknowledged within 5 working days unless a stricter applicable scheme requirement applies.

6.2 Independence and Conflict-of-Interest Check

Before assigning the case, STEP UP Certification verifies and documents the independence and competence of the person(s) proposed to investigate and decide it. A person who participated in the relevant audit, assessment, validation, verification, technical review or certification/validation/verification decision shall not investigate or decide an appeal concerning that same activity or decision. The same principle is applied to complaints where prior involvement could compromise objectivity.

Where necessary, an independent external competent person or panel may be appointed. External personnel are subject to the same confidentiality, independence and conflict-of-interest controls as internal personnel.

6.3 Investigation / Review

The assigned reviewer or panel gathers and evaluates all information necessary to determine whether the complaint or appeal is substantiated. The investigation may include review of applications, contracts, audit or assessment plans, working papers, reports, objective evidence, technical review records, decision records, correspondence, scheme-owner information, competence records and other relevant documentation.

- Relevant personnel may be interviewed and additional technical expertise may be obtained where necessary.
- The investigation and conclusions are documented in the Complaints & Appeals Register and/or a separate review record.
- Where the matter indicates a management-system weakness or non-conformity, it is also handled under the Control of Non-Conformities and Corrective Actions raised towards STEP UP procedure.

6.4 Decision and Communication

The decision is made or approved by a competent person who has not been involved in the activity or decision being challenged and has no conflict of interest. The decision shall be supported by the investigation results and objective evidence.

- Possible outcomes include acceptance, partial acceptance, rejection, corrective action, reconsideration of a conformity assessment decision, escalation, or other justified action.
- The complainant or appellant is informed in writing of the outcome and, where appropriate, the reasons and actions taken.
- STEP UP Certification aims to provide the final response within 20 working days from receipt. If the investigation cannot be completed within this period, the complainant/appellant is informed of the status and expected completion date. Stricter scheme-specific timelines apply where required.

6.5 Follow-up and Closure

- Required corrections, corrective actions or improvements are assigned, implemented and verified.
- Where the outcome affects a certification decision, certificate status, validation or verification statement, STEP UP Certification evaluates the impact and implements the necessary action without undue delay.
- For validation or verification, any impact on the validity of an issued statement is evaluated and appropriate action is taken without undue delay.
- A case is closed only after the decision has been communicated and all required follow-up actions have been completed or formally transferred to the applicable corrective-action process.
- Closure date and evidence are recorded in the Complaints & Appeals Register.

7. Confidentiality and Records

Complaint and appeal information is treated as confidential and access is restricted on a need-to-know basis. Where information must be disclosed to an accreditation body, scheme owner, competent authority or other authorised party, the disclosure is made in accordance with applicable requirements and is documented where appropriate.

All complaint and appeal records, including correspondence, evidence, conflict-of-interest checks, investigation records, decisions and follow-up actions, are retained for a minimum of 10 years from the last relevant activity, review or decision, unless a longer period is required by law, accreditation requirements, contractual obligations or an applicable scheme.

8. Communication, Escalation and Public Information

The Board Member is responsible for official communication with accreditation bodies, scheme owners and competent authorities. STEP UP Certification fulfils all applicable notification and reporting obligations and provides requested information within the required timeframe while respecting confidentiality requirements.

STEP UP Certification makes information on its complaint and appeal process publicly available as required by applicable accreditation standards and certification schemes.

9. Scheme-Specific Requirements

9.1 PEFC Forest Management – Ukraine

All applicable requirements of ISO/IEC 17021-1 concerning complaints and appeals apply. STEP UP Certification shall notify the Association NVFCS within 30 days of appeals filed by the client where required by the applicable PEFC Ukraine scheme requirements.

9.2 PEFC Forest Management – Latvia

Complaints and appeals related to application of the Latvian National PEFC Forest Management Standard that cannot be resolved between the auditee and STEP UP Certification, or that are outside STEP UP Certification's responsibility or competence, are forwarded to PEFC Latvija in accordance with the applicable scheme requirements.

9.3 PEFC Chain of Custody

The applicable requirements of ISO/IEC 17065 concerning complaints and appeals apply.

- STEP UP Certification notifies the PEFC Council within 30 days of substantiated claims of non-compliance with certification requirements by client organisations, or complaints against client organisations, where required by PEFC rules.
- For resolved complaints and appeals against PEFC-certified client organisations, STEP UP Certification provides the required summary information to the PEFC Council and the corresponding PEFC National Governing Body.

9.4 PEFC Contractor Certification (PEFC MDS)

STEP UP Certification informs PEFC Latvija of complaints and appeals related to the PEFC certification/accreditation process where required by the scheme. Disputes that cannot be resolved between the applicant or certificate holder and STEP UP Certification are escalated to PEFC Latvija in accordance with the applicable PEFC MDS requirements.

9.5 SURE-EU

Complaints and appeals concerning SURE-EU certification are handled under this procedure together with the latest applicable SURE scheme requirements. STEP UP Certification verifies current SURE requirements before closing the case and fulfils any applicable notification, reporting, escalation or information-provision obligations towards SURE.

- Any impact on certification status, audit findings, corrective actions or other SURE certification records is evaluated and reflected in the relevant records and systems without undue delay.
- Where a complaint or appeal reveals a non-conformity or systemic weakness, the matter is linked to the applicable corrective-action process and tracked to effective closure.
- Communication with SURE is controlled in accordance with the Communication with External Parties and Authorities procedure.

9.6 ISCC EU and ISCC PLUS

Complaints and appeals concerning ISCC certification are handled under this procedure together with the latest applicable ISCC System Documents, General Terms of Certification and applicable ISCC System Updates. STEP UP Certification ensures that complaints and appeals related to ISCC audits or certification activities are processed in an effective, timely and professional manner.

For ISCC purposes, conflicts or disagreements between STEP UP Certification and an ISCC System User concerning certification activities or decisions, including audit findings or certification decisions, are handled at the lowest appropriate level and through direct dialogue where possible. Where such a conflict cannot be resolved directly, the matter may be referred to ISCC in accordance with the applicable ISCC System Document 102 – Governance.

- Where STEP UP Certification intends to file a complaint or appeal against a decision made by ISCC, the conflict-resolution and appeal procedure defined in the applicable ISCC System Document 102 – Governance applies.
- Allegations of non-conformity involving an ISCC System User or Certification Body that may affect other stakeholders or the integrity of the ISCC System may constitute an ISCC whistleblower report and shall be referred to ISCC through the applicable ISCC reporting channel in accordance with ISCC System Document 102 – Governance.
- STEP UP Certification cooperates with ISCC and provides relevant records and information where required under the ISCC System, General Terms of Certification, Integrity Programme or applicable System Updates.



- Where the outcome affects an ISCC certification decision or certificate status, STEP UP Certification evaluates and implements the required certification action and completes any applicable communication, reporting or ISCC HUB update without undue delay.
- Any identified internal non-conformity, systemic weakness or improvement action is handled through STEP UP Certification's corrective-action process and followed through to effective closure.
- Before closing an ISCC complaint or appeal, STEP UP Certification verifies whether any scheme-specific notification, reporting, escalation, certificate-status or information-provision requirements apply.

9.7 Validation and Verification – ISO/IEC 17029 / ISO 14065

Complaints and appeals relating to validation or verification activities are handled in accordance with this procedure and the applicable programme requirements. Personnel involved in the original validation or verification activities shall not participate in the investigation or decision relating to the same complaint or appeal.

- The complaint or appeal is investigated impartially and documented.
- Where the outcome affects the validity of a validation or verification statement, STEP UP Certification determines and implements appropriate actions without undue delay.

10. Monitoring and Continual Improvement

Complaint and appeal trends, significant cases, resulting corrective actions and identified impartiality or competence risks are considered, as applicable, during management review, internal audits, risk assessments, competence/KPI evaluations and impartiality reviews. Relevant systemic risks are communicated to the Impartiality Committee where appropriate.

11. Related QMS Documents and Records

- Quality Manual
- Confidentiality Procedure
- Communication with External Parties and Authorities
- Control of Records Procedures
- Document Control Procedures
- Risk Management Procedures
- Personnel Competence Procedure
- Certification, Validation and Verification Decision Process
- Validation and Verification Procedure



STEP UP CERTIFICATION

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

- Control of Non-Conformities and Corrective Actions raised towards STEP UP
- Control of CARs Raised to Clients
- Complaints & Appeals Register
- Applicable PEFC, SURE and ISCC scheme documents and requirements