

# THE CULTIVATOR

NEWS FROM THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE

SPRING 2017

## Organic, Rooted in Soil

Farming with Natural Complexity

BY LINLEY DIXON, PHD

**G**rowing up, I told a skeptical family member that I wanted to be an organic farmer. He replied, “Why make life difficult for yourself by choosing a career that goes against convention?”

The long answer to his question would have included everything from the benefits of farm biodiversity, nutrient cycling, environmental stewardship, animal welfare, reduction of farmworker and consumer chemical exposure, production of healthier food, and, in short, a desire to leave a piece of land better than I found it! Instead, I simply replied, “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

Last November esteemed Vermont organic greenhouse grower Dave Chapman testified before the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) that, if profits were his sole motivation as an organic farmer, he would become a hydroponic grower.

Rather than putting so much effort into caring for the soil by building organic matter and fertility, he would see an immediate boost in yield and profits with a hydroponic container system.

Chapman testified, “Do you have any idea how profitable hydroponics would be for me if I called it ‘organic?’ Why wouldn’t I do that? Because I believe it would be fraud. ‘Organic’ must be based in the soil.”

**The organic label has become an avenue for industrial-scale producers to make higher profits by incorporating conventional inputs, methods, and systems.**



The organic community’s reverence for the complexity of natural soil ecosystems comes from the knowledge that thousands of species are interacting in diverse ways with one another and with the naturally occurring minerals in soil.

Soil, plants, and animal species have been coevolving for millions of years. Soil contains fungi, micro-algae, protozoa, nematodes, invertebrates, actinomycetes (bacteria that grow in filaments), nitrogen-fixing bacteria, and even the healthy bacteria that reside in our guts!

This respect for, and desire to work with, natural complexity is rooted in the organic community’s embrace of a systems approach to farming. Organic agriculture rejects the reductionism of conventional systems that has led to monoculture, synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and genetic modification to the detriment of our land, water, ecosystems, and health.

This same reductionism has driven hydroponics. Most industrial ‘organic’ hydroponic operations reduce their nutrient requirements to those which can be obtained from hydrolyzed, conventional soybeans.

Hydrolyzed soy, fed continuously through an irrigation system into containers filled with coconut husk (coir), is the primary source of fertility used to produce crops of ‘organic’ hydroponic tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers.

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# Grass-fed Dairy an Expanding Market

Benefits Animal Welfare and Nutrition

BY MARIE BURCHAM, JD

Consumers are now starting to look for “grass-fed” dairy, following exponential growth in the 100% grass-fed beef sector.

So what’s the difference between grass-fed dairy and conventional dairy, and why do consumers care?

Cattle, along with sheep and goats, are ruminants, meaning they evolved to eat and subsist on green forage.

Conventional agriculture relies on feeding ruminants things they are not meant to eat—grain, soy, and food by-products—to meet the energy needs demanded by cows being pushed for high production.

In contrast, organic dairies must pasture their animals during the grazing season. There is a minimum standard required for the amount of graze dairy animals must access if their products are certified organic.

All organic dairy is technically grass-fed, but not likely 100% grass-fed. It’s important to know the difference between these two designations, because an animal’s diet affects the milk nutrition, as well as livestock health and well-being.

The regulation of the terms “grass-fed” and “100% grass-fed” are not well defined at this point. In January of 2016, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) withdrew their previous “grass-fed” and “forage-fed” marketing verification claims for ruminant livestock and their meat products.

That change should have no impact on a producer’s ability to apply to the USDA’s Food Safety Inspection Service for a grass-fed claim on their label. However, while marketers cannot perpetuate misinformation in their labeling, consumer understanding of these terms can be a moving target.

While dairy products labeled “grass-fed” clearly must have received some grass in their diet, they may still be consuming significant amounts of grain and other feed. This is why all organic dairy is considered grass-fed.

The alternative, “100% grass-fed,” means the dairy animal received a diet composed entirely of forage (green-growing pasture and stored forage, such as hay).

Third-party certifications for grass-fed dairy products are gaining prominence and can give consumers some insight into products while shopping.

Third-party certifications all have different standards. These include labels like Certified Grassfed by A Greener World (a program started by Animal Welfare Approved), the American

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Grassfed Association, and Pennsylvania Certified Organic (which has a 100% Grassfed Organic certification). Some organic certifiers also certify grass-fed operations.

There are many benefits to dairy products sourced from 100% grass-fed animals. First, those ruminant livestock get the most natural diet possible, grazing on fresh pasture during the grazing season and usually eating stored forage (such as hay) during the non-grazing season.

Because of their diets, these cows are least likely to be found in intensive confinement. Instead, they live outside in social environments.

The grass-based diet itself makes the livestock healthier, requiring less intervention with drugs or other health remedies. Overall, this management provides many benefits for animal welfare.

There is a growing body of evidence showing that dairy from 100% grass-based operations have superior health benefits compared to their grain-fed counterparts.

Milk can be a good source of beneficial omega-3 fatty acids if the livestock are allowed to graze on pasture for all, or the majority of, their diet.

Another health benefit associated with grass-fed dairy products in particular is the high ratio of conjugated linoleic acids (CLAs). There is some scientific evidence that CLAs may help prevent cancer, acting as potent antioxidants and enhancing immune system function.

Like the higher ratio of omega-3s, CLAs are only present in high levels when a dairy animal gets most or all of its diet from fresh-growing grass.



**There is a growing body of evidence showing that dairy products from 100% grass-based operations have superior health benefits compared to their grain-fed counterparts.**

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Despite the benefits of grass-based dairying, it is still important for consumers to know their product suppliers. Buyers should beware of a grass-fed label that does not take into account how grazing practices impact the environment.

A grass-fed label reflects what animals are fed and doesn't necessarily distinguish whether the milk product was produced on well-managed, environmentally friendly farms that are not overgrazed.

Choosing dairy products that are both organic and 100% grass-fed should ameliorate concerns of sustainability; improving soils and water quality, while maintaining biodiversity, are all defining principles of organic agriculture.

Despite the perceived animal welfare and health benefits associated with 100% grass-fed dairy products, the niche market has grown more slowly than the 100% grass-fed meat industry.

It is difficult to have an entirely forage-based dairy. These dairy farmers depend on climates where good grass grows naturally and on livestock breeds that thrive on all-grass diets.

The energy demands of lactation result in grass-based farmers producing much less milk per animal than their grain-fed counterparts.

That loss of revenue may be offset by lower operating and feed costs, as well as an added revenue stream from being able to sell a greater number of young calves (since their cows live longer, they need fewer in their operation), but it still can place producers on a thin profit margin.

However, financial benefits for marketers selling 100% grass-fed milk products are creating incentives for farmers to innovate.

While it can be difficult to run a successful 100% grass-fed dairy operation due to the high-energy demands of pregnancy and lactation, consumer demand is fueling this market. Many skilled practitioners are stepping up to the plate to meet that demand!

There is a lot to look forward to in this growing niche market. Many of the top brands highlighted in The Cornucopia Institute's soon-to-be-released organic dairy scorecard sell dairy products from 100% grass-fed cows. The updated dairy report will go into detail about the benefits and challenges of 100% grass-fed dairying.

There is no doubt that the growing popularity and availability of these products within the organic industry is something consumers can look forward to.

# Regenerative Agriculture Improves Soil

Building Organic Matter, Storing Carbon, Combating Drought

BY MARIE BURCHAM, JD &  
JENNIFER HAYDEN, PHD

**M**any of the soils in the U.S. are depleted—unproductive, eroded, lacking microbial life, high in salts, and unable to retain water. This depletion has both global and local consequences that regenerative agriculture seeks to remediate.

Regenerative agriculture is not a new idea, but it is gaining steam as awareness of climate change, drought, and food security issues become more universal and pressing.

A principle goal of regenerative agriculture is to improve the land by building healthy soil, benefitting ecosystems and humanity.

One service healthy soil provides is the ability to retain water. When rain falls on depleted soil, it washes away substrate and precipitates down into the water table quickly, actions that leach the soil of nutrients and contribute to erosion and flooding.

In contrast, a healthy soil mat absorbs and stores water, combats the effects of drought, and keeps the microbiome vibrant.

Another major benefit of healthy soil is the ability to store carbon. In fact, carbon sequestration in soil is a practical way to reduce the primary atmospheric greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), that contributes to climate change.

Due to the destruction of native grasslands, wetlands, and forests—often to make way for the soil-depleting practices of conventional agriculture—the United States has seen a precipitous drop in the amount of carbon stored in such natural carbon sinks. The key to soil carbon sequestration is supporting the soil microbiome (i.e., soil life).

Through photosynthesis, plants naturally take CO<sub>2</sub> in from the



**The key to soil carbon sequestration is supporting the soil microbiome.**

atmosphere and convert it into the carbohydrates they need to grow. Plants send some of this carbohydrate energy down through their root systems to feed microbial soil life.

Plants act as carbon pumps, bringing the CO<sub>2</sub> down into the soil, where it is “fixed” by soil life in a process that builds organic matter. A large fraction of organic matter is comprised of stored carbon.

Common agricultural practices destroy organic matter. Chemicals, tillage (plowing), and fallow fields all lead to the destruction of soil life, soil structure, and soil carbon. Regenerative agricultural practices replenish depleted soils and create a system that supports soil life.

These practices include reducing or eliminating tillage (no-till) and pesticide use, planting fields year-round (cover crops), leaving plant residue on fields after harvest, adding compost, and utilizing diverse rotations and agroforestry techniques that combine crops, forestry, and livestock into one system.

Livestock raised on pasture can also aid soil regeneration and carbon sequestration when managed in ways intended to meet these goals. These management strategies seek to mimic the grazing patterns of wild herds.

Trampled grass and animal waste help build up organic matter

across pastureland, serving as a valuable carbon sink. Intensive grazing practices, sometimes called “mob grazing,” rotate high densities of animals among fenced parcels of pasture.

Many of these practices are essential to organic farming—in fact, organic farmers are the vanguard of regenerative agriculture.

A contingent of conventional farmers do use no-till practices, which are regenerative, but their continued heavy use of synthetic pesticides in monocrop systems hampers soil regeneration.

Regenerative agricultural practices can reduce atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, while increasing resilience to both floods and drought. As an added benefit, soils built up by regenerative practices also retain their productivity without the need for synthetic fertilizers, because these soils have a rich biome that retains its mineral components.

Organic agriculture, when practiced according to the original intent of the movement, is wholly aligned with regenerative agriculture. At the heart of both is the goal of supporting soil health, which leads to long-term sustainability.

When we support organic farms that practice regenerative agriculture, we are supporting the rehabilitation of our most important shared resource: Planet Earth.

# Raising the Bar

## Choosing Between Healthy Snacks and Synthetic-filled Junk Food

BY LINLEY DIXON, PHD

Food bars marketed as “granola,” “protein,” “energy,” or “nutrition” bars are currently an \$8 billion industry, posting double-digit annual growth rates.

They’re handy to carry along on a hike, after a workout, as an adjunct to homemade lunches, or for an energy boost at work. Packaged, ready-to-eat bars are popular for their convenience and health claims. But are they really healthy?

Few food bars are made with organic ingredients, and even fewer products qualify for the USDA Organic Seal.

The presence of the organic seal indicates that at least 95% of the ingredients are certified organic, and the remaining ingredients have undergone a rigorous review for human and environmental health and safety.

Some companies cut corners on costs by using only one, or just a few, organic ingredients, while further adding conventional foods, such as chocolate, soy lecithin, and fruit, that are more expensive to buy organically.

These products cannot carry the USDA Organic Seal, but can advertise “made with organic” if at least 70% of the product is certified organic.

Many companies charge higher prices and market products as “natural” when they are no different from other conventional products.



### Few bars are made with organic ingredients, and even fewer products qualify for the USDA Organic Seal.

Cornucopia’s soon-to-be-released report, *Raising the Bar*, and the accompanying scorecard will help consumers differentiate between the few truly healthy snack bars and those that use false “natural” claims while adding cheap, synthetic ingredients.

Our research found a number of high-quality bars containing whole, organic ingredients like nuts, seeds, grains, and dried fruit. Others boasted high protein and fiber contents, but also contained high amounts of added protein isolate and sugars.

Cornucopia’s upcoming report will highlight bar brands that are true organic champions.

In the meantime, follow these suggestions when trying to find the best bars for you and your family:

1. Buy products with the USDA Organic Seal. The seal indicates the product was produced without GMOs and that all ingredients have undergone additional safety reviews. Support companies that only offer USDA organic products. These

companies are truly dedicated to the values that come with the organic label, protecting farmworkers, consumers, and the environment from exposure to toxic pesticides.

2. Avoid protein isolates. Unnecessary, gimmicky additives like pea or soy protein isolate (commonly processed with synthetic solvents like hexane) are added to cheaply increase the protein content of bars, rather than using whole nuts and seeds.

3. Choose brands with the fewest added sweeteners. Though organic cane sugar, honey, and maple syrup are better than artificial sweeteners,

for a healthy choice, bars should only contain naturally sweet, whole foods, like dried fruit, that also have naturally occurring antioxidants, vitamins, and fiber.

4. Choose products without artificial flavors. Added flavors are only necessary when lower-quality ingredients are used. Some synthetic flavors can be a health risk and are prohibited in organic foods.

5. Choose products without harmful synthetic preservatives. Common preservatives with known negative health effects include benzoic acid, butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT), butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA), sulfites, and EDTA. Safer preservatives are ascorbic acid, lactic acid, citric acid, tocopherols, and rosemary oil.

With hundreds of options on the shelf, our report and scorecard will help consumers support 100% organic companies, while differentiating between the few truly healthy snack bars and those that should be considered desserts, or even junk food.

Keep an eye out for the upcoming snack bar report and scorecard.



# Community Supported Agriculture

## How to Choose a Farm Share

BY LINLEY DIXON, PHD

**C**ongratulations, you've decided it's time to join a CSA, arguably the best way to support local, diversified food production!

For the uninitiated, CSAs allow you to purchase a share in a local farm. In exchange for your investment, you receive a weekly portion of the farm's harvest throughout a season, generally worth more than, or equal to, your payment.

Though the concept can be individually adapted to unique farms and communities, there are certain fundamental principles that every authentic CSA shares.

Subscribing to a CSA ensures that farmers, rather than companies that transport, process, and market food, receive the full value of the cost of the share. In return, customers become connected to the farm and the community.

Robyn Van En, who pioneered the CSA movement in North America in 1985, summed it up by illustrating, "food producers + food consumers + annual commitment to one another = CSA and untold possibilities."

It is estimated that there are roughly 10,000 CSAs in the U.S., although the numbers aren't tracked, so it is hard to be sure.

Assuming an average of 100 members at \$600 per share, CSAs are estimated to divert roughly \$600 million from big agriculture into community-based systems each year.



**Do your homework before you subscribe to a CSA to ensure that you are supporting local farmers and your community.**

During most of the year, and in most parts of the country, organic produce is predominantly shipped in from California and Mexico.

"Joining a CSA might mean that your produce was picked 10 hours ago, instead of 10 days ago," said Mark Kastel, Cornucopia's codirector. "That makes a world of difference in terms of flavor and nutrition."

As this direct-market, farm-to-consumer movement grows, industrial businesses are attempting to capitalize on the concept by offering their own grocery store subscriptions and delivery programs guised as CSAs.

It is more important than ever to do your homework before you subscribe to a CSA to ensure that you are actually supporting local farmers and your community.

Since not all CSAs are created equal, what follows are a few simple guidelines that can help inform your decision.

### UPFRONT PAYMENT

Authentic CSAs usually require an upfront payment from their members, which provides local farmers with capital early in the season, before they start selling the harvest. That capital is also insurance for the farmer in case of crop failures from weather or pests.

In most cases, CSA money is not refunded when there are crop failures. This allows the local farm to endure the hardship and come back to farm the next season. CSA members are true partners, sharing the risk and the bounty.

However, despite common reasons for crop failures, such as pest outbreaks, soil deficiencies, or destructive weather events, CSA farms are usually so diverse that farmers are almost always able to periodically deliver quick-to-harvest crops like greens and root vegetables.

### FARMER RELATIONSHIP

The best CSAs allow for direct contact with the farmers. Regular communication should exist between members and the farmer as well as opportunities to visit the farm. This open channel for communication is crucial for both parties.

First, it allows farmers to share their production practices with members. Is the farm organically certified? If not, what are their practices? On a personal level, the farmer can explain to members the basis for which crops are grown.

Second, members can provide feedback to the farmer to help improve the CSA. Whether it be crop choices, pricing, or pickup, the farmer should always be trying to improve members' experiences.

## SUPPORT LOCAL

CSAs can come in many shapes and sizes and, while there can be benefits to different models, the farm's proximity to your local community should factor heavily into your decision.

First and foremost, you will be supporting your local economy, while also keeping transportation costs and environmental impacts down. While meal services and local food aggregators often advertise family farms, those farms can be spread out across the country.

Some "CSA" aggregators will even supplement your share with store-bought foods! Transparency is the hallmark of a good CSA; there should be no question as to where your food is being produced.

## WHO'S BEHIND YOUR CSA

Most CSAs are owned and operated by a farmer directly. In these cases CSA payments go straight to the farmer.

Some CSAs are run through a cooperative, where multiple farms provide diverse food—including meat, eggs, or cut flowers—in your weekly box.

Subscribing to this type of cooperative CSA can be a good way to support many local farmers in your area. However, there are some important questions to consider in order to ensure you are maximizing your support of local food production.

Is the cooperative farmer-owned and completely local? Are the farmers receiving fair prices for their products? What percentage

of the CSA budget goes toward management and distribution, and what percentage goes to the farmers?

One disadvantage of cooperative marketing is that farmers are likely not compensated for crop failures. Non-refundable CSA purchases have traditionally been an important component of the success of local agriculture, because adequate forms of crop insurance don't exist for small, diversified organic farms.

Conversely, in some cases, cooperative CSAs provide market opportunities for isolated farms that have trouble getting CSA members and distributing their products.

Cooperative CSAs also allow local farms to work together for production planning, so that they are less likely to directly compete with one another in the marketplace.

When a CSA is backed by a company, non-profit, or corporation, there is potential for unfair competition with authentic family farmers who must make a living from the farm.

As local food gains in popularity, there are more unique situations where farms are financially backed by a project or business.

While most of these entities have good intentions, it is important to consider who benefits from your subscription and the effect that these subsidized farms have on the prices that local farmers can get for similar offerings.

Fundamental for everyone involved is a strong desire to see the farm survive and thrive. Members find meaning in the knowledge that they are vital to the farm's survival, while farmers feel supported by their community.

When the pressures of corporate America on our food system seem too overwhelming to overcome, joining a CSA is arguably the best way to come together and collectively make a difference.



## Cornucopia Welcomes Anne Ross

The Cornucopia Institute has hired Anne Ross as a new farm policy analyst. Anne has an advanced law degree in Agriculture & Food Law from the University of Arkansas, where her studies focused on the federal regulation of pesticides and food labeling.

For her thesis Anne focused on the health effects of endocrine disrupting pesticides and the inadequacies in the laws governing the use and regulation of these pesticides in both the United States and Europe.

Before pursuing her passion in farm policy, Anne was a litigator and handled a variety of cases, including environmental torts and product liability.

A native of rural South Carolina, Anne now lives in San Diego, California. She is an avid runner and outdoors enthusiast.

With their vast greenhouses full of plastic containers and tubing, industrial hydroponic systems do nothing to improve the land.

How can a system completely removed from land stewardship, gleaming fertility primarily from conventional, likely GMO, soy production, be considered ‘organic?’

The USDA Organic Seal was developed so that a market premium could go to farmers who incurred additional production costs for adhering to higher standards.

The organic standards incorporate environmental and human health, animal welfare, and sustainability. The Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) includes a firm requirement for soil in organic systems because the founders recognized soil’s central role in nutrient cycling and sustainable land management.

The law states, “An organic plan shall contain provisions designed to foster soil fertility primarily through the management of the organic content of the soil.” OFPA continues, “An organic plan shall not include any production or

handling practices that are inconsistent with this chapter.”

Clearly hydroponic container systems are not compliant with the law, and they are contrary to the spirit of organic as well. These systems do not increase organic matter in the soil, nor do they foster soil fertility, cycle nutrients, or capture carbon.

However, some organic certifiers and the National Organic Program (NOP) are allowing these hydroponic container systems to be labeled ‘organic,’ pushing true organic producers who adhere to the law out of business, because caring for our land is more costly than simply producing food without it.

Meanwhile, certifiers adhering to the letter of the law and upholding the spirit of organics, such as OneCert, Vermont Organic Farmers, and Ohio Ecological Food and Farming Assoc., are losing business as a result.

Why would a certifier choose to lose revenue by refusing to certify a hydroponic container operation if the NOP would let them get away with it? The short answer: Because it’s the right thing to do!

There will always be people who make decisions based on profit, while

others reject this temptation because of their commitment to operate ethically.

The *good food movement* has continued to experience the co-opting of its language by inauthentic use of the words “local,” “family farm,” “farmstead,” “artisan,” and even “CSA.”

The original organic stakeholders lobbied to create the National Organic Program to prevent misuse of the word “organic” by designing a mechanism to enforce the OFPA. In the case of hydroponics, the NOP has ignored the law altogether because of pressure from corporate agribusiness.

More and more, the organic label has become an avenue for industrial-scale producers to make higher profits by incorporating conventional inputs, methods, and systems into the organic label, all with the intent of “growing the organic market.”

But this is progress for the sake of progress. Organic enforcement must be strong on the requirements for biodiversity, land stewardship, nutrient cycling, and increasing organic matter in the soil if it is to continue to distinguish itself from conventional farming.

While other production systems certainly have their merits, not all of them should be called ‘organic.’

## Follow Cornucopia’s Updates on Facebook

If you use Facebook to stay up to date with organizations you support, chances are you aren’t actually seeing many items they post in their timeline due to changes Facebook has quietly made.

Organizations on Facebook are now routinely filtered out of your newsfeed, with only a small fraction of their posts ever making it to you. But you can fix this!

You can easily opt to receive all of Cornucopia’s updates.



The next time you are signed into Facebook, visit Cornucopia’s page. Follow these simple instructions:

- Click the “Following” button
- Select “See First”
- Ensure notifications are “On”

You can do this for all of the organizations you like on Facebook and never miss a live video or a chance to comment, like, and share posts again.

Not on Facebook? Don’t worry! Our bi-weekly email newsletter is the best way to stay current with The Cornucopia Institute.

# Uncharted Waters

## Will the Trump/Perdue USDA Defend or Kill Organics?

BY MARK KASTEL

President-elect Trump named former Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue as his pick to head up what President Lincoln called “the People’s Department”—the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Perdue (no relation to the giant Perdue poultry company) holds a doctorate in veterinary medicine, grew up on a farm, and ran a small fertilizer business before running for elected office. When he left the governor’s office in 2011, Perdue’s agricultural involvement shifted to ownership in crop export companies, farm transportation, and grain/feed processing.

During his political career he accepted \$328,000 in campaign donations from agribusiness interests according to published reports.

Like outgoing Secretary Vilsack, who was named biotechnology Governor of the year when he was the chief executive in Iowa, Mr. Purdue received the same recognition from the industry.

Illustrating the bipartisan nature of leadership at the USDA and the power of the agribusiness and biotechnology lobbies, Mr. Vilsack threw his support behind Purdue after his nomination was announced.

Perdue’s perspective on organic food and agriculture is a mystery; he has never publicly spoken about it.

During his campaign, President-elect Trump expressed his disdain for federal regulations and vowed to relieve regulatory burden on businesses. So how will this apply to the National Organic Program (NOP) at the USDA?

The NOP was established by an act of Congress, the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. The organic community—farmers and consumers



—actually asked Congress for strict regulation. We wanted the organic label to mean something!

Ever since, large agribusiness, agrochemical, and biotechnology interests like Monsanto, have been doing their best to discredit organics and have appealed to politicians to pull the plug.

Now that \$40 billion a year is at stake, the industry lobby group, Organic Trade Association (OTA), and their powerful members have done their best to expand and weaken the working definition of organic.

Which powerful lobbying faction in Washington will win out? Or will the swamp truly be drained at the NOP?

During its final days, the Obama administration published two exceedingly controversial rulemaking initiatives as gifts to the OTA and business lobby.

First, over the objection of certified organic farmers, they have paved the path for a proposal from corporate lobbyists to tax farmers and other participants in the organic industry to pay for promotion and research (the organic checkoff).

Then, after a years-long delay, the USDA published an anemic rule, purportedly improving organic animal welfare. But even that is too

much for the largest corporate factory livestock operators. Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts told the Associated Press that he will work with President Trump to reverse the rule.

And speaking of Congress, the most conservative group of lawmakers in the legislative wing, the Freedom Caucus, has called for eliminating the National Organic Program altogether.

Cornucopia will continue to carefully monitor and report on the agency’s activities and engage with the new Trump/Perdue administration in an attempt to:

1. Spark vigorous enforcement, cracking down on confinement of organic dairy cows, beef cattle, laying hens, and other livestock in industrial settings. Lack of enforcement has disadvantaged ethical family farmers and betrayed consumer trust.

2. Seek a vigorous investigation, and ongoing oversight, of vast amounts of organic animal feed and food ingredients being shipped to the U.S. from China and other non-reputable sources.

3. Reverse the arbitrary and capricious power grab (subject of federal lawsuits) that have undermined the authority of the National Organic Standards Board, set by Congress to buffer organic regulations from corporate corruption.

Cornucopia is adamantly nonpartisan, supported by a diverse membership. We all unite in the conviction that shifting to ecological agricultural practices and eating the very best food pays dividends for our families and society as a whole.

However this new administration shakes out, please be assured that The Cornucopia Institute will be there to protect and defend the integrity of the organic seal.

# Welcome to John Ikerd and Frank Nilsen

**E**steemed agricultural economist and professor John Ikerd has joined Cornucopia's policy advisory panel.

Raised on a small dairy farm in Missouri, Ikerd's lifetime of scholarship focused first on neoclassical economics before taking a radical departure to develop the field of sustainable economics. His research, theory, and practice on agriculture in the context of economic, social, and environmental relationships is pioneering and influential.

As an Extension agricultural economist during the farm crisis of the 1980s, Ikerd experienced first-hand the failures of the policies he had been advocating to farmers, which led him to what he calls a "conversion" in his work.

Ikerd has spent the past thirty years focused on finding a sustainable solution that keeps family-scale farms viable while caring for the long-term health of farmland and rural communities. Since his retirement from the faculty at the University of Missouri in 2000, he continues to develop collaborations around "deep sustainability" and its relationship with agriculture.

Deep sustainability reintroduces the concept of "purpose" (including relationships, as well as moral and ethical beliefs) as a way of reorienting economics,



and agriculture, beyond efficiency and substitution. Ikerd has written six books on sustainable agriculture and economics, including *The Essentials of Economic Sustainability* (Kumarian Press, 2012). Cornucopia is delighted by his willingness to share his decades of experience and wisdom with the organization.

Ikerd fills the seat on Cornucopia's policy panel left by organic dairyman Tony Azevedo. Azevedo's was the first certified organic farm in California's San Joaquin Valley, and he was instrumental in creating the pasture rule for organic livestock. Cornucopia thanks Azevedo for his years of service to the organization and for his work upholding organic integrity at the national level.



**C**ornucopia is pleased to welcome Frank Nilsen as website administrator. Nilsen's business, EFN Web, specializes in website development and maintenance for small businesses and organizations like Cornucopia. He will be handling the more complex technical aspects of Cornucopia's website.

Longtime Cornucopia web administrator Jeremy Vossman, of Papertree Designs, provided admirable support for Cornucopia.org since its inception 10 years ago; we wish him well in his future endeavors.

## USDA Taking Comments on Organic Checkoff

**T**he Organic Trade Association's (OTA) push for an organic checkoff is open for comment. The scheme, advocated by the industry's largest lobby group, would establish a mandatory tax on farmers, food processors, distributors, retailers, and importers engaged in organic commerce.

The estimated \$30 million in annual revenue would be earmarked for research and promotion (minus considerable administration costs) of organic commodities.

Many farmers are familiar with checkoffs from conventional farming (i.e., "Got Milk" and "The Incredible Edible Egg" campaigns). Almost uniformly, farmers view checkoffs as a tax from which they realize little benefit.

Virtually all organizations with organic farmer members are opposing the organic checkoff, including

the Organic Seed Growers and Trade Association, the Northeast and Western Organic Dairy Producers Alliances, OFARM, most Northeast Organic Farming Association chapters, and Cornucopia.

Mark A. Kastel, Cornucopia's senior farm policy analyst, says "Powerful corporate interests are pushing this hard and farmers know that other checkoffs have all too often been little more than economic Robin Hood-in-reverse programs."

The deadline for public comments is March 20. To submit yours, go to <http://bit.ly/2k447hl>, or mail comments to: Promotion & Economics Div.,

Specialty Crops, AMS, USDA; 1400 Independence Ave. SW, Rm 1406-S, Stop 0244; Washington, D.C. 20250-0244.





# THE CORNUCOPIA FARMER PROFILE

## Avant-Grain

### Walking Through the Fields of Change

BY RACHEL ZEGERIUS

**F**or Kansas grain producer Oren Holle, the intention to farm was early and lasting. “When I was in high school, only one thing was clear in my mind about my future,” says Holle. “I would be a farmer.”

A fifth-generation grower, Oren helped his father manage herds of dairy and beef cattle, grain crops, laying hens, and pastured hogs. Those days, agrarian traditions tended towards more sustainable and socially just local food systems.

Reflecting, Holle recalls how this diversified, ecologically based approach to farming began to change in the late 60’s. The route trucks quit running in rural northern Kansas and milk processing started going the way of bulk tanks. Holle recounts his own decree; he intended to be married, but not to a herd of Holsteins.

Inheriting the family business, Oren and his brother, Leland, retrenched the farm, turning it into a successful certified organic grain operation. Their yields of wheat, corn, soybeans, oats, and alfalfa fed their own beef cattle, and were sold on the larger market, supporting other organic livestock producers.

In the early 90’s, transitioning to organics was not the path of least resistance for a crop farmer. Organic grains did not command the premiums that they do in today’s market, and the policies and practices surrounding organic growing were still taking shape.

But Holle recalls, “It was clear that the new technologies of that time were a band-aid approach. The problems of insect and weed pressures were not being solved by the emerging technologies in agriculture, so we chose to go a different route.”

Transitioning to organic came naturally to the Holle family; they

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had always been intimately connected to the whole farm ecosystem, carefully observing their footprint on the land each year. The shift was made easier by the presence of innovative organic farmers in their community, passionate about sharing their experiences and willing to mentor.

Holle remembers a late summer afternoon visiting John Vogelsberg. That sunny day, Vogelsberg was cultivating his organic corn crop. “He shut down the whole operation to spend the afternoon with me talking about his passion for sustainable agriculture,” he recalls.

This was a turning point for Holle—a viable alternative was within reach. More than just a fad, organic farming offered an economic opportunity to cut input costs, while providing greater ecosystem services and other benefits to his rural community.

Over time, Holle became deeply rooted in the organic movement. Not only did he build his own farming interests but, through cooperation and collaboration, Holle contributed greatly to regional, national, and even international organic grain markets.

From his early involvement in the National Farmers Organization and Kansas Organic Producers, to his enduring leadership at Organic Farmers’

Agency for Relationship Marketing (OFARM), Holle has helped develop these markets by bringing needed pricing and marketing information to organic producer groups and establishing long-term relationships among farmers who support true organic principles.

Today, Holle has scaled back his beef cattle operation and manages 155 acres of certified organic grains. He is a fierce advocate for maintaining the integrity of the organic label, currently advancing the resistance against the organic checkoff and working to hold the National Organic Program (NOP) accountable to overseeing imported ‘organic’ grains.

Holle and the network of family farmers who have worked hard to develop a thriving organic grain market have significant concerns regarding the quality of imported grains. Some are disgusted with the NOP, its lack of an auditing trail and process for confirming production sources. Holle notes, “There are two parts to that. One, we seriously question whether they are doing the job they have the power to do. And, secondly, whether they have the power to do the job that they need to do.”

Imports are driving down the market prices of domestically produced organic grains, demand pushed by the industrialization of organic production.

Research into the integrity of these organic products is lacking and, for some transactions, it’s questionable whether the grain is even organic to begin with. Organic pioneers like Oren Holle, who have worked hard to provide the highest quality food available, deserve a level playing field.

**Oren Holle Farm  
Bremen, Kansas**





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

## Lawsuits Grind Forward

Given their pace and expense, lawsuits have never been the first choice for problem solving by Cornucopia. However, in some instances, no other options remain.



• Cornucopia is awaiting a decision from a federal judge regarding agribusiness executives appointed by the USDA to seats Congress reserved for farmers on the National Organic Standards Board.

• Cornucopia and 14 other stakeholders will present final arguments to a judge this spring concerning arbitrary, unilateral changes made by the USDA to ease the use of synthetics in organics.

• Cornucopia is seeking transparency in USDA decision-making with 10 Freedom of Information Act lawsuits, spurred by the gross, systematic withholding of public documents.

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## Support Authentic Organic

Cornucopia Scorecards Help You Choose the Best



**H**ave you ever stood in front of an egg or milk case and wondered which to buy? If you're lucky, you might have several organic options to choose from, but often the only way to differentiate between them is the packaging or the price.

But there is a difference between organic brands—that's why we do the research to determine which organic brands are truly upholding the spirit and the law of organic food and farming.

Cornucopia shares this research with you in the form of reports and scorecards. Reports provide detailed information on the criteria that make for exceptional organic production (i.e., Are the cows truly out on pasture?). The related scorecards rank brands and farms to help you easily find the best food from authentic organic farms and producers.

You can use Cornucopia scorecards when shopping for:

- Organic Eggs
- Organic Dairy (milk, butter, cheese)
- Organic Soy Foods (tofu, tempeh)
- Organic and Natural Yogurt
- Organic and Natural Breakfast Cereals

For Spring 2017: Cornucopia's scorecards have been completely redesigned to make it much easier to use them while you're shopping. We've incorporated feedback from you to make this new design very user-friendly. You can access the scorecards right from your cell phone, or you can print any one of them to take with you when you shop.

We've done the legwork so you don't have to. Find out which brands are going beyond organic, and which make a mockery of the organic label, at [Cornucopia.org/scorecards](http://Cornucopia.org/scorecards).