

THE CULTIVATOR

News from The Cornucopia Institute
Fall 2011

Cereal Crimes: Agribiz Deception

Many “Natural” Products Contain GMOs, Cost the Same as Organic

PHOTO BY BJ BIRKEL



Many consumers say they are confused by the term “natural.” They assume it means the product is free from pesticide residues and GMOs. Cornucopia’s research shows nothing could be further from the truth.

Federal law requires that organic food products be produced in ways that promote ecological sustainability, without the toxic inputs and genetically engineered ingredients that are common in the conventional food system. Increasingly, these organic products are forced to compete with products that claim to be “natural.”

No requirements or restrictions exist for foods labeled “natural.” The term often constitutes nothing more than meaning-

less marketing hype promoted by corporate interests seeking to cash in on the consumer desire for food produced in a genuinely sustainable manner.

Unlike the organic label, no government agency, certification group, or other independent entity defines the term “natural” on processed food packages or ensures that the claim has merit.

The Cornucopia Institute’s latest report, *Cereal Crimes: How “Natural” Claims*

Deceive Consumers and Undermine the Organic Label—A Look Down the Cereal and Granola Aisle, available at www.cornucopia.org, explores this growing trend of labeling conventional foods as “natural,” focusing on breakfast cereal and granola.

Companies use various strategies to create the illusion of equivalence between “natural” and organics.

Some companies that started out organic, and built consumer loyalty as organic brands, have switched to non-organic “natural” ingredients and labeling. Peace Cereal® is an example of “bait-and-switch.” In 2008, the company that owned the Peace Cereal® brand switched from organic to cheaper conventional ingredients, without lowering its prices. Today, the company that owns Peace Cereal® changed its logo to include “All Natural,” appearing right below

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USDA Pushes Animal ID Scheme

Independent Farmers Lose if Big Ag Wins on Tracking Rule

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced in August a new proposed rule for mandatory animal traceability. The proposed rule greatly expands what animals must be identified, including feeder cattle, which are processed at a young age and never enter the breeding herd. It also creates new requirements for not only animal owners, but also for businesses associated with livestock. For example, veterinarians and auction barns would be required to keep records on every tagged animal for a minimum of five years.

"All this does is impose unnecessary burdens on small businesses, accelerating the loss of independent businesses to corporate industrial-scale agribusiness," stated Judith McGeary, Policy Advisory Panel member of

The Cornucopia Institute. McGeary is the executive director of the Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance and vice-chair of the USDA Secretary's Advisory Committee on Animal Health.

The rule has raised concerns among family farm and ranch advocates, who say this is a one-size-fits-all approach that does not address the control of livestock diseases or the food safety risks posed by industrialized factory-farm meat production.

The powerful meatpacking lobby has continued to push for such mandated traceability requirements in order to develop international standards for exports. Critics have suggested this is not in the American public's best interest, however, since the U.S. is a net importer of beef and cattle and the



SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

profits from the export market go to a small handful of massive meatpacking companies.

"If Americans don't want their food supply to cave like the banking and housing industries, they need to urge the USDA to rewrite the rule to address the needs of family farmers rather than the meatpacking lobby," stated Mark A. Kastel, Cornucopia's Senior Farm Policy Analyst. ■

—Will Fantle

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Synthetic DHA: The Fight Is On

Cornucopia to Pressure NOSB to Prohibit GMO Additive in Organics

For years, The Cornucopia Institute has raised serious concerns about Martek Biosciences Corporation's novel oils, added to foods to increase the content of DHA, an omega-3 fatty acid.

Humans naturally obtain omega-3 fatty acids from eating seafood, grass-fed meat and milk, nuts and seeds (like flax or chia). The primary source of DHA in the human diet is fish.

Martek Biosciences Corporation's DHA oils are derived from novel strains of algae, sometimes extracted with neurotoxic solvents (hexane), and further refined with other non-organic processing aids and synthetic ingredients. These oils have been added to certain organic foods, including organic infant formula, baby foods and fluid milk, for years, despite never having been formally reviewed and approved by the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), as required by law.

Martek Biosciences Corporation only recently petitioned its materials for approval—and the NOSB is now scheduled to review and vote on this petition at their upcoming November 2011 meeting in Savannah, Georgia.

Cornucopia staff will provide information to Board members containing an overwhelming array of evidence for why these oils have no place in organic foods.

We will also present proxy letters from the public (please look for your letter in the mail sometime this fall) to show that organic community stakeholders do not want ingredients like these to taint the organic label.

Martek's oils are added to foods to increase the content of one specific nutrient, DHA, an omega-3 fatty acid. The process was originally developed by Monsanto in



SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Martek Corp.'s synthetic DHA oil is commonly—and illegally—added to organic infant formula.

the late 1990s. Monsanto, the same company responsible for a whole host of controversial genetically engineered foods, succeeded in genetically modifying a strain of algae for high DHA production.

Instead of relying on fish, and the processes that occur in their bodies to synthesize DHA from algae, Monsanto scientists bypassed this natural step and produced high-DHA oil directly from algae. Monsanto later sold its patented algae DNA along with the accompanying technology; it was eventually acquired by Martek Biosciences Corporation.

Martek argues in their petition that no organic alternatives exist. *This is simply not true.* Currently, several organic milk products on store shelves contain added DHA. While Dean Foods chose DHA oil from Martek for their Horizon brand milk, other organic milk processors, including Organic Valley, chose fish oil. Unlike Martek's patented products, fish oil has been reviewed and legally approved for use in organics.

Martek also argues that organic infant formula will be "nutritionally inferior" if manufacturers are prohibited from adding their DHA oil. However, several meta-analysis studies have concluded that no benefits exist to infant development from adding

DHA and ARA to formula. A recent long-term study even suggested that supplementation of formula with algae-based DHA may have long-term detrimental effects (see Cornucopia's report, *Replacing Mother*, at www.cornucopia.org).

Martek also mentions the World Health Organization (WHO) numerous times in its petition to the NOSB. But the director of the World Health Organization's Department of Nutrition has said: "The World Health Organization does not have a recommendation for the addition of DHA to infant formula." And he explains the reason: "The [Food and Agriculture Organization/WHO] consultation did not provide any recommendation about supplementing synthesized DHA in infant formula, as to date, **no solid evidence exists to be able to say that adding DHA to infant formula will have important clinical effects**" [emphasis added].

Meanwhile, adverse reaction reports submitted to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration reveal that some infants and young children have experienced severe reactions and may be unable to tolerate these novel, highly processed oils. Vomiting and diarrhea in infants are symptoms of this intolerance, according to the reports.

Organic foods should provide a safe haven from novel, potentially harmful ingredients like Martek Biosciences' DHA oil. The vote at the upcoming NOSB meeting will be critical. Board members should vote in the interest of organic consumers and ethical organic businesses, using solid science, and reject the Martek petitions. Please help us by sending in your proxy when you receive it. ■

—Charlotte Vallaeys

Cereal Crimes

Continued from page 1

the “Peace Cereal®” name, and continues to charge customers as much as or more than the certified organic competition.

Another common tactic that confuses consumers is using the phrase “natural *and* organic”—instead of “natural *or* organic”—to describe a brand’s ingredients. Saying “natural *and* organic” suggests that the two terms are equally meaningful and valid, and that all such products contain organic ingredients.

Annie’s Homegrown states on its website that “Annie’s uses only simple natural and organic ingredients,” as if the term “organic” is just another way to describe “natural” and vice versa. (Only 20% of their cereal product line is certified organic, with the balance labeled “natural.”)

In reality, the difference between organic and conventional “natural” ingredients is vast.

Organophosphate pesticides, common in American conventional agriculture, were developed from World War II-era nerve gas and are designed to be toxic to the neurological systems of target animals. They are deadly to insects but also damaging to humans—with fetuses and children especially at risk. These pesticides are prohibited in organics, but commonly used to produce conventional ingredients for “natural” products.

Several recent studies have linked organophosphate pesticide exposure to a wide range of developmental disorders in children, including behavioral problems, poorer short-term memory and motor skills, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

The USDA has found residues of organophosphate pesticides like chlorpyrifos and

Berry Cereal			
Ingredient	Percentage of ingredient samples found with residues (by USDA testing)		Human health effects
Peace Cereal® Wild Berry Crisp			
Blueberries	Phosmet	11.6%	Neurotoxin
Strawberries	Captan	55.1%	Carcinogen
Price: \$0.36/oz.			
Organic alternative: Nature's Path® Flax Plus Red Berry Crunch			
Blueberries	Phosmet	Prohibited in Organics	
Strawberries	Captan	Prohibited in Organics	
Price: \$0.34/oz.			
Price difference: The all-organic option by Nature's Path is less expensive than conventional Peace Cereal® labeled "natural."			





CHART BY NANCY ZUCKER DESIGN

As this chart shows, not only does the “natural” brand contain pesticide residues, it costs *more* per ounce than the organic, residue-free product. Cornucopia’s new report includes several comparison charts like this one to help consumers and wholesale buyers make wise purchasing decisions.

malathion on corn, soy, wheat flour, and oats, which are all common ingredients in breakfast cereals. In the case of wheat flour, residues were found on more than 60% of samples.

Only cereal bearing the organic label provides third-party certification to ensure that no such toxins were used in the farm fields. The “natural” label is meaningless in terms of addressing pesticide use and residues.

Given consumer interest in avoiding genetically engineered (GE) ingredients, The Cornucopia Institute also tested many “natural” breakfast cereals for genetic contamination.

Cereals by leading “natural” brands including Kashi, Mother’s, Nutritious Living, and Barbara’s Bakery contained high levels of genetically engineered ingredients. Full results are available in the report and on page 12 of this newsletter. Consumers might find this subterfuge less surprising when they learn that leading “natural” cereal brands such as Kashi and Mother’s are owned by well-known agribusinesses such as Kellogg and PepsiCo.

Despite findings that “natural” cereal products offer little, if any, advantages over

conventional products, companies charge high prices for products with “natural” labels.

An analysis of wholesale and retail prices reveals that “natural” products—using conventional ingredients—often are priced *higher* than equivalent organic products. This suggests that some companies are taking advantage of consumer confusion.

For example, prices in the leading distributor’s wholesale catalog for multigrain flakes show that two of the *least* expensive products are certified organic, offered by Nature’s Path and Food for Life. Meanwhile, Kashi’s 7-grain cereal, made with non-organic grains by the multinational corporation Kellogg but disguised as an independent sounding “natural” brand, is priced higher than several equivalent organic options.

Committed organic companies, rated highly in Cornucopia’s accompanying online scorecard, must compete with Kellogg, Kraft, and PepsiCo and their misleading “natural” claims on conventional products, which appear under brand names like Kashi, Back to Nature, and Mother’s. When companies overcharge consumers for “natural” products, they take business away from

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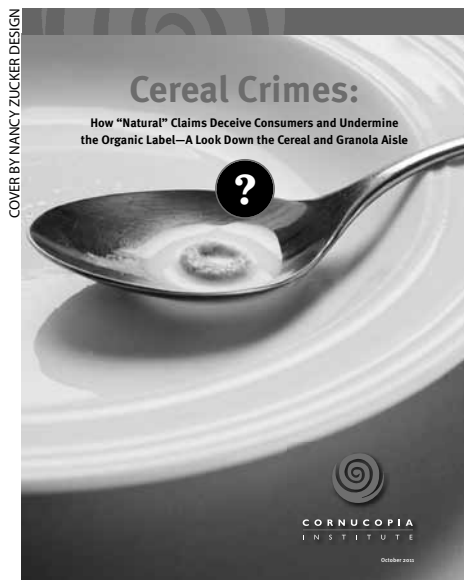
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the companies that are supporting organic farmers.

Organic farmers have received lower prices for their grains as cereal companies drop their demand for organic ingredients as they switch to “natural” labeling and conventional ingredients.

According to research by the Natural Marketing Institute, a market research firm, two-thirds of U.S. consumers believe foods today are less safe to eat because of chemicals used during growing and processing of foods. Given this widespread interest in avoiding food-borne chemicals, it is increasingly important for consumers to realize that buying “natural” foods does little, if anything, to avoid synthetic inputs and toxins used on the farms and inside the manufacturing plants. ■

—Charlotte Vallaeys



For a copy of Cornucopia's new report, **Cereal Crimes**, and the accompanying product scorecard, which rates both organic and “natural” cereals and granolas, visit www.cornucopia.org. The principal author of the report is Charlotte Vallaeys, Director of Farm and Food Policy.

Anti-GMO Summit Held

Coalition Forms to Plan Battle Strategy

A gathering of leaders from the organic and sustainable agriculture community met in Boulder, Colo., in late June for a summit to discuss how to work together to fight the spread of GMOs (genetically modified organisms) in food and agriculture. The 60 people participating in the two-day, by invitation only dialogue included farmers, consumers, food manufacturers and distributors, food retailers, and non-profit food and agriculture organizations. Cornucopia was one of the participants.

When the size of the “natural” food sector is added to organics, the value totals in excess of \$80 billion. Organics explicitly excludes GMOs from food production and processing, making it a potential safe harbor for consumers. However, there is no testing protocol as yet in place in the U.S. organic system to measure any contamination. Some companies and processors do have their own testing procedures.

As for “natural,” a term viewed favorably by many consumers and marketers, there is no ban on the use of GMOs. Some companies and the Non-GMO Project are trying to address this issue.

But if there was a point of tension at the gathering, it was between those involved with natural food and those who are part of the organic sector. Natural, of course, has no prohibition on the use of pesticides, herbicides and antibiotics, or requirements for soil building, humane animal husbandry and environmental stewardship—all of which are part of the organic system. The difference led to some lively discussion over strategies and tactics.

All in the room, however, perceived the

rapid push by Monsanto and the biotech lobby for unfettered development of more GMOs, facilitated by a mostly willing USDA, as a threat to the future of agriculture and food.

Several initiatives were debated during the summit, including:

- mandatory labeling of GMOs in food and a consumer's right-to-know
- policies preventing GMO contamination of organic and non-GMO crops, including compensation for farmers economically injured by crop contamination
- transparent federal regulations and independent science to ensure that GMOs do not threaten human health and the environment
- more public funding and incentives to prioritize development and improvement of organics
- open and unfettered access by public sector scientists to all seeds for non-commercial research plus funding for classical breeding programs and production of farmer-ready public crop varieties and livestock breeds

The issues are complex while the challenges are immense. Monsanto and its business partners and government friends are aggressively pursuing their agenda of consolidation and control of the basic components of life. Participants at the summit clearly understand this, and they committed themselves to cooperating and working together, where possible, on the above noted initiatives. ■

—Will Fantle



Promiseland transferred illegal conventional cattle to Aurora "Organic" Dairy, above.

Promiseland Defrocked

After a lengthy tug-of-war over compliance with federal organic regulations, a Midwestern livestock operation has lost its organic certification.

In an investigation and legal case that dragged on for almost six years, Promiseland Livestock, LLC withdrew its appeal of a USDA-ordered suspension in late June. Based in Nebraska and Missouri, Promiseland is the nation's largest organic dairy replacement cow and beef cow supplier, with a mammoth CAFO with 22,000 head. As of July 28 the livestock giant is prohibited from representing any of its operation as organic for the next five years, according to a USDA statement.

The Cornucopia Institute helped spark the USDA investigation that led to the decertification of Promiseland. Cornucopia filed a formal complaint with the USDA when it discovered that Promiseland was transferring illegal conventional cattle to the giant Aurora Organic Dairy complex in Platteville, Colorado. USDA investigators eventually found Aurora had "willfully" violated 14 tenets of the organic regulations.

USDA filed a complaint against Tony Zeman, owner of Promiseland in Bassett, Neb., in

Open Letter to USDA



Dear Secretary Vilsack,

After a legacy of neglect by your predecessors (under the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administration and outright monkeywrenching during the George W. Bush administration), we were certainly impressed by your recognition of the importance of the growing organic agriculture movement and your duty, as mandated by Congress, to protect stakeholders in the industry.

Your appointment of highly qualified and respected individuals to run the National Organic Program (NOP) is illustrative of this commitment.

However, after more than 2 1/2 years in office some of the most vexing issues that face the industry remain unresolved. None of the industry's challenges are more important than the scandal that has undermined the credibility of the organic dairy sector and undercut the livelihoods of many family farmers and reputable processor/marketers. Dairy is the organic industry's second-largest sector (after fruits and vegetables).

Since the year 2000, stakeholders in the organic industry, through the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), have petitioned the USDA to crack down on scofflaws operating industrial-scale "organic" dairies milking as many as 10,000 cows. Although the NOSB passed no fewer than five recommendations for new rulemaking and guidance, there was a premeditated attempt to delay the enforcement process during the Bush administration.

The NOP, during your tenure, has done an excellent job of implementing the new rules and training certifiers. As you know, the final regulations took effect this past June.

However, *the NOP has now dropped the ball*, reportedly because of staffing and budget constraints. We are told that they do not have the resources to visit and audit compliance with the updated regulations on the 20 or so "factory farms" operating in the United States milking over 1,000 cows and labeling their milk organic—the NOP will instead exclusively depend on the accredited certifiers.

The legacy of these CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations) in organics is abysmal and much of the responsibility lies with their certifiers.

During the past eight years virtually all the enforcement actions taken against organic CAFOs have been instigated by formal legal complaints filed by The Cornucopia Institute (proving, unlike USDA's contention during the Bush years, that the prior regulations were in fact enforceable).

It is unfair to the taxpayers, and organic stakeholders, to continue to depend on private public interest groups for investigations of this nature.

To illustrate the validity of past complaints, and systemic problems with larger organic dairies, Cornucopia actions have resulted in:

1. Vander Eyk Dairy (California), 10,000 cows, shipping milk to Dean Foods/Horizon—decertified;
2. Aurora Dairy, five CAFOs in Colorado and Texas, the leading organic private-label milk producer in the country (Walmart, Costco, Target, etc.)—recommendation by NOP

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staff for decertification overruled by Bush administration appointees, leading to one year probation and reducing their Platteville, CO facility from 4,500 cows to about 800;

3. Colorado Department of Agriculture (Aurora certifier)—recommended for suspension by the NOP, which also was overruled by political appointees at the Department;

4. Rockview Dairy (Nevada), 5,000 cows, selling their own milk to unsuspecting California consumers—organic herd diminished to a few hundred; and

5. Promiseland Livestock (Missouri /Nebraska), the supplier of replacement dairy animals to many of the organic CAFOs operating in the U.S.—finally lost their right to engage in organic commerce, after years of delays.

Unfortunately, this list does not include other investigations that have dragged on, in some cases since before you took office. These include complaints filed against Shamrock Dairy (Arizona) with 16,000 milk cows (about 1000 organic). After inspection by Cornucopia staff, confirming access to pasture was not being afforded, this company has continued to operate disadvantaging competitors fully complying with the law.

And, the lack of attention to this matter has allowed the largest “organic” dairy, Natural Prairie (Texas), with 9,000 cows, to continue to competitively damage those following the spirit and letter of the law.

Mr. Secretary, we feel that the USDA owes the family-scale organic dairy producers in this country, and their customers, your full and immediate attention in this matter.

We encourage you to allocate the necessary resources, either through the NOP, or assigning sworn law enforcement agents from other branches of the USDA, to confirm that the largest organic dairies in the country are now fully operating in compliance with the law—on an expedited basis. Furthermore, when the Obama administration took office, the organic community was assured that a top priority would be new rulemaking closing the loophole, currently being exploited, allowing operations like Promiseland to “convert” conventional cattle to organic status—on a perpetual basis.

The USDA’s past interpretation of the regulations, allowing this loophole, is thought to be erroneous by many independent experts on the National Organic Standards, including past NOSB chairman James Riddle.

At this point, because of the damaging competitive impact of allowing wealthy corporations and investors to instantly launch CAFOs, utilizing converted conventional cattle, we would ask that rulemaking be, truly, a top priority for immediate action. Alternatively, we request an internal legal analysis of the rule’s language and, if you agree with Cornucopia, Mr. Riddle, and other prominent industry observers/analysts, that you immediately issue a guidance clarifying the past misinterpretation of the rule and bring to an end a practice that betrays the values of the organic movement.

As always, on behalf of our 4,000 members, a large percentage of the organic farming community, we thank you for your attention to these matters and stand ready to assist you and your staff if called upon.

Sincerely yours,



Mark A. Kastel
Codirector, The Cornucopia Institute

2008, after he refused to allow Agricultural Marketing Service agents to review documents and certification records as required by the Organic Foods Production Act. AMS requested documents specifically concerning the at least 13,000 head of cattle that Promiseland sold to Aurora Organic Dairy.

“We are proud of Cornucopia’s role in bringing this scofflaw to justice,” said Mark Kastel, co-founder of Cornucopia. “For years, many in the industry suspected Promiseland was ‘laundering’ conventional animals as organic (replacement heifers mostly going to giant factory farms and beef cattle).”

Kastel added, “It is sinful that this operation has been able to continue operating—for years—while going through this appeals process. Organic farmers do need the right to due process, to assure that overzealous regulators do not strip them of their livelihoods, but these delays have been excessive. Not only have they fueled the buildup of factory farms, they have also defrauded many organic consumers along the way.”

Visit www.cornucopia.org for a more detailed story. ■

—Will Fantle

Where’s the Beef (Survey)?

Are you a certified organic beef producer? If so, we need your help to rein in abuses in the organic marketplace. Cornucopia is currently researching the organic beef industry. One of our goals is to protect the livelihoods of domestic organic beef producers, who are facing increasing competitive pressure from organic beef imports—especially from Australia and Uruguay.

Your participation in a brief, confidential survey will help us carry out this critical investigation. If you received the survey in the mail, please take a few moments to complete it. If you did not receive it, contact us at (978) 369-6409 or cultivate@cornucopia.org. Together we can defend economic justice for ethical organic farmers and ranchers like you. ■

Canadian Giant Loses Certification

Grain Exporter Allegedly Sold Adulterated Product as Organic

Jirah Milling and Sales, a grain exporter based in Quebec, has had their organic certification suspended by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA).

The company, annually selling thousands of metric tons of organic feed soybeans and grains in U.S. and Canadian markets, had been under scrutiny for some time. Organic soybean growers and other crop producers on both sides of the border questioned how Jirah could apparently sell organic beans significantly below what producers knew to be the cost of production.

“We have been aware of problems with imported soybeans for years and have been actively investigating this operation for many months,” said Mark Kastel, Cornucopia’s Senior Farm Policy Analyst. “It was obvious, from collaborating with U.S. organic grain producers and their cooperative leaders, that something was wrong,” he said.

Michael Saumur, the National Manager of the Canadian Organic Office at CFIA, said they had received complaints about Jirah’s operations. Jirah then received “multiple assessments,” he said. The assessments revealed what Saumur would only term as “deviations” from the company’s organic plan. Jirah, Saumur explained, was “given ample opportunity to correct” the deviations. Unable to do so, Saumur said “it was deemed applicable to issue a suspension.”

While Saumur expressed the need to maintain confidentiality about specifics, one complaint concerning Jirah, filed in November 2010, alleges blending of cheaper conventional grains with organic and then the sale of the adulterated product as certified organic feed.

Jack Erisman, an organic crop producer

in Pana, Ill., reported that “even with growing demand from organic egg and dairy producers, over the past two years, I have had soybeans that I could not sell in the marketplace.”

In assessing the current regulatory crackdown Erisman affirmed, “The organic marketplace is only fair when we all play by the same rules.”

Cornucopia’s investigation brought the group in contact with Canadian farmers familiar with Jirah. “The Canadian farmers’ allegations, reported to us, were that Jirah was buying a nominal quantity of legitimate organic soybeans but the vast majority of their beans came from conventional IP, GMO-free growers,” Kastel said. “These Canadian growers are the real heroes; they brought this apparent fraud to the attention of Canadian regulators and Cornucopia and tirelessly pushed for action,” he observed.

None of the Canadian farmers that Cornucopia directly worked with on this investigation were willing to speak on the record for fear of recrimination or violence. “We had one incident related to us concerning the vandalism of an organic inspector’s car to the tune of many thousands of dollars,” said Kastel.

“Buyers should know,” said Merle Kramer of Saline, Mich., Marketing Director at the Midwest Organic Farmers Cooperative, “that when we are in a \$24.00 organic soybean market and they get four bids for around \$24.00 and one bid for \$19.75, it should be obvious that those are not organic soybeans. Unfortunately, for some the main

concern is to get cheap organic grains and a piece of paper that says it is organic.”

Cornucopia is offering a stern warning to U.S. buyers to avoid products represented as organic by Jirah, which has removed all references to organics from their website.

“We have received reports that they have

“The organic marketplace is only fair when we all play by the same rules.”

—Jack Erisman, Illinois farmer

continued to attempt to sell, since their suspension, using the certification documents of individual farmers from whom they are buying soybeans and other commodities,” said Kastel. “This would not be legal as any handler, storage facility, miller or roaster of soybeans would itself have to carry valid certification.”

Cornucopia cautions buyers of organic commodities against purchasing at prices that seem too good to be true. “It is incumbent upon responsible participants in this industry to do their own due diligence and not strictly rely on certification documents for protecting the integrity of the products they are marketing,” said Kastel.

Cornucopia is working to prepare a class-action lawsuit seeking damages for any marketplace injury on behalf of U.S. and Canadian farmers. We encourage farmers who have been competitively injured to contact us regarding potential future litigation. We are also asking for help from industry stakeholders in identifying Jirah’s U.S. customers. If you have information, please contact us at cultivate@cornucopia.org. ■

—Will Fantle

Organic Acreage Declines

Culprits Are Conventional Prices, “Hassle Factor,” Extreme Weather

Some organic farmers are converting their acreage back to conventional farming practices, complete with agrochemicals they once worked so hard to avoid, while others drop out and look towards retirement.

For a number of years, the amount of organic farmland steadily increased, growing from just under 1 million acres in 1995 to over 4.8 million acres in 2008. Then the organic market went to seed, so to speak, with the number of organic acres decreasing since then.

In the Midwest, for example, at least 35,000 acres are no longer being organically farmed, said John Bobbe, executive director of OFARM (Organic Farmers’ Agency for Relationship Marketing). OFARM is a *marketing agency in common* unifying six farmer-owned cooperatives in the U.S.

Merle Kramer of the Midwest Organic



Heavy flooding damaged farms in the Midwest and Northeast this year.

Farmers Cooperative, an OFARM member, estimates that as much as “20% of the organic production has gone back to chemical farming.”

The downturn appears to stem from four main factors: a faltering economy, burdensome paperwork and logistics, the meteoric rise of conventional prices, and plain, ol’ bad weather.

Organic acreage began to decrease in 2008, Kramer explained. As the economy

slid into recession, consumers adjusted their spending and, “food companies did the same,” he said. “Prices started dropping like a rock for farmers.”

Another factor is the additional effort it takes to maintain organic certification—what some farmers call the “hassle factor,” OFARM’s Bobbe reported. Beyond more rigorous production practices, paperwork, and certification fees, organic farmers face logistical hurdles conventional producers simply don’t, Bobbe explained.

For example, conventional farming requires just a few hours to truck grain to a local elevator, unload it, and be paid. In organics, the truck must be cleaned of any conventional grain, including genetically modified contaminants, then driven to an organic elevator, still chancing the load may be refused if the buyer suspects contamination.

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Drought, Floods Plague Farms Across U.S.

For a number of years cool, wet springs have delayed planting and exacerbated weeds for many farmers, explained OFARM director John Bobbe. But 2011 unleashed a maelstrom of weather woe for growers in every region of the United States. Wildfires in the Southwest; tornadoes in the Southeast; drought in Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas; and flooding in the Midwest and, most recently, in the Northeast, have battered both conventional and organic agriculture. What’s more, extreme heat slayed cattle by the thousands. Flooding and heavy rains displaced countless other livestock, disrupting operations and costing farmers untold sums of both dollars and grief.

Farmers along the Missouri River are in a world of hurt, says Mike Williams of OPINS Co-op (Organic Producers Iowa Nebraska South Dakota). “Midwestern farmers along the Missouri may not get crops next year due to field damage and prep activities necessary to farm again,” he said. “Organic producers may be delayed even longer due to the three-year requirement to be non-chemical. All fields will need to be rebuilt to perform to former levels, if they ever do in this decade,” said Williams.

Cornucopia board member Kevin Engelbert’s operation was devastated by Tropical Storm Lee in September. Engelbert Farms, the first certified organic dairy farm in the U.S., since 1984, sustained heavy flooding that ruined the milking facilities, wiped out the crops and winter feed, polluted the wells, and displaced the farm animals, causing \$1.125 million in damages. Ankle-deep mud covers all. “Looks like a bomb went off at the farm,” Englebert wrote in an email to the farming community. “The only bright spot is no one got hurt.”

—Elizabeth Wolf



Farmland ravaged by flooding near Sioux City, Iowa

PHOTO BY JERRY SCHMUTTE

Acreage

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Organic farmers frequently wait 10 to 30 days to be paid.

To make matters worse, extreme weather has wreaked havoc with the planting and growing seasons in both the U.S. and Canada. (See story below.)

Probably the biggest influence on the decision to convert from organic back to conventional farming is that of economics. There is simply more money to be made in conventional production.

"In 2008, organic prices skyrocketed," OFARM's Bobbe explained, using wheat as an example. When the recession hit, organic prices came down with it, and the organic flour market plummeted. It had been at \$14-\$20 a bushel, and corn, which was getting

\$12-\$16, both fell to \$6 and under.

Because of the financial setbacks, some farmers felt they had no choice but to return to conventional production—and in some cases their bankers reportedly forced them to do so. As of August, the organic grain market had rebounded somewhat, Bobbe said.

As the demand for organic crops returns, along with the requisite financial rewards, Bobbe feels it is unlikely acreage that left organic will return. "As far as new acreage, we don't see huge amounts transitioning to organic. We do see some large producers adding 100 acres here and there, but we don't see a big influx into organic."

"There are lots of farmers who converted to organics because it was the right thing to do for the environment, their farms, and the health and safety of their family members and workers," said Cornucopia's Codirector Mark A. Kastel. "Although some might

have economically been forced out few have done so willingly. This isn't always a matter of organics not being profitable. It's a matter of conventional being *more* profitable."

This has led Kastel and other analysts to worry about the destabilizing impact organic grain shortages could have on the marketplace.

"Organic dairy farming and egg production have continued their healthy growth after having flattened out a couple years ago. I predict that no organic livestock will be taken out of production because producers are unable to find organic feed. There are only two possible ways to fill the void: imports and fraud," stated Kastel.

The Cornucopia Institute has met with officials at the USDA imploring them to apply the necessary assets to ensure the integrity of the organic grain market. ■

—Heidi Griminger Blanke is the executive director of WAFER (www.waferlacrosse.org) in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Calling All Interns Research, Policy Positions Available

Continuing our successful internship program, building more relationships and empowering more individuals in the good food movement, The Cornucopia Institute is beginning the search for new interns for the fall season. Internships will also be available for the winter and spring seasons.

This summer we worked with three interns from diverse backgrounds and locations. Casey Rogers just received a BA in environmental policy with a minor in political science from Western Washington University's Huxley College of the Environment. She will next pursue a JD in Agricultural Law and a master's in Public Health.

Dan Houlihan, who resides in Chicago, has a background in nutritional studies and, as a traveler, has worked on farms of all sizes and shapes. Casey and Dan provided research and administrative and database contributions.

Lisa Xue, who assisted on policy work, is working toward her master's degree in International Policy Studies at Stanford University, with an emphasis on food security and environment policies. We deeply value the contributions of Casey, Dan, and Lisa, and wish them good luck on their future endeavors.

Cornucopia has internship positions available in both administration and research, and in policy work. The fall internships will run from late September through late December, and winter from January through April. Individuals interested in helping with our research and investigations of organic and sustainable agriculture and food practices, and who possess a background in business, political science, information technologies, and/or biology and food sciences, are encouraged to apply.

For the administration and research internship, experience in phone calling, Microsoft Excel, and writing are preferred, as is at least some college education. For the policy work internship, the candidate must be a graduate student and have experience and skills in writing research reports.

The interns will work from their remote location, need to supply their own computer, Internet connection and housing, and be able to work independently. Although unable to offer a stipend, Cornucopia will cover preapproved investigation expenses. If interested in a fall, winter, or spring internship, please email your resume and letter of interest to cultivate@cornucopia.org.

Cornucopia staff members enjoy helping interns prepare for the next stage in their careers. The skill sets these individuals bring to our organization are varied and valuable. We are eager to see who our next interns will be! ■

—Lynn Buske

The Cream of the Crop

My grandfather's grandfather homesteaded at a place about five miles south of here," Dave Minar said from his home in New Prague, Minnesota. He was explaining the genesis of his family's award-winning organic farm and creamery operation.

In 1926, just before the Great Depression, Minar's grandfather purchased the land to the north that is now Cedar Summit Farm. His parents moved onto the farm in 1938.

Dave himself, the current patriarch, named the farmstead when he was a boy. His father had given him a Holstein heifer. To register the animal he had to identify the farm. Mindful of a handsome stand of cedar trees around their home upon a knoll, Dave was inspired to write down "Cedar Summit Farm." Decades later Dave, his wife Florence, and their extended family all involved, the Minars are deeply rooted. Two of the namesake cedars still stand.

Cedar Summit became an organic farm pioneer in 1974 after Dave suffered a dangerous allergic reaction while mixing up pesticides. Meanwhile, they were noticing dead birds around their land. Right then and there, Dave and Florence made the enduring decision to go chemical-free.

In the process of becoming organic, they married their environmental ideals with a practical economic vision. They remain guided by the philosophy that healthy land equals healthy animals and healthy people.

Cedar Summit is currently a 150-cow organic dairy farm on 470 acres. Their certified organic milk is processed at an on-site creamery into a variety of products including non-homogenized milk, heavy cream,



Dave and Florence Minar, of Cedar Summit Farm and Creamery, switched to organic in 1974 after Dave had a serious reaction to pesticides.

and ice cream. They have developed effective direct marketing strategies: they sell their products at a store on the farm and deliver to more than 80 retailers and restaurants in the area. Their farm store also sells other farmers' products, such as turkeys, chickens, free-range eggs, apples, cider and jellies.

About 45 minutes from the Twin Cities, the farm also sells milk products wholesale to Co-op Partners Warehouse, a division of The Wedge, a natural foods co-op in Minneapolis. Co-op Partners is a distributor of organic produce, dairy, soy and juice for co-ops and restaurants in the Upper Midwest.

To keep things on track, the Minar family has monthly board meetings. "We also do an annual retreat in the winter, where we give over a full day for brainstorming," Dave says. "Because we have a big farmhouse, we usually meet on the farm." The retreats help keep communication open between family members and ensure that all are involved when important decisions are made.

"We actually are two businesses," Dave explains. "The farm is a sole proprietorship, and the creamery is an LLC which leases the building, hires its own employees, and buys the milk from the farm to create value-added products for sale."

Cedar Summit holds a popular annual event dubbed "Milkapalooza." It's a chance for the public to visit the farm, take a tour, take part in milking contests, pet farm animals, sample fresh cream, and more.

To stay on top of their farm operation, most family members are trained in Holistic Management practices. Over the years the farm has developed a registered Holstein herd that has received state and national recognition. Among other honors, the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) named Dave and Florence 2007 Farmers of the Year.

Tapped for Cornucopia's board of directors in late 2010, Dave has also served as board member of Minnesota Institute of Sustainable Agriculture, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, and other ag outfits.

Dave's advice for other farmers in the current economic climate: "You have to be able to set your own prices; then keep your costs down. That's why we built our creamery, as a way of setting our prices."

For dairy farmers considering a transition to organic, "think outside the box and join a graziers' network," Dave says. He should know. Over nearly 40 years, Cedar Summit Farm has become a model of what works in organics. ■

—Steven McFadden is the author of *The Call of the Land: An Agrarian Primer for the 21st Century* (www.thecalloftheland.com) and 11 other books.

GMOs: “Natural”?

What do chemical preservatives, synthetic pesticides, neurotoxic solvents, and genetically engineered (GE) crops have in common? They are prohibited from certified organic foods—yet commonly present in “natural” products.

To ascertain if “natural” breakfast cereal products contain high levels of GE ingredients, Cornucopia sent samples to an

independent, accredited testing lab. This was part of an investigation for our just-released report,

Cereal Crimes:

How “Natural” Claims Deceive Consumers. (See cover story.)

The test results showed that several so-called “natural” products are indeed contaminated with high levels of GE ingredients, sometimes as high as 100%—among them products by Kashi, Mother’s, Nutritious Living, and General Mills.

Results also showed that even natural products that make “non-GMO” claims, or are associated with the Non-GMO Project, cannot always be trusted. For example, Barbara’s Bakery Puffins and Whole Foods’ 365 Corn Flakes contained more than 50% GE corn. In contrast, Nature’s Path certified organic corn flakes were free of GE contamination.

Shoppers should be skeptical of “natural” products, even those making “non-GMO” claims. As always, look for the organic seal as the *gold standard* in non-GMO food production. ■

—Charlotte Vallaeys



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The Co-op Connection

Heartfelt thanks to **Common Ground Food Co-op** in Urbana, Illinois, for choosing Cornucopia as a recipient for their monthly “Round Up” program. Not only did those coins collected at the register add up to a sizeable gift, Cornucopia made a lot of new friends. Staff members tell us that just two days into the Round Up, they’d run out of Cornucopia brochures and people were clamoring for more. Music to our ears.

Cornucopia prides itself on our close connection with the co-op grocer community. More than a third of the nation’s 270+ co-ops financially support our work, for which we are eternally grateful. What’s more, almost all co-ops use our reports and scorecards in their whole-sale buying decisions—to reward farmer heroes and put pressure on the ethically challenged. Others, such as The Wedge in Minneapolis, invite Cornucopia’s codirectors to speak at annual meetings. Newsletter editors are always welcome to reprint our news and action alerts.

Recently we reached out to reconnect with our co-op friends. We’ve enjoyed getting back in touch with Outpost in Milwaukee, Bloomingfoods in Bloomington, Ozark Natural Foods in Fayetteville, La Montanita in Albuquerque, New Pioneer in Iowa, and many others. These conversations have led to much-needed donations—thank you—but also to renewed relationships. That’s just as important to us here at Cornucopia. Co-ops connect us to the countless passionate, conscious consumers who amplify farmers’ voices. We couldn’t do what we do without co-ops. They are the true pioneers and stakeholders in organics. We salute you! ■

—Elizabeth Wolf



SOURCE: ISTOCKPHOTO