

THE CULTIVATOR

NEWS FROM THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE

FALL 2012

Organic Integrity Upheld at NOSB Meeting

It's a Constant Battle — But the Party Could be Over for Corporate Lobbyists

BY CHARLOTTE VALLAEYS

It began as so many had in the recent past, with confident corporate lobbyists everywhere in sight. Then the unexpected happened. Science and common sense took center stage, and by the end of the meeting, some of those lobbyists looked downright glum. The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) had, over the course of four days, smacked down dubious proposed additives to organic food promoted by the corporations and their lobbyists. It was a laudable turn of events.

The Role of the NOSB

Decisions made by the NOSB at its biannual meetings determine the future of organics to a large extent. Congress created the 15-member expert citizen panel when it passed the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, and charged the NOSB with advising the Secretary of Agriculture on federal organic policy and rulemaking.

But the NOSB does more than just advise. No synthetic farm inputs or food ingredients are allowed unless the NOSB has determined that they are safe for human health and the environment, that they are essential, and that they comply with other requirements in the law.

Yet the NOSB ignored these important criteria at two past meetings, in

The Fall meeting of the National Organic Standards Board marked the Board's 20th anniversary. It could also mark a turning point.



The NOSB met October 15–18 at the historic Biltmore Hotel in Providence, Rhode Island.

Albuquerque, NM and Savannah, GA, and sided with corporate lobbyists to allow gimmicky nutraceuticals like DHA algal oil and harmful ingredients like carrageenan in organic food.

Granted, the NOSB did not approve every petitioned material at past meetings, but there was a distinct correlation between the size and power of the corporation backing a petitioned material and the likelihood of its approval.

Despite the crucial importance of

these meetings to the future of organics, which so many of us depend on, as farmers and as consumers, they had happened largely out of the public eye with corporate lobbyists running the show. No more—the party's over.

Misinformation Misfires

This past meeting, in Providence, Rhode Island, may have marked a turning point. Gone was the sense that “decisions made at NOSB stay at NOSB.” On the table in the lobby, Cornucopia had displayed copies of several articles—from the *New York Times*, the Rodale Institute, *Mother Jones*, and Dr. Andrew Weil—all educating consumers about the devastating decision on carrageenan that

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When Corporations Betray Organic Values

Organic consumers were outraged when they learned that certain corporations owning iconic organic brands collectively spent millions of dollars to join Monsanto and the biotech industry in an effort to defeat Proposition 37, California's GMO labeling initiative. Money consumers spent to buy Horizon milk, R.W. Knudsen juice, and Cascadian Farm cereal—among other organic products—turned into revenue for corporate parents Dean Foods, Smucker's, and General Mills—among others—to bankroll a \$1-million-a-day ad blitz against GMO labeling. Cornucopia exposed this betrayal of consumer trust with widely shared infographics drawing the battle lines in Prop 37.

Not coincidentally, Cornucopia findings rank some corporations' organic brands at the bottom of our scorecards, and our testimony at National Organic Standards Board meetings is typically diametrically opposed to that of corporate executives, consultants, and trade/lobby groups.

No surprise, then, that some attempt to discredit our work as “anti-corporate,” as if Cornucopia's concerns were knee-jerk reactions to a company's size or structure rather than reasoned responses to its unethical actions.

Let's set the record straight: Cornucopia is not “anti-corporate,” but rather pro-organic. If a corporation can manage organic farms and brands in ways that respect the values and principles this movement was founded upon—economic justice for family farmers, humane animal hus-



Let's set the record straight: Cornucopia is not “anti-corporate,” but rather pro-organic. The issue is not a company's size or legal structure, but whether it upholds true organic principles and practices.

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bandry, and environmental stewardship, among others—then, regardless of its size, the company's management and investors should be welcomed into the organic community.

Our scorecards do not rate the attractiveness of organic brands' marketing materials, advertisements, and websites. Rather, our job is to look behind the façade and learn the full story—the practices, ingredients, and actions—of the corporations behind the brand. Consumers have the right to know where their food dollars are invested.

At Cornucopia, we look forward to the day when each and every corporation involved in organics acts in accordance with the values that we hold so dear: when they remove harmful food additives like carrageenan, or afford true outdoor access to dairy cows and chickens, or contribute to campaigns for mandatory GMO labeling.

But until they do, we will continue to monitor them closely and judge them, not by their claims, but by their actions. The issue, after all, is about corporate ethics—the emphasis on *ethics*.

—CHARLOTTE VALLAEYS

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Who Owns Organic?

An Interview with Philip H. Howard

There are 2 million farmers in the U.S. There are 300 million eaters. The number of companies connecting the two groups has shrunk so much over the past 20 years that “our food system now resembles an hourglass,” Philip Howard explains. “I don’t think this is something consumers would have agreed to had we known. That’s why companies put frolicking cows on the label, when the reality is it’s a big CAFO.”

Studying with Bill Heffernan as a doctoral student in rural sociology at the University of Missouri, Howard was shocked to discover just how few corporate players control the global food system. When he turned his beam on the organic industry, he discovered the same pattern—and how few people realize it.

That’s changing, thanks in no small part to Howard’s eye-opening infographics on food system structures. Widely circulated on the Internet, and by co-ops and natural food grocers, millions have seen at a glance which companies dominate the industry—and can now vote accordingly with their forks.

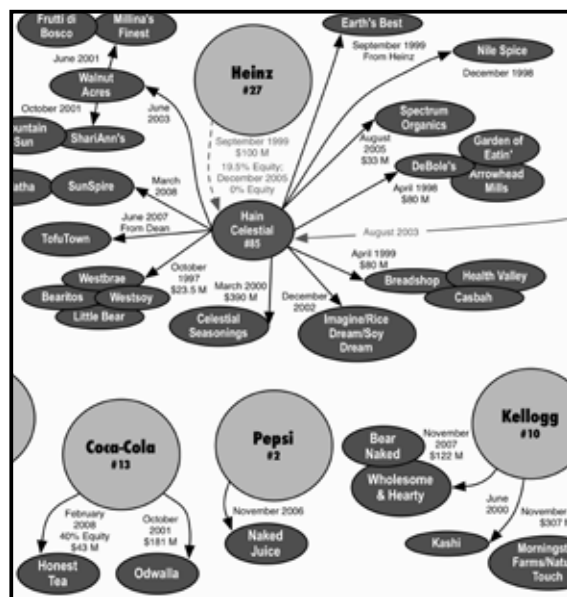
Howard says he hopes the graphics serve as a tool for consumers, and

also contribute to ongoing debates within the organic and fair trade movements regarding the benefits and challenges of corporate participation.

The benefits? Greater availability of organic products, to name a big one for many; and more cropland in organic production, rather than industrial-chemical, to name another.

Among the challenges? For starters, dilution of organic values. “When you buy frozen vegetables from Cascadian Farms, the money goes to General Mills,” Howard cites as an example. “General Mills can then turn around and influence policies that most organic consumers would disagree with”—like spending millions to defeat Prop 37, California’s GMO labeling initiative, as Cornucopia’s own infographic recently exposed.

“Consumers who want food companies that embody more of the original organic ideals would do well to seek out products from independent organic firms,” Howard advises. “Given the very uneven playing field they are competing in, independent organic



Graphic by Philip H. Howard

There were 81 independent organic processing companies in 1995. A decade later Big Food had acquired all but 15 of them. Organic retailers and distributors followed the same trend. Yet corporate consolidation of the food system, both conventional and organic, has been hidden from consumers. That's changing fast.

processors are unlikely to survive without such support.” Tools like Howard’s infographics (and Cornucopia’s online scorecards) empower us to make those choices.

—ELIZABETH WOLF



Visualizing the Food Revolution

Along with the sea change in organics, Phil Howard sees an explosion of interest in food and farming among his students at Michigan State University (MSU). The associate professor teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Community, Food, and Agriculture. MSU sponsors a student-run organic farm that offers a year-long apprentice program. Many students go on to start urban farms or other agrarian projects, taking advantage of the numerous vacant lots in recession-hit Lansing. “Critics sometimes say these initiatives have little impact because they’re so small,” Howard observes. “But that’s exactly how organic started.”

Howard has created dozens of infographics on who rules the organic and fair trade sectors as well as the global seed industry (it’s Monsanto: surprised?). Network animations show the corporate feeding frenzy over time. Visit msu.edu/~howardp/. Many of the graphics are also on Cornucopia’s website, cornucopia.org.

Organic Inspector Sued by Nebraska Farmer

USDA Accidentally, Inappropriately, Revealed Complainant's Identity

A \$7.6 million lawsuit against Evrett Lunquist, an organic certification inspector, and International Certification Services (ICS), is sending a penetrating legal chill through the nation's network of individuals tasked with ensuring that the organic label has a trusted meaning.

The case, the first known brought against an organic inspector by a farmer, calls into question the willingness of the USDA and its National Organic Program (NOP) to stand behind inspectors.

For the last 11 years, Lunquist, 42, has earned extra income working part time as an inspector of farms seeking USDA organic certification. He was acting on his own when, in 2008, he notified the NOP of suspicions about Paul Rosberg's farm, near Wausau, Nebraska. Lunquist says he felt honor bound by the International Organic Inspectors Association (IOIA) Code of Ethics to report suspected fraud.

The NOP investigated indepen-



Evrett Lunquist is an independent organic inspector and an organic farmer.

dently, finding Rosberg's operation indeed failed to qualify for organic certification. Lunquist's complaint should have been kept confidential under NOP policy. But his identity was inadvertently released, leading directly to the lawsuit. "In my mind this is so simple," Lunquist said. "I reported something I was concerned about. NOP looked at it and found everything to be true. My defense is to assert what is true and factual."

Rosberg is representing himself, *pro se*, in the case. According to court records, the farmer has been involved in dozens of lawsuits in Nebraska the past 28 years. While pressing his suit against Lunquist, Rosberg and his wife have meantime been indicted by a federal grand jury on six counts of fraud for selling misbranded meat to Omaha Public Schools. They face fines and prison terms if convicted. That trial is set for November 26.

The Lancaster County Court, however, granted Rosberg's motion to amend his complaint against Lunquist, adding ICS as defendants, alleging that they conspired together to deny him certification. The next hearing date in the case is January 29.

As Lunquist's case drags on, legal

"Organic integrity relies on the ability of inspectors to register complaints without fear of reprisal. A 'chilling effect' from the threat of disclosure and retaliation could make it much less likely that individuals will report to the NOP suspected fraud, misconduct, or other actions that undermine organic integrity."

—Margaret Scoles, IOIA

bills continue to mount—to over \$27,500, as of October 2012.

Since the NOP violated their own confidentiality policy by releasing his name, Lunquist, with the support of the IOIA, asked the NOP to make things right. The NOP declined to help with legal costs or to issue a public apology, and was slow to provide documents needed for his defense, thereby driving up legal expenses. However, the NOP ultimately provided a Declaration corroborating Lunquist's complaint. The agency stated it is taking precautions to ensure this never happens again.

Lunquist said his motivation for filing a complaint was to preserve organic integrity. "If people run roughshod over it," he said, "then organic will have no meaning. In my mind I was doing the right thing by submitting information. This turn of events is stupefying."

For more information, or to make a donation, visit lunquistlegalfund.org.

STEVEN MCFADDEN serves on the board of Open Harvest Co-op in Lincoln, Nebr. Common Good Farm is among 110+ local vendors that do business with the co-op. McFadden, a journalist, blogs regularly at thecalloftheland.com.



Photos by The Cornucopia Institute

With his wife, Ruth Chantry, and their five children, Lunquist owns and operates **Common Good Farm**. They produce free-range eggs, grass-fed beef, pork, herbs, and vegetables. It is one of two Demeter-certified Biodynamic farms in Nebraska.

Organic Dairy Scandal Ends in \$7.5M Settlement

Aurora Dairy, Walmart, Costco, Target and Others Said to Have Misled Customers

In what has been billed as the largest scandal in the history of the organic industry, Aurora Dairy and its major customers, supermarket chains selling private-label organic milk, were accused of misrepresenting the authenticity of their products. The class action lawsuit was brought on behalf of consumers in more than 30 states who felt defrauded after purchasing private-label, or store brand, organic milk at a number of retailers served by Aurora, including Walmart, Costco, Target, Safeway, and other large grocery chains.

"This settlement proves our contention that there is a higher authority enforcing the organic standards in this country than the USDA, and that's the organic consumer," notes Mark Kastel, Cornucopia's Senior Farm Policy Analyst.

Aurora, based in Boulder, Colorado, first gained notoriety in 2005 when Cornucopia filed a formal legal complaint with the USDA alleging that it was producing milk on giant feedlots, confining as many as 4,400 milk cows, instead of grazing their cattle, as federal organic standards require.

Cornucopia's first complaint was summarily dismissed by Bush administration political appointees at the USDA. A second complaint was eventually adjudicated by federal regulators who found that not only had Aurora "willfully" violated regulations requiring pasture for their animals but it had also used non-organic subcontractors and illegally brought conventional cows into their organic operations.

Of the 14 "willful" violations found at Aurora, one documented by the USDA was selling milk that did not meet the federal organic standards. But William J. Friedman, of the powerful Washington law firm of Coving-

ton and Burling, brokered a deal on behalf of Aurora with USDA officials for a one-year probation with several changes made to their operations. One condition required Aurora to reduce the number of milk cows at their Platteville, Colorado, facility from approximately 4,400 to 800. This herd size could be legally managed on available pasture.

"Congress gave the USDA the authority to fine scofflaws, in matters like the Aurora scandal, millions of dollars, and yank their organic certificate, effectively banning them from commerce," said Tony Azevedo, a California organic dairy farmer and President of the Western Organic Dairy Producers Alliance, "but they chose to side with the millionaires and investors operating Aurora rather than the thousands of family-scale dairy farmers that they had competitively injured."

Adds Kastel: "Despite 14 'willful' violations of federal organic standards this company, with over \$100 million in revenue, was not fined one red cent."



The Cornucopia Institute

Aurora's Colorado factory farm. Plaintiffs alleged the mega-dairy misrepresented itself as a family farm.

The consumer class action lawsuit, and subsequent \$7.5 million settlement, centered on marketing claims, labeling, and graphics depicting cows happily grazing on lush pasture, and in some cases family farm scenes, when in reality the animals were living short, stressful lives being forced to produce copious quantities of milk in the kind of filthy industrial conditions that organic consumers thought they were avoiding.

According to Azevedo, "In every market dedicated organic consumers can find brands of organic milk, cheese, butter, and ice cream that truly represent superior environmental stewardship, humane animal husbandry, and where the profits are more equitably shared with hard-working farm families."

"This is a big victory for organic consumers, and the farmers who respect the federal law," said Joan Levin, a retired attorney and longtime Chicago advocate for organic food. Farmers and consumers together will continue to hold corporations responsible if the USDA does not appropriately enforce the mandate they received from Congress to protect the integrity of the organic label."

—WILL FANTLE

Cornucopia's report, MAINTAINING THE INTEGRITY OF ORGANIC MILK, and accompanying scorecard rate every organic dairy brand in the U.S. The comprehensive report concludes that 90% of all organic milk brands meet the letter of the law and consumer expectations. Available at cornucopia.org.



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the Board made at the Spring 2012 meeting. The message was clear: consumers may not be physically present at the meeting, but they are watching. And at Cornucopia we take our job, of keeping organic stakeholders in the loop, seriously.

A big agenda item at the Providence meeting was industry's petition for synthetic preservatives in organic infant formula. "We clearly were concerned when we read the line-up for public testimony on the eight petitioned synthetics for use in organic foods, including organic infant formula," noted Cornucopia Codirector Mark Kastel. "Cornucopia," he explained, "was the first and only voice for the public interest, followed by no fewer than ten infant formula consultants, executives and lobbyists."

Prior to the meeting, Cornucopia policy staff had thoroughly reviewed nearly every item on the agenda, and submitted a comprehensive, 80-page written comment based on extensive research. The organization had made a commitment to provide the NOSB with balanced information on all pro-

By the end of the meeting, the corporate lobbyists for the infant formula industry looked glum. Even on votes where they outnumbered the public interest ten-to-one during public comment, they lost.

posed synthetics in organics.

There was another important difference at this meeting. The USDA and NOSB, to their credit, had invited two independent medical authorities on infant formula, one from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and one from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), to answer questions about the synthetic preservatives and synthetic nutraceuticals that were on the agenda.

In previously submitted written comments, industry lobbyist Dr. Richard Theuer had sought to muddy the waters by questioning whether the two petitioned synthetic preservatives should be regulated as preservatives. Some of the Board members seemed to take his arguments seriously. But in sharp contrast to previous meetings, the two independent experts, from the FDA and AAP, took



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Robert Rankin, with the International Formula Council, testifies in favor of the eight synthetics petitioned for use in organic infant formula.

to the podium and instantly squashed the industry's attempts to win with misinformation and confusion.

"We were pleased that the comments provided by the FDA and AAP experts concurred with Cornucopia's analysis of these proposed synthetic materials," said Kastel.

By the end of the meeting, the infant formula industry lobbyists appeared dismayed. All but one of their petitioned synthetics had been rejected, and the one that passed

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Right Is Might—Cornucopia's Secret Lobbying Weapon: The Truth

In our effort to win National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) votes that favor the public interest and organic integrity, Cornucopia's most powerful tactic lies in providing accurate, fact-based, scientifically sound information to the Board members. Just how do we accomplish this?

Prior to the most recent meeting, this writer, Policy Director Charlotte Vallaeys (MTS Harvard, MS Tufts), and Policy Analyst Pamela Coleman (MS Cornell, PhD University of California-Davis) collectively read over 2,150 pages of petitions, technical evaluation reports, committee recommendations, and industry comments.

We then conducted research into each petitioned material or issue on the NOSB agenda, performing independent literature reviews to reach our own assessment of its merits or demerits, and whether its use is consistent with organic principles, as required by law.

Then we presented our analysis to the Board members in an 80-page

written comment (available for download at cornucopia.org), with the most compelling arguments backed by scientific citations.

In preparation for the meeting's deliberations, we then read comments submitted by corporate representatives, consultants, and lobbyists—again adding up to hundreds of pages of text. We also sifted through 622 public comments to provide to the Board an analysis of each issue's supporters and opponents.

Yes, it's a lot of pages to read and write—but luckily our policy staff has a passion for truth. Since Cornucopia has no financial interest in any of the vote outcomes, and Board members are typically bombarded with corporate misinformation aimed at winning their vote, we consider this work—which we do twice each year, prior to every NOSB meeting—to be of vital importance to the organic community and the future of organics.

—CHARLOTTE VALLAEYS

How Healthy Is Organic Food?

Thinking Outside the Processed Foods Box

COMMENTARY BY MARK KASTEL

I have enjoyed a virtually exclusive organic diet for the past 30 years. But I've been deeply unsettled by recent stories in the media casting doubt on the value of an organic diet.

In terms of the extra cost and value of eating organically, I have always subscribed to the adage "pay now or pay later." While my personal experience does not provide much in terms of a scientifically legitimate sample size, in the last 30 years, after suffering from pesticide poisoning prompted my shift to an organic diet, I have exceeded my insurance deductible only once, due to an orthopedic injury. And my doctor keeps telling me how remarkable it is that I, at age 57, have no chronic health problems and take no pharmaceuticals.

Unfortunately, an analysis of organic food done by Stanford University physicians, covered by the *New York Times*, the Associated Press, and other media this fall, did not look "outside the box," as many organic farming and food advocates do.

The scientists discounted many of the studies, including those by the USDA, that show our conventional food supply's nutritional content has dropped exponentially over the last 50 years. This has been attributed to the declining health of our farms' soil, and healthy soil leads to healthy food. Organic farming's core value is building soil fertility.

Furthermore, there are many externalities that impart risk on us as individuals and as a society, which the physicians failed to look at. For example, eating organic food protects us all from exposure to agrichemicals contaminating our water and air.

Additionally, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have become

ubiquitous in processed food with an estimated 80% to 90% contaminated with patented genes by Monsanto and other biotechnology corporations. The use of GMOs is prohibited in organics.

Interestingly, there have been virtually no long-term studies on human health impacts of ingesting GMOs, although many laboratory animal and livestock studies have led to disturbing conclusions. The best way to operate using the "precautionary principle," as European regulators mandate, is to eat a certified organic diet.

Current research now indicates that some of Monsanto's genes are passing through the placenta into human fetuses and into the bloodstreams of adults and children. Organics is a way to prevent your children from becoming human lab rats testing genetically engineered bovine growth hormone (rBGH) or a myriad of other novel life forms.

Stanford researchers, cited in the recent press accounts, dismissed statistically significant differences between agrichemical (pesticide, herbicide, fungicide, etc.) contamination in conventional and organic food.

The researchers might trust the FDA to set "safe" levels of toxic and carcinogenic chemicals in the food we serve our families, but many parents have decided to set a lower threshold—as close to zero as possible. Even the doctors at Stanford confirm demonstrably lower levels of pesticide contamination in organic food.

In supporting this cautious approach, there is a growing body of scientific literature that suggests it's not just the gross level of toxic contamination that pesticides present, but rather,



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Recent press accounts have questioned whether organic is more "nutritious" than conventional food. Add up the benefits to soil, the natural environment, farmers and farmworkers, rural communities, humane animal husbandry, and avoidance of toxic pesticides and GMOs, and the answer is a resounding "Yes."

minute amounts of these toxins can act as endocrine disruptors, or mimickers, sometimes triggering catastrophic and lifelong abnormalities in fetuses and developing children.

Is it worth experimenting with the health of future generations when we know that there is a demonstrated safe alternative—organic food?

To illustrate the difference, researchers at the University of Washington published a paper in *Environmental Health Perspectives* that documented a tremendous drop in organophosphate pesticide contamination, in the urine of children, after just three days on an organic diet. This is hard science that didn't sway the Stanford investigation's conclusion.

Scientists have also recognized that we must take into consideration the disproportionate quantities of food that children eat relative to their body weight, especially of certain fruits and vegetables that have been found to be highly contaminated with

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came with a restrictive annotation that Cornucopia had not opposed.

But even though organic regulations expressly prohibit the use of synthetic preservatives, and two independent experts had validated Cornucopia's position that these materials act as preservatives, four of the Board members still voted to allow one of them. What is perhaps most disturbing about this vote is that two of the four "yes" votes came from Board members occupying NOSB seats reserved for farmers—Wendy Fulwider, an Organic Valley executive, and Carmela Beck, an executive at Driscoll's, the industrial-scale berry producer. "At the end of the day the overall Board made the right decisions to protect the safety and propriety of the organic label," Kastel said.

Conflict of Interest Policy

The effort to strengthen the NOSB's conflict of interest policy, which the NOSB could have voted on at this meeting, was again delayed due to substantial public comment with widely opposing viewpoints. Industry interests, spearheaded by the Organic

Trade Association, strongly oppose any tightening of the current conflict of interest policy. But public interest groups, including Cornucopia, are increasingly frustrated by Board members who vote on issues when a conflict of interest clearly exists.

"We believe that at the past two NOSB meetings, public interest groups lost on important issues by a close vote in part because Board members with conflicts failed to recuse themselves from voting," explained Will Fantle, Cornucopia's Cofounder and Research Director.

At the Fall 2011 NOSB meeting, a full-time employee of General Mills, who occupied the NOSB seat reserved for an independent scientist, failed to disclose a conflict concerning a product licensing agreement between General Mills and a petitioner for a substance proposed for use in organic foods—DSM/Martek Biosciences' DHA algal oil.

Cornucopia's PUBLIC COMMENT TO THE NOSB, 80 pages of independent review and recommendation on meeting agenda items, is available at cornucopia.org.

At the next meeting, Spring 2012, NOSB "farmer" member and Organic Valley employee Wendy Fulwider did not recuse herself from participating in the notorious carrageenan vote, even though Organic Valley uses the controversial food additive in some of its products and the company's CEO directly contacted NOSB members to lobby for their "yes" vote.

At this Fall meeting, we saw once again how the system is broken, with Board members failing to take conflicts of interest seriously. Board member Joe Dickson, a full-time employee of Whole Foods, failed to publicly disclose that his employer markets "organic" infant formula under its own 365 brand name. Of the six petitioned synthetic nutrients for infant formula, four appear in Whole Foods' 365 formula product. Dickson was the only Board member to vote "yes" on each of these four petitions.

"Cornucopia will continue to do this work—researching the issues and petitions extensively, providing valuable, impartial, written comment on behalf of organic integrity, and acting as 'citizen lobbyists' at NOSB meetings," said Kastel. "We need to provide balance to the overwhelming corporate lobbying that pervades these critical meetings."

HOW HEALTHY IS ORGANIC FOOD?

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synthetic chemicals. Furthermore, their study failed to look at the cumulative effects of contamination in many different food items in one's diet. Again, children, for developmental reasons, are especially at risk.

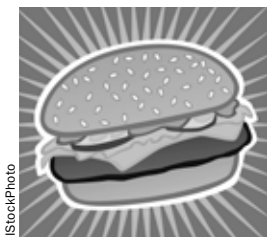
Both the *New York Times* and AP stories did touch on a number of advantages, like lower levels of contamination from antibiotic-resistant pathogens. But that was also dismissed by stating that these could be "killed during cooking." However, we know that inadequate cooking does take place, and cross-contamination can easily occur in residential kitchens. So again, I pose the question, how many potentially lethal, antibiotic-resistant organisms do

How many potentially lethal, antibiotic-resistant organisms do you want to bring into your home?

you want to bring into your home?

Although there is conflicting science on whether or not organic food is truly nutritionally superior, there is no doubt that in terms of many parameters, organic food is demonstrably safer.

I will stick with the diet that concentrates on fresh, local, more flavorful food that's produced without synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, and genetically modified organisms. And I, for one, am convinced I'm getting a good value for my own health, while at the same time supporting environmental stewardship and economic justice for family farmers.



Hamburger Helper

Making Sense of the ‘Organic,’ ‘Natural,’ and ‘Grass-fed’ Labels

Hamburgers used to be an easy choice. The big decision was, “Do you want ketchup or mustard?” Today the choices start in the supermarket, where consumers are faced with an array of labels shopping for ground beef.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulates the labeling of meat, including beef. But it’s up to the consumer to understand what the labels really mean. Most of the hamburger sold in supermarkets is from conventional cows that have been confined in filthy feedlots, treated with antibiotics and hormones, and fed genetically modified (GM) corn to fatten them. This is not healthy for the cows, the consumers, or the environment.

Shoppers looking for healthier alternatives need to understand the labels. Here we explain three of the most common labels: *organic*, *natural*, and *grass-fed*. They differ concerning the way the cattle are raised, and the way the programs are regulated.

Organic

Beef can be labeled *organic* only if it is raised on a certified organic farm and processed at a certified organic slaughterhouse. This program is administered by the USDA National Organic Program (NOP). The NOP determines the standards and regulates the labeling of organic foods. The organic label is a “third-party certification” because production practices are verified by an independent entity with no financial interest in the sale.

When farmers apply for organic certification, they must have a written plan that explains their farm practices. After the certifier reviews the farm plan, a trained inspector visits the farm and verifies that the plan is being followed. The inspector examines the livestock, visits each field, and reviews farm records. This process ensures that cattle are fed 100% organic feed, with no animal by-products and no GMOs, hormones, or antibiotics. Cattle must be allowed access to outdoor pasture; however, the pasture may be supplemented by grain, particularly to “finish” the animals (fatten them for slaughter).

Natural

All fresh meat qualifies as *natural*. The meat must be

“minimally processed,” such as ground beef, and contain no artificial ingredients or preservatives. The federal regulations for natural beef do not regulate the cattle feed or their living conditions. Meat from cows raised in a conventional feedlot, fed GMO feed, and treated with antibiotics and hormones, can be labeled “natural,” as long as no artificial ingredients were added after slaughter.

Some companies and organizations have developed their own, more stringent, production requirements for their “natural” label. These programs are administered by the producers and the organizations that own the brand name, not by the USDA. Typically the beef producer signs an affidavit agreeing to follow the program requirements, and there is little to no verification of practices.

Grass-fed

The *grass-fed* label is defined by the USDA. Cattle must have access to pasture, and may also be fed hay and silage, but no grains. The pasture can include legumes, such as alfalfa. The grass-fed label does not require organic production practices.

Green plants, especially grass, are the natural diet of cattle. Grass-fed beef is healthier than grain-fed because it is leaner and has a higher percentage of omega-3 fatty acids and other nutrients. Most beef cattle, even conventional cattle, eat grass for the early part of their lives, and then are sent to a feedlot to be finished on grains for a few months before slaughter. The grain-finishing process eliminates the nutritional benefits of grass-fed beef. Although the federal grass-fed label stipulates cattle are also grass-finished, this is not a guarantee. Farms that were using the grass-fed label before regulations took effect are allowed to continue using the label, even if they finish the cattle on grain.

How can you tell if the beef is both grass-fed and grass-finished? Look for certification by the American Grassfed Association, a third-party certification system verified by on-farm audits. This label indicates that cattle have been grass-fed for their entire lives, were born and raised in the U.S., and have not been given antibiotics or hormones. Some farmers and ranchers label their beef grass-finished, or 100% grass-fed, but these terms are not currently regulated by the USDA.

Know Your Farmer

Labels can help you know how your food is grown. Alternatively, you can choose to buy locally, and know your farmer. Healthy, sustainably raised food should be an easy choice.

—PAMELA COLEMAN, PhD

Stay tuned for Cornucopia’s new report and scorecard, **WHERE’S THE (ORGANIC) BEEF?**, due out in 2013.

GMO Myths & Truths

Genetically modified crops are promoted on the basis of a range of far-reaching claims from the biotech industry and its supporters. A new, evidence-based report by U.K. scientists shows these claims are unsubstantiated. Here is a snapshot of their findings.

MYTH #1: Genetic engineering is just an extension of natural breeding.

TRUTH: Genetic engineering is very different from natural breeding and poses special risks. Natural breeding occurs between like life forms—a cat with a cat, not a cat with a dog or a tomato with a fish. GM transfers DNA between unrelated organisms in ways that do not occur naturally.

MYTH #2: GM foods are strictly regulated for safety.

TRUTH: GM food regulation in most countries varies from non-existent (the U.S.) to weak. In the U.S. the FDA overruled its own scientists to form a GM policy, in the 1990s, that required no safety testing or labeling.

MYTH #3: GM foods are safe to eat.

TRUTH: GM foods can be toxic or allergenic. Peer-reviewed studies have found harmful effects on the health of livestock and lab animals fed GMOs.

MYTH #4: GM Bt insecticidal crops harm only insects and are harmless to animals and people.

TRUTH: GM Bt insecticidal crops pose hazards to people and animals that eat them. Findings include toxic effects on the small intestine, liver, kidney, spleen, and pancreas, and disturbances in the digestive and immune systems.

MYTH #5: GM animal feed poses no risks to animal or human health.

TRUTH: GM feed affects the health of animals and may affect the humans who eat their products. Bt toxin protein has been found in the blood of pregnant women and the blood supply to their fetuses.

MYTH #6: GM crops increase yield potential.

TRUTH: GM crops do not increase yield potential—and in many cases decrease it. Dr. Doug Gurian-Sherman: “Traditional breeding...can be solely credited with the intrinsic yield increases in the U.S. and other parts of the world that characterized the agriculture of the 20th century.”

MYTH #7: GM crops decrease pesticide use.

TRUTH: GM crops increase pesticide use. In the first 13 years since their introduction, in 1996, GM crops increased pesticide use by 383 million pounds.

MYTH #8: No-till farming with GM crops is environmentally friendly.

TRUTH: Claims of environmental benefits are unsound. GM herbicide-tolerant crops, such as Roundup Ready soy, have increased the use of toxic agrichemicals and led to glyphosate-resistant superweeds.

MYTH #9: Roundup (Monsanto's glyphosate) is a benign, biodegradable herbicide.

TRUTH: Roundup persists in the environment and has toxic effects on wildlife. Glyphosate was detected in 60%-100% of air and rain samples in the U.S. Midwest during crop growing season.

MYTH #10: GM crops can “coexist” with non-GM.

TRUTH: “Coexistence” rapidly results in widespread contamination of non-GM and organic crops. Germany passed a law making GM crop growers liable for economic damages to non-GM farmers resulting from GM contamination. The law has virtually halted the planting of GM crops in that country.

MYTH #11: GM will deliver climate-ready crops.

TRUTH: Conventional breeding outstrips GM in delivering climate-ready crops. Tolerance to extreme weather and resistance to accompanying pests and diseases are complex traits that GM cannot deliver.

MYTH #12: GM reduces energy use.

TRUTH: GM crops are energy-hungry. They depend on large amounts of herbicides which require large amounts of fossil fuels to manufacture. The U.S. food system spends 10 kilocalories of fossil energy for every 1 kilocalorie produced. Two-thirds of that energy goes to produce synthetic fertilizers and on-farm mechanization.

MYTH #13: GM crops are needed to feed the world's growing population.

TRUTH: GM crops are irrelevant to feeding the world. GM neither delivers higher yields nor produces more with fewer inputs than non-GM crops. Hunger is a problem of distribution and poverty, which GM cannot solve.

MYTH #14: GM crops are vital to achieving food security.

TRUTH: Agroecological farming is the key to food security, according to 400 scientists and experts from 80 countries, a position endorsed by 62 governments worldwide. Their report, the *International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology*, did not endorse GM.

Summarized from “**GMO Myths and Truths: An evidence-based examination of the claims made for the safety and efficacy of genetically modified crops**,” by Michael Antoniou, PhD; Claire Robinson, MPhil; and John Fagan, PhD; June 2012, published by Earth Open Source, a London-based not-for-profit dedicated to assuring the sustainability, security, and safety of the global food system. Download the free 123-page report at earthopensource.org.



THE CORNUCOPIA FARMER PROFILE

The Honey Behind the Hive

When we think of farms, most often rows of fresh crops come to mind, or perhaps bucolic images of cows or pecking hens roaming free. But how often do we think of bees? Quite often, if you're Gunther Hawk, director of Spikenard Farm Honeybee Sanctuary.

Photo courtesy of Spikenard Farm



For decades, Hawk (pictured at right) has been aware of the importance bees play in our agricultural systems. Hawk has been an educator, Biodynamic gardener, farmer, and beekeeper for close to 40 years. Inspired by Rudolf Steiner's work and a realization that honeybees—perhaps now more than ever before—need protection and support, he wrote the 2002 book *Toward Saving the Honeybee*.

"Our lives depend on the honeybees, the 4,000+ species of native bees, the ants, the hornets and wasps," says Hawk. In 2006, this fact led Gunther and his wife, Vivian, to create Spikenard Farm as a non-profit educational and research organization as well as a sanctuary for honeybee populations.

In 2009, the farm acquired land in the Blue Ridge Mountains, offered with generous terms by owner Terry Brett, owner of Kimberton Whole Foods in Pennsylvania. Here the Hawks' bees thrive, as do educational programs about the importance of bees and holistic agriculture systems. (You can see the farm in action in the documentary *Vanishing of the Bees*.)

If you haven't yet heard of the mysterious condition threatening bee populations around the planet, Colony

Collapse Disorder is something that affects us all. Important pollinators responsible for about one-third of our food production, bees play a role that can't be effectively mechanized. And these crucial farm friends are dying off in rapid numbers—abandoning their hives and foregoing their duty amongst the flowers. No exact cause for this phenomenon has been determined, but a number of chemical pesticides have been pinpointed as likely culprits.

"What do the bees need at this present time in order to be healthy and vibrant?" asks Hawk. "What can I do so that they can strengthen their immune system and are better able to cope with all the visible and invisible attacks on their health?"

These questions are at the heart of sustainable beekeeping. According to Hawk, this "involves looking at the honeybees beyond their physical appearance, taking into consideration that there is what the American Indians called 'the Great Bee,' like the Great Buffalo." Hawk says that the instinct of the queen and the hive radiates a spiritual archetype of sorts, and when we go against that—as in industrial beekeeping or the use

of toxic chemicals in conventional agriculture—we risk causing



Bee populations are plummeting due to mysterious Colony Collapse Disorder. Spikenard Honeybee Sanctuary offers a refuge for these industrious insects so crucial to our survival.

great harm, as is being seen in Colony Collapse Disorder.

Bees are unique in many respects, but it's the hive mind that is perhaps most fascinating. "Each colony is an organism and, like cats, dogs, horses, etc., each one has a personality," says Hawk. "Some are more diligent or more aggressive, more vibrant or more docile than others."

With urban beekeeping now becoming a popular hobby (and necessity, to reboot the dwindling populations), it's important that newcomers keep a holistic perspective in mind when working with hives, says Hawk. He encourages home gardeners to avoid all chemical herbicides and pesticides, and to grow forage plants for bee populations to feed on.

Just as important, find a local honey producer who is using holistic beekeeping methods and purchase bee products from them. This not only helps to support healthy bee populations in your area but also stimulates a local market economy—increasingly important as multinational corporate manufacturers continue to push consumers towards Big-Ag-produced food swimming in chemicals and genetically modified organisms.

Spikenard also offers an "Adopt a Hive" program through their website, where supporters can become more invested in stimulating and supporting thriving bee populations.

—JILL ETTINGER

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Photo by bugman50



C O R N U C O P I A
I N S T I T U T E

Aurora Settles Fraud Suit for \$7.5 Million



Aurora Dairy is an “organic” factory farm operator with industrial-scale operations in Colorado and Texas.

What has been billed as the largest scandal in the history of the organic industry — and a real black eye for USDA industry stewardship — has produced a court settlement on behalf of consumers against Aurora Dairy. The factory farm operator has agreed to pay plaintiffs in a class-action consumer fraud lawsuit \$7.5 million to end litigation involving fraudulent marketing claims concerning the company’s organic milk. See story on page 5.

—WILL FANTLE

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Farmers and consumers who are passionate about the good food movement, working together, are a potent force in Washington and the marketplace. Together, we can make a difference. Plug in!

—LYNN BUSKE

