

THE CULTIVATOR

NEWS FROM THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE

SUMMER 2014

Turmoil Shakes NOSB Meeting in Texas

USDA Restricts Citizen Board's Governance and Authority on Organic Standards

Protests, an arrest, and parliamentary maneuvers marked the beginning of the semi-annual meeting of the USDA's National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) held in San Antonio, Texas, in late April. The meeting was the first since the USDA arbitrarily imposed governance and process changes on the NOSB—changes that have been widely criticized in the organic community.

The NOSB was established by Congress as part of the landmark Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 (OFPA). The 15-member board is composed of four organic farmers, two handlers (processors/manufacturers/distributors), a certifier, a scientist, three public interest representatives, three conservation/environmental experts, and a retailer.

Congress gave the board the authority to review and approve materials used in organic agriculture and food, as well as mandating the USDA Secretary seek their advice and counsel on policies important to the organic community.

"The NOSB is a prime example of the desire to build partnership and collaboration, as established by OFPA," notes Will Fantle, Cornucopia's codirector. "It was supposed to be a buffer to prevent total control of the organic sector by the USDA and big agribusiness interests."



The NOSB meeting was gavelled open by its new co-chair, USDA's Miles McEvoy, who directs the staff of the National Organic Program. The prominent role of the USDA bureaucrat, now claiming the right to co-chair the NOSB meeting, was a first and one of the changes implemented by the USDA.

Almost immediately this "power grab" was challenged by demonstrators from the Organic Consumers Association (OCA). A number of their members moved in front of the podium and began chanting "Don't change *sunset*," a reference to another controversial change made by the USDA that lowers the threshold for re-approval of synthetic materials allowed for what has been thought to be temporary use in organic food and

agriculture. Ultimately, following a quick adjournment of the meeting, OCA's political director Alexis Baden-Mayer was arrested and removed from the room.

When the meeting resumed, NOSB member Jay Feldman, executive director of Beyond Pesticides, called for a *point of order* to contest the co-chairing of the meeting by USDA's McEvoy. Feldman, who occupies one of the seats for conservationists, sought to restore the authority of the board's duly elected chair.

Beyond Pesticides, Cornucopia, and most other public interest groups involved in organics contend that the language of OFPA is clear in mandating that the board "shall select a Chairperson for the Board."

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Good Eggs: Scorecard Update in the Works

In 2010, The Cornucopia Institute published a report on organic egg production titled *Scrambled Eggs: Separating Factory Farm Egg Production from Authentic Organic Agriculture*. We also developed the web-based Organic Egg Scorecard to give consumers and wholesale buyers a more complete story behind the organic egg carton.

This year Cornucopia is completely updating the organic egg report and scorecard. We appreciate the hard work of organic egg farmers in producing one of the most nutritious foods, and we want to assist ethical farmers—the good eggs, if you will—in sharing their stories.

Unfortunately, lax enforcement by the USDA has now made it possible to produce “organic” eggs on giant CAFOs confining as many as 100,000 birds in a single house, with little or no legitimate access to the outdoors, as required by organic standards. This is a betrayal of consumer trust and places ethical egg producers and brands at a competitive disadvantage.

Consumers expect the organic label to signify ecological stewardship, humane animal welfare, and economic justice for family farmers. When you buy organic eggs, this expectation applies as well. The Cornucopia Institute



Photo by Maggie Yount, emwhynphotography.com

developed the Organic Egg Scorecard to empower consumers and wholesale buyers to better understand the egg brands you see on the store shelf, allowing you to make good, discerning decisions in the marketplace.

Cornucopia is sending a survey on production practices to all the organic egg brands we could identify around the country. We will then follow up with additional investigations and/or site visits. After we have received and inputted all the survey information, the scorecard will be updated with new brands and expanded scoring criteria, to be released later this year.

Egg brands that transparently share *the story behind their label* with their customers are viewed as ethical participants in the organic community. The updated scorecard will be shared widely via Cornucopia’s website, quarterly newsletter, biweekly e-news, social media channels, and press releases. (Our previous reports and research have been covered by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, NPR, ABC, NBC, Fox News, and dozens of other news outlets.)

So if you’re an organic egg farmer, send in your completed survey today! If you’re an egg lover, look forward to this important tool that will help you support the farmers and brands that uphold true organic principles.

—REBECCA THISTLETHWAITE

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Walmarting Organics

Will the Growth of “Big Organic” Lower Food Quality, Weaken Standards, and Destroy Farmers’ Livelihoods?

COMMENTARY BY MARK A. KASTEL

As Yogi Berra said, “It seems like déjà vu all over again.” In 2006 The Cornucopia Institute released a report accusing Walmart of cheapening the value of the organic label by sourcing products from industrial-scale factory farms and developing countries, including China.

At the time, Walmart announced that they would greatly increase the number of organic products they offered and price them at a target of 10% above the cost for conventional food. They failed miserably at that first attempt, eventually removing many of the organic items from their stores.

This past May, Walmart announced they will once again enter the organic arena, in earnest, with the goal of eliminating the premium price for organic food.

Since the announcement, Cornucopia has received numerous press inquiries asking if Walmart’s organic expansion is “good news or bad news” for the industry. My stock answer has been, as it was in 2006: If Walmart lends their *logistical prowess* to organic food, both farmers and consumers will be big winners by virtue of a more competitive marketplace. However, if the company applies their *standard business model*, and in essence *Walmart’s organics*, then everyone will lose.

Organic family farmers in this country could see their livelihoods disintegrate the same way so many industrial workers saw their family-supporting wages evaporate as Walmart, Target and other big-box retailers put the screws to manufacturers—forcing a production shift to China and other low-wage countries.

Walmart became the nation’s largest organic milk retailer by partnering with the dairy giant Dean Foods/WhiteWave (Horizon Organic). They then introduced their own private-label organic milk packaged by Aurora Organic Dairy. Aurora, based in Boulder, Colorado, has faced a maelstrom of organic industry criticism and negative press for operating a number of industrial-scale dairies with thousands of cows confined in feedlot-like conditions. They were the subject of a USDA investigation that found the giant dairy had “willfully” violated 14 tenets of the federal organic standards.

This time around Walmart is keeping the sourcing of their organic products a secret by using a private-label supplier and marketing products under the Wild Oats brand, a former natural foods grocery chain briefly owned by Whole Foods before, in 2009, an antitrust rule forced it to divest its holdings (resulting in the eventual shutdown of the Wild Oats chain).

Walmart claims that each item in the line, to consist of about 100 packaged products including pasta, peanut butter, dried spices, and olive oil, will cost at least 25 percent less than other organic goods sold at their store, according to *Consumer Reports*.

I’ve always said that “private-label, store-brand organics” is an oxymoron. By its very nature the practice is secretive. Grocery chains want to pit supplier against supplier. They want the companies manufacturing their products to feel insecure knowing they could lose the business for a few pennies to a rival competitor. For that



Walmart/Flickr.com

reason retailers don’t want their customers to become loyal to a specific brand-name supplier.

In contrast, most organic consumers are label readers. We want to know where our food is coming from, how it is produced and, if livestock are involved, how respectfully they are treated. None of that is possible with private-label products.

Target has taken a different approach. Although they have plenty of private-label brands (Archer Farms, Market Pantry, and Simply Balanced in their grocery aisles), they are also presenting a “curated” product line including many name brands owned by large agribusinesses that have invested in organics.

It should be noted that the product lines at Walmart and Target include both organic and conventional (“natural”) products under the same private-label brands.

Cornucopia’s 2006 report documenting the Walmart/factory-farm connection also highlighted the company’s decision to lower the per

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WALMART

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unit cost basis on organic products by collaborating with its long-time trading partner China.

Even if the organic certification process in China were not cause for serious concern—coupled with the fact that the USDA has provided little if any regulatory oversight there—food shipped around the world, burning fossil fuels and undercutting our domestic farmers, does not meet the consumer’s traditional definition of what is truly organic.

Meanwhile, Whole Foods Market announced that they are cutting many prices to meet increasing competition from mainstream retailers like Kroger, Safeway and now Walmart, and their stock plunged nearly 19% this past May.

“I don’t think consumers have any idea just how industrialized [mainstream organics] is becoming,” said best-selling food movement author Michael Pollan in an interview with the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. “There are some real downsides to organic farming scaling up to this extent,” he added.

Both Pollan and I worry that the expansion of “Big Organic” will lower

The gold standard in organic retailing remains the hundreds of member-owned food co-ops and independent natural foods grocery stores across the country.

food quality, weaken standards and hurt small family farms.

There’s a reason that organic food costs more. It costs more to produce, and paying farmers a fair price has always been part of the deal. The claim that Walmart will be able to provide organic food *that truly adheres to federal organic standards*, without a premium price, seems questionable at best.

The last time Walmart rolled out organic foods on a large scale, The Cornucopia Institute caught them labeling “natural” food as organic. After an investigation by the USDA and making the commitment to take down fraudulent signage, the company was not prosecuted. Walmart obviously did not have the expertise, at the store level, to manage organics.

The gold standard in organic retailing remains the hundreds of member-owned food co-ops and independent natural foods grocery stores



Co-ops such as The Wedge in Minneapolis, above, were essential to building the organic market.

across the country. Many of them are like a farmers market seven days a week where you can also find reputable national brands. They also act as a portal for accessing the local food movement. Your community’s farmers market, or joining a CSA, can also provide your family with the highest quality organic food.

When Walmart and Target complete their product roll-out, you can be sure The Cornucopia Institute will publish a new report for our members, the public and the media. We will provide discussion and analysis as to whether these massive corporations have learned from their past failures relating to organics and are now offering a true competitive alternative in the marketplace. ☺

Is Cornucopia’s Enews Winding Up in Your Spam Folder?



If you’re trying to keep up with Cornucopia and the *good food movement*, but you never seem to receive our emails in your inbox, you may need to whitelist our domain in your email. The process is slightly different for each email provider. You can find directions online by searching the keywords *whitelist* and [your email provider name]. Below are the instructions for Gmail and Yahoo!

How to whitelist an email address with Gmail: Once you are signed in, add **cultivate@cornucopia.org** to your contacts. Next, click the cog icon in the top-right corner. Click **Settings**, then **Filters** and then **Create a new filter**. Enter **cornucopia.org** in the **From** field and click **Create filter with this search**. In the box headed **When a message arrives that matches this search** select **Never send it to spam**. Click **Create filter**.

How to whitelist an email address with Yahoo! Mail: Once you are signed in, add **cultivate@cornucopia.org** to your contacts. Mouse over the Settings menu icon and select **Settings**. Click **Filters** and then **Add**. The **Filter Name** to enter is **cornucopia.org**. Select **Inbox** as the folder to deliver the email to, click **Save** and then click **Save** again.

—MELODY MORRELL

My Road to Organics

Cycling to Health, Vitality and Purpose

Many of us have had an aha! moment or moments that sparked our decision to farm, garden or eat organically. In this issue, Cornucopia board member Amanda Love tells how a cross-country journey awakened her to an organic lifestyle. Today she offers workshops, classes and retreats on how to prepare delicious, nourishing meals and live a harmonious life.

Was it my grandmother who owned a health food store in New Mexico long before they were popular or my health-conscious mother? Was it reading Emerson and Thoreau in high school that opened my mind to new expanses? Or the college study-abroad trip to Italy, where I experienced real food, real family values and *la dolce vita*?

I'm not sure which of these had the most influence on me or if they all converged to make me begin to question my way of life and start doing things differently. But I do know that the real turning point for me came the summer of 1997, when I rode my bicycle across the country. This trip unequivocally changed my life.

Suffering from a broken heart and knowing an adventure could be the cure, I signed up for a bike trip that was all about spreading awareness for "sustainable transportation." I had no idea what "sustainable" meant at the time, but I considered myself an environmentalist and I knew it sounded good—despite the fact that I had never ridden a bike more than 13 miles in one stretch, much less the proposed 70 miles a day! But I was up for the challenge.

Starting out in Portland, Oregon, I was in bliss as I took in the nature, green landscapes, waterfalls, brilliant sunrises and sunsets. My legs ached and moaned for about a month biking through Oregon and Idaho until we summited the Grand Tetons. Finally, we enjoyed some coasting relief while riding through the plains of eastern Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, Indiana and Ohio—only to climb again starting in West Virginia. By the time we reached the Appalachians, my legs were old pro's at this biking business, and I had woken up in many ways.

At the start of the trip, I gave no thought to where my food came from. I didn't even know about organic food much less free range, sustainably produced or grass-fed. By the end of the trip, I had not only become a conscious eater, I had become an activist.

The long days out on the road had purged me of my addiction to TV and unconscious eating. I saw the beauty as well as the ugliness and unconscious ways of this country. My nose took in all of it—the scent of wildflowers in bloom, forests and mountain air as well as the stench of factory



Amanda Love, "The Barefoot Cook," lives and teaches in Austin, Texas.

farms, road kill, toxic fumes from every tailpipe, and synthetic pesticides and fertilizers that went on for miles.

This trip was the turning point that helped me become

empowered to make my own decisions about what I eat, whether or not I own a car, and what I want to support with my dollars. After we triumphantly reached Washington, D.C., two and a half months after our journey began, we lobbied Congress to support sustainable transportation, a term I was now very familiar with.

A few months later, I moved from my home state of Texas to Northern California. There I was surrounded by like-minded people who not only cared about what they ate and how they lived, they were willing to protest to protect what they held dear. I joined the steering committee of a successful campaign designed to help defend our small town against corporate abuses. During the process, I met activist Julia Butterfly and got to sit with her for an hour, in a treehouse, in Luna, the ancient redwood she was protecting.

I then found myself at Heartwood Institute, where I learned to cook amazing health-conscious and nutritious food. I was immersed in a world of healers and those becoming healers. I knew this world was my home and I would continue on this path.

Since I was a little girl, my body had always been sensitive—or maybe just intelligent enough to know that nothing but real food worked for it. Finally having real, organic, healing food to eat all the time, I could feel my body being nourished on a level it had never known before. Going back to eating chemically produced food would never again be an option for me.

For the last 16 years, I have shared my message with others and have hoped to inspire them to take their health into their own hands by the simple (and yet complex) choice of what they put into their mouth.

AMANDA LOVE is an inspirational "chef-tivist" who teaches families, farmers and food lovers how to reclaim the power of simple, nourishing cooking. She has served on Cornucopia's board of directors since 2011. Learn more at www.thebarefootcook.com.

Dissension, Decisions and Delays

National Organic Standards Board Handles Packed Meeting Agenda

BY PAMELA COLEMAN, PhD

The National Organic Standards Board met in San Antonio, Texas, from April 29 to May 2, to discuss a multitude of topics. The Cornucopia staff, and the entire organic community, looked forward to this meeting, because the fall meeting was canceled last year, making it a full year since the NOSB has held a public meeting.

These gatherings, at their best, are a forum where the organic community participates in a democratic process to discuss standards for organic food. At the spring meeting, undercurrents of dissension (see cover story), particularly about NOP's revision of the sunset process (see sidebar), colored much of the discussion. Despite the dissension, board members worked together to review all the items in the packed agenda.

Crops

Streptomycin, an antibiotic used to control fire blight in apples and pears, will be phased out of organic production this year. One of the most contentious proposals at this meeting, this proposal, if passed, would have extended the allowance of the antibiotic streptomycin until October 2017. This antibiotic is currently allowed but only until the end of this year. A year ago the NOSB voted not to extend the use of the antibiotic tetracycline. At this meeting the board voted not to extend the use of streptomycin.

Magnesium oxide was approved to aid in applying humate fertilizer sprays.

Vinasse, used as a soil amendment and fertilizer, is a by-product of sugar and molasses production. The question before the board was to determine whether vinasse is synthetic (because it's produced with prohibited



materials) or non-synthetic (because it's made from sugar cane). This distinction is crucial. A determination of non-synthetic would allow vinasse to be used on organic crops without further review, and several board members were concerned about that possibility.

Ultimately, the board revised and passed a motion that classifies vinasse as non-synthetic, but **only if** it does not contain prohibited materials. The board also recommended that similar language be added to the NOP draft guidance document *Materials for Organic Crop Production*.

Laminarin is an extract of seaweed used for plant disease control. Again the question before the board was to determine whether laminarin was non-synthetic. The motion failed, which indicates that NOSB had insufficient information to conclusively determine classification. The proposal was sent back to subcommittee for further review.

Livestock

Synthetic **methionine**, in limited quantities, may be used to supplement the diet of organic chickens. A proposal was submitted to change the calculation method and base the rate of methionine on an average amount over the life of the flock. Board mem-

bers noted that methionine is often required for optimal bird health, because corn and soy are deficient in this essential amino acid and few natural supplements are available. On the other hand, previous boards have advocated a step-down process to reduce the dependence on synthetic methionine and encourage the organic poultry industry to find natural alternatives.

The proposal was sent back to the livestock subcommittee, who will consider adding an expiration date to the listing. Without an expiration date, methionine approval would be extended. The new sunset process would make it more difficult to ensure that methionine will be phased out over time.

Acidified sodium chlorite was petitioned as a topical disinfectant for use on dairy animals. This was sent back to the subcommittee for further investigations on possible alternative substances available for this use.

Aquaculture

The numerous materials petitioned for **aquaculture** use garnered many comments submitted before the meeting. The materials petitioned for aquatic animals (fish and shellfish) included chlorine, tocopherols, minerals, vitamins, and vaccines. Materials petitioned for aquatic plants (algae, but not terrestrial plants grown in a hydroponic system) included chlorine, micronutrients, carbon dioxide, lignin sulfonate, and vitamins. Many organizations were concerned that approving synthetic materials was premature, because organic standards have not yet been established for organic aquaculture. NOSB members listened, and sent all aquaculture

petitions back to the subcommittee with instructions to table their review until the USDA promulgates draft aquaculture standards.

Handling

Ammonium hydroxide was petitioned for use as a boiler additive. Boiler additives are needed to optimize the boiler operation, but there are already some others on the National List. This was referred back to subcommittee to gather additional information and to consider whether ammonium hydroxide or the listed boiler additives are the best options for organic processors.

Another boiler additive, PGME (**polyalkalene glycol monobutyl ether**), was reviewed to determine whether it comes into contact with organic products in the boiler steam. Conflicting information was presented, resulting in a request for the subcommittee to seek additional information.

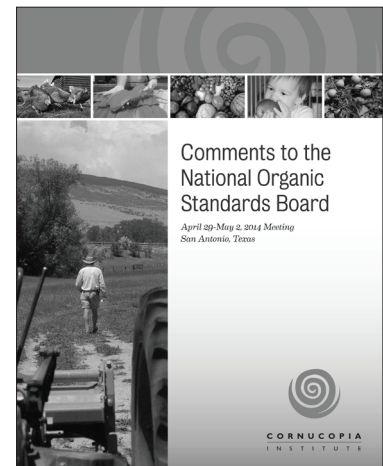
A petitioner requested removal of **glycerin** from the National List,

because organic glycerin is available. Although organic glycerin is preferable to synthetic, the sudden removal could present problems for the organic industry. Several compromises were discussed, and the subcommittee will prepare proposals for voting at a future meeting.

Other Items

As part of the five-year **Sunset** review cycle, the crops subcommittee reviewed sulfurous acid, sodium carbonate peroxyhydrate, and aqueous potassium silicate. The handling subcommittee reviewed gellan gum, tragacanth gum, and the cooking wines marsala and sherry.

Confidential business information (CBI) is sometimes withheld from the public when materials are petitioned for addition to the National List. The board determined CBI is not allowed; petitioners must provide complete information about manufacturing processes and ingredients so that the NOSB and the public can fully evaluate each petitioned material.



This article presents a brief summary of the proposals and the resulting decisions. For a complete discussion of each issue, refer to the formal comments Cornucopia submitted to the NOSB, available at www.cornucopia.org under the Projects tab. Our comments describe each proposal and explain why we support or oppose it.

A version of this article with footnotes and links to related articles is available at www.cornucopia.org.

Sunset and the Goal of Continuous Improvement



Organic agriculture relies on the use of natural materials as much as possible. Organic processed food is made from organic ingredients. The exceptions to these principles are found on the National List of allowed synthetics and allowed non-organic ingredients. A material can only be added to the List if two-thirds of the NOSB members vote to allow it. This process ensures that synthetic and non-organic materials can only be used if a broad consensus agrees that the material is consistent with organic principles.

Originally, all materials were scheduled to automatically expire, or “sunset,” from the National List after five years, unless the full board re-evaluated that material and again voted to renew it. The process was meant to foster continuous improvement in organic production and handling. Farmers and processors would seek organic and natural alternatives, to prepare for the day when synthetic materials would be removed from the National List.

The recent change in the sunset rule reverses this process. Now, all materials will automatically be renewed each year, unless two-thirds of the NOSB members vote to remove the material, and the NOP agrees with the recommendation.

This change makes it difficult to remove inappropriate materials from organic production and handling. Thus it may have a major impact on the number of synthetic materials in organic food.

The NOSB subcommittees are looking ahead, because they need to request technical evaluations now for materials that will sunset in 2017. The workload is enormous, with 53 listings for crops materials, 42 for livestock, and a whopping 118 for handling /processing that will sunset in 2017 or before. Cornucopia staff will continue its work of reviewing each material and providing comments to NOSB members to aid their decision-making.

NOSB MEETING

Continued from page 1

During the middle of a roll call vote, the meeting was again suspended and USDA staff huddled to discuss the situation. McEvoy was seen making cell phone calls, presumably with superiors in Washington. He subsequently approached Feldman during the break and reportedly told him that he would cancel the entire meeting unless Feldman retracted his parliamentary move. Once the meeting resumed, Feldman reluctantly withdrew his objection.

“It’s amazing that the USDA would go to the mat over the issue of Mr. McEvoy’s co-chairing the meeting,” observed Fantle. “Being willing to shut down the entire process in San Antonio, after board members and organic stakeholders invested thousands of hours in preparation and tens of thousands of private and taxpayer dollars, over such a small but symbolic dispute is reprehensible.”

McEvoy next offered a lengthy explanation of why the USDA had taken more control over the actions of the board, and detailed the “training” session (termed “obedience training” by some) that all NOSB members had been summoned to Washington, D.C. for in February. He claimed the changes would lend more transparency and streamline NOSB procedures.

NOSB member Jean Richardson, a public interest representative from Vermont, observed shortly after McEvoy concluded his remarks, that the NOSB has no work items “on our agenda.” Her comment referenced the USDA’s taking away of agenda-making authority from the NOSB, a right formerly used to develop positions on important issues including GMO contamination in organics and the potential use of nanotechnology.

Even before the NOSB’s Texas meeting began, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack was receiving a steady stream

“My style is collaborative, and I always try to build partnerships between the various stakeholders,” says newly elected NOSB Chair



Jean Richardson. “Organics is such a tiny part of food production in the U.S., and the USDA is such a huge organization, that we need to do all we can to work together to ensure the integrity of the organic label. I have appreciated the work that Cornucopia staff have done to provide accurate information on research topics.”

of criticism regarding what several public interest groups described as a power grab and a gutting of OFPA. Three former and widely respected chairs of the NOSB sent a joint letter to Vilsack outlining their grave concerns. And, dramatically, just days before the opening of the meeting, two of the prime authors of OFPA, Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy and Representative Peter DeFazio of Oregon, contacted Vilsack urging a reversal of the changes made to the sunset policy, stating the move was “in conflict with both the letter and intent of the statute.”

As the first day of the meeting moved into the afternoon, a number of board members continued probing and questioning USDA staff about the sunset changes. Richardson called the new process a “rabbit warren,” adding that it was “hard to see transparency.” During the formal public comment session, a number of citizens and representatives of public interest groups harshly criticized the changes as well.

Ultimately, the board turned its attention to the numerous agenda items requiring discussion, votes and decisions at its four-day meeting. (See the companion report on page 6.) But before that process began, McEvoy

mentioned that the USDA had “heard” the comments on sunset changes and the dilution of the NOSB’s power. To date the USDA has given no indication that they will roll back the widely unpopular moves that have generated impassioned protests as well as threats of a legal challenge by Cornucopia and other groups.

During the meeting McEvoy also reported that draft aquaculture standards had passed clearance and would be issued in the near future. And McEvoy announced that long-promised regulations concerning *origin of livestock* had similarly been given clearance. Organic dairy farmers have long complained that this loophole was allowing organic “factory farms” to continue to bring in conventional replacement animals. The pending rule change is expected to prevent the practice. A federal rule governing organic pet food production and labeling has similarly been cleared for release.

As one of its last agenda items, the NOSB selected its new leadership. Jean Richardson, Professor Emerita of Natural Resources at the University of Vermont, was elected board chair. John Foster, a handler representative and an employee of White-Wave/Earthbound Farm, was elected vice-chair. Mac Stone, the certifier representative, was elected secretary.

Natural foods chef Amanda Love, a Texan and Cornucopia board member, testified at the meeting. Afterward, she noted, “It will be interesting to see if Secretary Vilsack responds to the almost universal public condemnation of their power grab as illustrated by the tumult at the meeting in San Antonio.”

Cornucopia’s policy staff attended the NOSB meeting and contributed to this report.



The Open Source Seed Initiative

Challenging the Corporate Control of Our Food System

BY LINLEY DIXON, PhD

Seed diversity is undeniably essential to life. Scientists have only scratched the surface in identifying the millions of genetic traits stored in seed banks including variations in appearance, and nutrition, as well as resistance to disease, drought, and salinity.

Intellectual property rights allow research plant breeders to patent new plant varieties they breed and gene sequences they “discover.” There are some philosophical questions to grapple with here.

First, should we even be allowed to patent life? Patenting seed encourages the use of a narrow set of traits to which biotechnology and breeding are targeted—for example, the ability for a plant to break down a patented chemical. Innovations are restricted to the best-selling crops and are targeted toward mechanized monoculture farming because large-scale production sells the most seed and chemical inputs. If genes and varieties are not patentable, big seed companies are not able to make big financial investments in varieties that promote big monoculture farming practices.

To try and change this trend, a group of scientists at the University of Wisconsin–Madison are raising awareness of the growing number of patented genes and seeds by coordinating the Open Source Seed Initiative (OSSI, www.opensourceseedinitiative.org).

OSSI was launched in 2011 with the realization that, according to their website, “continued restrictions on seed may hinder our ability to improve our crops and provide access to genetic resources.” In April 2014, OSSI’s first release of seeds included 36 varieties of 14 different crops with



an open-source license stating that the seeds and DNA sequences cannot be legally protected in any way in the future.

Though this is a small step toward decentralizing the responsibility for agricultural innovation, the OSSI is raising awareness that we cannot leave our future in the hands of a few corporations.

It is impossible to know what genes will become useful for adaptations to increased atmospheric carbon dioxide, drought, salinity, and other future shifts in environmental conditions.

Seed viability diminishes with time. Therefore, if unique varieties of seeds are not continually grown, pollinated, and new seeds collected and properly stored, some traits will be lost forever. Likewise, if farmers are not saving and replanting their seed, adaptations to local conditions will not be preserved. Future food security depends on the availability of a diverse gene pool within each food crop that is *available to all* for future experimentation.

With the increasing industrialization of our global food supply, the number of unique cultivars farmers are

growing is dramatically being reduced.

When a crop species lacks diversity in the field, conditions favor the spread of plant diseases. The United States’ most economically devastating crop epidemic was caused by the intentional use of cytoplasmic male sterility genes, which also unknowingly created susceptibility to a disease.

In the summer of 1970, Southern Corn Leaf Blight, caused by a type of fungus, *Bipolaris maydis*, wiped out a billion dollars’ worth of corn in the United States. Seeking to reduce the labor involved with hybrid corn seed production, seed companies used the trait for cytoplasmic male sterility. This eliminated the need for hand detasseling of female plants so that foreign pollen could more easily be introduced to create hybrids.

The disease resulted in the loss of 250 million bushels of corn in Illinois alone that year, clearly demonstrating the threat to food security from genetic uniformity and monoculture farming practices.

There are numerous examples of plant epidemics triggered by a lack of

Future food security depends on genetic diversity of food crops. Scientists at the University of Wisconsin have launched an initiative that promotes common wealth and common health.

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Cornucopia Elects New Policy Officers and Advisor

Wisconsin organic beef and produce farmer Helen Kees was elected board president at Cornucopia's March 22 annual meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota. Kees, a third generation farmer, with her husband Bob and daughter Chris, holds the distinction of being one of Wisconsin's first certified organic beef producers. The family direct markets vegetables and beef as well as wholesales to Organic Valley Cooperative.



Helen Kees

New York organic dairy farmer Kevin Engelbert was elected board vice president. Engelbert, along with his wife Lisa and family, was the nation's first certified organic dairy farmer. Their family farm produces a wide variety of organic cheeses, veal, beef, pork, pasture, hay, corn, soybeans, and vegetables. Engelbert, a fifth generation farmer, is a former member of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB).

In addition, Barry Flamm, PhD, previously on Cornucopia's policy advisory panel, was elected to the board. A past NOSB chairman, Flamm operates a certified organic sweet cherry orchard in Montana. He also served on the Montana Governor's Council helping develop the Montana Department of Agricul-

ture Organic Certification Program, and he was a founder and vice chair of the Montana Organic Association.

Roger Featherstone was re-elected as board treasurer. The long-time environmental activist grew up on a small family dairy farm in Wisconsin that has been continuously operated by his family since 1847. He lives in Tucson, Arizona, where he is the director of the Arizona Mining Reform Coalition.

Replacing Dr. Flamm, Cornucopia added a new member to the policy advisory panel, Mitch Blumenthal, the President and Founder of Global Organic/Specialty Source, Inc. A resident of Sarasota, Florida, Blumenthal purchased ten acres of organic farmland in 1995 and continues to grow vegetables, fruits, herbs, and specialty items at Blumenthal Farms. In 1999, he launched Global Organic/Specialty Source, now one of the most significant organic distributorships in the Southeastern U.S.



Mitch Blumenthal

The board formally recognized long-time board member and past president Steven Sprinkel, who recently retired from the board. The Ojai, California, resident operates an organic vegetable farm and runs an organic grocery and restaurant with his wife Olivia. His longtime contribution to Cornucopia is greatly appreciated.

—WILL FANTLE

SEEDS

Continued from page 9

genetic diversity in the field, including Stem Rust of Wheat, which contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire, and Late Blight of Potato, which caused the death or emigration of 2 million people from Ireland.

Unfortunately, this isn't just a story of our past. Biotech seed companies count on farmers to be lured by their latest high yielding varieties as American tax payers foot the bill in the form of subsidies and federal crop insurance when disease inevitably strikes the thousands of acres planted with genetically related seed.

Genetic uniformity lends itself well to industrial-scale, monoculture food production that depends heavily on

mechanization, subsidies, and chemical inputs—and, more recently, patented, genetically engineered seed. These practices threaten our food security and the health of farm workers, and leave chemical residues on our food and in our environment.

In recent years, the lack of genetic diversity has continued to contribute to widespread epidemics. Genetic uniformity can be linked to the top ten emerging plant diseases and is likely the cause of Goss's Wilt, a new disease of corn, as reported in the *New York Times* in 2013. In addition, 90% of the corn and soybeans grown in the United States are genetically engineered. The hybrids chosen for genetic modification come from a small gene pool of high yielding varieties and are planted in vast monocultures across

the globe. The combination of large acreages planted to identical or similar genotypes produce ideal conditions for severe epidemics.

It is imperative to do all we can to shift to a more sustainable model of agriculture. Citizens have a social responsibility to challenge policies that allow for the patenting of life. We need to support public sector breeding programs, seed banks, and public access to the genetic resources they preserve. If we can prevent genes from being patented, plant breeding research will largely return to the public sector and to the many smaller diverse seed companies. This will encourage the development of genetically diverse plant varieties adapted to local conditions and resilient to environmental changes. ☺



THE CORNUCOPIA FARMER PROFILE

The Art of Farming

If there's a universally loved fruit, it just might be the blueberry. It's as fun to eat as food gets—popping those purplish little orbs into your mouth by the handful is symbolic of summertime goodness. And where else in the organic world do we get to eat the color blue? Outside of the processed food aisles, it's a rare and welcome sight—one that Pleasant Hill Farm has been focused on for 40 years.

Husband and wife team John Van Voorhees and Joan Donaldson began their foray into organic blueberry farming as a team in Fennville, a small Western Michigan town (also known for its wine). John is a third-generation farmer who cultivates bushes planted by his grandfather, and Joan is the granddaughter of a fruit farmer, so farming was naturally in the cards for the couple. They came to organic farming shortly after they were married, says Joan.

"An older friend gave us some copies of *Organic Gardening and Farming* and through Rodale's magazine we were introduced to the writings of Louis Bromfield about his organic practices on Malabar Farm," Joan recalls. "Wendell Berry also wrote articles for Rodale about his farm and philosophies about agriculture that inspired us to ponder what type of farm did we envision on our land?" Berry's classic book, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*, further shaped their agrarian worldview.

Also during this period, Organic Growers of Michigan organized. "Through the meetings and relationships, we all encouraged each other to strive for sound organic stewardship," says Joan.

The effort has paid off for the couple. With sweet blueberries that have devoted fans, scores of people have come to associate the season with blueberries from Pleasant Hill Farm. Locals can find them at co-ops and natural foods grocers or by visiting the farm directly, where picking your own berries is half the fun. For the rest of us, we can order direct—yes, Pleasant Hill will ship you fresh-frozen berries anywhere in the U.S. Because of the high organic content of the soil, and the years of sustainable farming, John and Joan say their blueberries are extra sweet and intensely flavorful.

But farm life hasn't always been easy at Pleasant Hill. "There have been difficult moments when battling diseases



Photo by Louis Schaefer

On their Western Michigan farm, John Van Voorhees and Joan Donaldson grow certified organic blueberries and healthy soil.

or various fruit pests when John and I wondered if we could continue farming organically and make a decent living," Joan explains. "But we always returned to our calling to build healthy soils and plants so that we can provide the healthiest fruit possible."

And it's not just for those baskets of blueberries they're selling today, she adds. The plan is to leave a soil legacy for the next generation of farmers, too. "Hopefully, after 40 years, the soil on our land is richer and fuller of nutrients, because we have done our best to cultivate good bacteria and have added minerals."

Even more than the fresh fruit, Joan says the creative process is the best part of farming. "I view farming as an art, a form of sculpture where we envision a neatly trimmed blueberry bush with vibrant leaves and laden with fruit," she says. "And for me, part of that experience results from viewing our acres of wildflowers that we plant, partly to feed bees, but also to sustain our souls. We need more beauty in this world."

As a writer and a farmer, Joan says her goal is to help other people "learn about the challenges and satisfactions of farming." Quite the different sentiment from what you'd expect to hear from the dominant conventional, subsidized mono-crop sector. But then again, like the short season for sweet, juicy blueberries, the committed organic farmer is also a rare and welcome treat.

—JILL ETTINGER



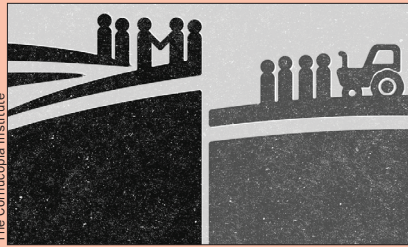
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CORNUCOPIA
I N S T I T U T E

Across the Fence



The USDA's power grab of National Organic Standards Board authority and responsibilities is being challenged with an administrative petition to the USDA. Cornucopia joined with Beyond Pesticides, the Center for Food Safety and 17 other allies in the legal action. (See related cover story.)

Cornucopia and other farmer-based groups are also responding to the Organic Trade Association's latest push for an organic check-off program, expressing their concerns that farmers need to protect their pocketbooks. For this and other late-breaking news, click on "Cornucopia News" at www.cornucopia.org.

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Oregon Counties: G-M-Over!

As battles heat up over GMO food labeling in more than 20 states, two counties in Oregon voted in May to ban GMO crops outright from being planted within their borders. Neighboring Jackson and Josephine counties have fewer than 170,000 registered voters combined, but the measures grabbed national headlines.

Nearly \$1 million of the \$1.3 million spent during the campaign was used by opponents, according to the Associated Press. Monsanto and five other corporations spent at least \$455,000 in this rural southwestern Oregon enclave in an attempt to defeat Jackson County's initiative. They failed: 66 percent of county residents voted to pass the measure. Josephine County's similar measure won by 57 percent.

"We fought the most powerful and influential chemical companies in the world and we won," local farmer and anti-GMO advocate Elise Higley told the *Oregonian*.

The process of getting the measure to a vote took about two years. It was sparked by concerns that GMO crops planted by some farmers would drift onto other, non-GMO farms and contaminate them.

In related news, Vermont will become the first state to require labeling of GMO foods. No sooner had the ink dried on Gov. Peter Shumlin's signature, the Grocery Manufacturers Association, a trade group representing Coca-Cola, General Mills, Monsanto, and other giant food and chemical companies, vowed it would sue the state. They made good on the threat June 12, filing suit in Vermont's federal district court. Anticipating legal challenges, Gov. Shumlin had already established a "food fight fund" to defend Vermonters' right to know what is in their food (www.foodfightfundvt.org).

—ELIZABETH WOLF