

THE CULTIVATOR

NEWS FROM THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE

SPRING 2021

Building Bridges

The Cornucopia Institute’s new executive director strengthens watchdog role

A pile of scratched notes and numbers shadows the coffee-stained seed catalogs, patiently waiting for the February weekend when Melody Morrell can lose herself in their beautifully illustrated depictions of wild foods, medicinal herbs, and permaculture perennials. “It’s not that I have a green thumb,” she says. “It’s that I’m dedicated to the place that I live, the land.”

Following the patterns of the soil and the sun, watching the water lay claim to low spots, Morrell has planted over 200 species of native plants on the piece of land she lovingly tends in East Central Minnesota.

Observing and listening to the landscape—it’s the same approach Morrell uses as she steps into her new role as executive director. Well suited to lead, Morrell also brings the main ingredient that makes Cornucopia an effective watchdog—integrity.

Having earned the trust of many, Morrell continues to reach out to stakeholders across the organic movement, building bridges among consumers, ethical organic brands, and wholesale buyers to reclaim economic justice in the organic marketplace.

“The organic label is critical to the evolving food system and climate. It is a foundation. We are aware of the cracks in this foundation—a troubling level and array of



certifier disagreement, an anemic enforcement arm of the National Organic Program, and real questions about the clarity of the Organic Foods Production Act. And still, the label offers us more assurances than any other when we cannot know our farmer,” Morrell explains.

Under Morrell’s leadership, Cornucopia will incorporate new technologies into industry investigations and deepen policy efforts, strengthening the organization’s position as a trusted ally and a catalyst for meaningful change.

Emerging from months of planning with a stronger voice, clearer strategy, and more resolute focus—Cornucopia will continue pointing to authentic

organic farms, helping community members, co-ops, and natural food stores find and support farms and products they can trust, while giving our supporters more concrete ways to step into the role of food system advocate.

Abundance requires stewardship and deep attention. Morrell remembers the spring when she planted black elder canes, which she had never seen on the property before.

The next year, she was amazed to see wild varieties of the species (*Sambucus nigra*) popping up nearby. From the soil to the work of Cornucopia, Morrell is passionate about nourishing the conditions for growth.

Organic Policy Watch

Pursuing a rulebook for the common good

The Cornucopia Institute is focused on community resilience; access to clean, nutrient-dense food; and supporting the farmers who produce organic food and contribute to the health of the planet.

But there's no rulebook for the common good. Corporations consistently erode the boundaries of organic regulations, hurting authentic organic farmers who have suffered the consequences of a stagnant regulatory arena for over a decade.

Cornucopia will scrutinize the following issues as they develop under the new administration, pushing for more movement in organic policy in the coming years.

Organic Fraud

The Agricultural Marketing Service released the Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) draft rule last year in response to ongoing fraud in the organic sector. The premiums paid for certified organic goods are attractive to bad actors. Investigating fraud is complicated by the involvement of organized crime, international trade agreements, intergovernmental relations, and a lack of interdepartmental cooperation within the US government.

The National Organic Program (NOP) began coordinating with Customs and Border Protection in 2020 and implemented the Automated Certificate for Trade to help trace the organic integrity of organic goods in the marketplace.

The extraordinarily low prices of questionable imported organic grain that undergird the cheapest organic livestock and poultry production have upended the domestic organic grain markets. More work is required to make SOE effective and enforceable.



PHOTO COURTESY OF COMMON GOOD FARM

Using moveable houses with portable fencing, Common Good Farm (Lancaster County, Nebraska) rotates its chickens throughout the pastures of its diversified, certified organic operation. The chickens and their appetite for grasshoppers provide critical pest control.

Organic Dairy

On industrialized organic dairies, scofflaws have long flouted existing “origin of livestock” rules, continuously transitioning conventional animals into production despite the fact that the organic standards intended that all organic livestock would be organic from birth (after an allowable one-time transition to organic).

A stronger Origin of Livestock Rule has been tied up in a quagmire for over a decade. Congress has demanded the NOP finalize the rule—twice. Instead, in October 2020, the NOP announced vague plans to overhaul it.

As Cornucopia awaits the new proposed regulations, it has joined more than 100 organic organizations and 200 organic farmers in a letter imploring the NOP to finalize a long-overdue Origin of Livestock Rule. Meanwhile, we continue our investigative work to expose the most notorious industrial “organic” dairy (often found in private label

brands), while giving consumers tools to purchase from brands dedicated to high-bar organic principles. Cornucopia’s recent milk plant code Action Alert reached more than 12,000 good food advocates, while our dairy scorecard was viewed nearly 360,000 times last year.

Animal Welfare

Many also hope to see the re-emergence of the previously withdrawn Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices (OLPP) Rule. The OLPP, which had nearly universal support, would have updated the livestock standards to require legitimate outdoor access for egg-laying hens and poultry and required other animal welfare-centered changes that would help align the organic regulations with consumer expectations.

With ongoing lawsuits challenging the withdrawal of the OLPP, we may see some movement in this rulemaking in the next few years.



The Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices Rule would have threatened the very existence of factory organic egg producers like Herbruck's Green Meadows Organics (Saranac, Michigan).

If the OLPP is reintroduced, Cornucopia plans to advocate for a stronger law that would ensure even better benchmarks for animal welfare.

Soilless Production

Hydroponic systems, as well as container systems where plants are grown in inert media and fed additives dissolved in water, are incompatible with legitimate organic production.

These factory farms rely on technological infrastructure and simple input substitution to produce inexpensive, “spray-free” fruits and vegetables. Their cheap, “organic” produce drives down the market price for authentic organic produce grown in carefully stewarded soil by farmers who are dedicated to continuous improvement of the land.

When farmers encourage soil health and biodiversity, as was intended in the organic law and regulations, wide-ranging benefits to their communities and local environments follow.

Healthy soils recycle nutrients, sequester carbon, retain water, and assist with other important ecosystem services. Without marketplace transparency, consumers may not realize the difference in the practices used to grow their produce.

A Center for Food Safety lawsuit challenged the USDA’s decision allowing the certification of hydroponic operations. The lawsuit claims that hydroponic operations violate organic standards for failing to build healthy soils. Without significant action in the courts, hydroponic production will continue to be allowed under the organic label.

In the year ahead, Cornucopia will engage in market research, working internally and with volunteer consumer advocates to gather data about which organic brands in the grocery store source their produce from hydroponic operations. Our updated Hydroponic Buyer’s Guide will point out hydroponically grown brands of organic berries, cucumbers, and tomatoes for consumers and wholesale buyers to avoid.

We will also launch the Living Soil Campaign, including action alerts, issue articles, and farmer spotlights to support farms and production practices that encourage biodiversity, soil health, and carbon sequestration.

Native Ecosystems

In 2018, the National Organic Standards Board took up the issue of protecting native ecosystems.

It recommended adding regulatory language that would require farmers pursuing organic certification for a site that qualifies as a native ecosystem to wait 10 years from the time the land is first converted to agriculture. Cornucopia continues to urge the NOP to enact that recommendation.

In the absence of this language, wild ecosystems can be immediately put into organic production, without the customary three-year transition period, because prohibited chemicals have never been applied to the land.

“This is a perverse incentive,” says Marie Burcham, JD, Cornucopia’s director of policy. “It does not make sense for organic to contribute to the loss of high-value ecosystems.”


Conservation of wild ecosystems is critical, as habitat loss is the single most pervasive threat to wildlife and native plant life. Healthy wild ecosystems also sequester more carbon, over many more years, than agricultural land. The organic label is built on the spirit of “do no harm,” yet the allure of pristine land persists.

Organic Farm Aid

In light of continued market stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Cornucopia is advocating for policy improvements to the Organic Certification Cost Share Program. In August 2020, the USDA’s Farm Service Agency announced reduced reimbursement rates for the program, which helps organic farmers recoup some of their certification costs. This change hobbles community-scale farmers that rely on these programs.

In 2021 and beyond, Cornucopia will identify high-leverage issues where action and impact align, engaging good food advocates to strengthen their voices and their agency to protect organic.

Policy is a long game. Contact us today about protecting the future of organic with a legacy gift.



The Price We Pay

Considering the true cost of industrial beef

BY MARIE BURCHAM, JD

The environmental impact of beef production may be the thorniest topic discussed in food circles today. Conflicting messaging only complicates matters. One way to weigh the implications of your own steak or burger is to consider the hidden ingredients of food production.

A farm or ranch “input” is defined as *all the resources* used in production. It’s a long list of chemicals, equipment, feed, seed, and energy. Inputs may also include vaccinations and other medications used by livestock producers, as well as soil amendments such as compost or lime. Most of these agricultural inputs are purchased from outside sources.

The highly concentrated machine of industrialized agriculture relies on chemical inputs like fertilizers, pesticides, and antibiotics to pump out mass quantities of “cheap” food. US industrialized farms also receive millions in subsidies, artificially inflating unsustainable food production.

Without acknowledging the costs to human and environmental health, industrialized beef production seems cheaper than authentic organic beef production and therefore more sustainable in terms of pounds of food produced per acre.

Reality is a bit tougher to digest. Industrial beef is one of the costliest

foods in terms of environmental impact. These farms consume significantly more inputs—in both quantity and volume—than smaller, diversified operations.

Take the feed inputs alone: Most cattle in the US are finished on feedlots, where they are fed conventional grains, soy, other

application, impacting the health of the living soil, water, and air.

Because the majority of feed is coming from somewhere else, factory farm-generated trucking and shipping racks up enormous fossil fuel emission costs that must be paid by all of us.

The food produced by industrial beef operations remains cheap

because the communities and ecosystems in which they operate pick up the rest of the tab.

There are grave implications beyond environmental health, too. Factory beef operations rely on low-grade antibiotics, and use and abuse clean water, both on-site and where the agricultural feed is grown.

Because more animals are concentrated into smaller areas, the land resources occupied by factory farms seem smaller.

But *land* cannot be simplified to feeding pens alone. The issue of land use includes the land where feed is grown, land and waters affected by pollution from runoff, and even land occupied by office buildings.

How do the inputs compare on an authentic beef operation? The difference is striking.

Consider Cornucopia’s definition of “authentic organic beef.” Authentic organic producers use methods that protect the environment, public health, human communities, and animal welfare, all while subscribing to the motto of “continuous improvement.”



ADOBE STOCK IMAGE

Here’s what the packaging won’t tell you: Food produced by industrial beef operations remains cheap because the communities and ecosystems in which they operate pick up the rest of the tab.

concentrated feeds, and even waste products from other industries.

The majority of the concentrated feed (corn, soy, and other grains) is federally subsidized, allowing producers to buy grains below market prices.

All of this feed—including the hay and silage—is grown on distant farmland drenched in pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. Those same pesticides and fertilizers wreak compounding environmental effects, both in energy use and pollution, during their manufacture and

Authentic organic producers always exceed the minimum standards set by the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 and the organic regulations.

Sustainable animal production provides inputs and manages outputs in a self-contained cycle. The stored feed (hay, baleage, and grain) used by most authentic beef producers is produced on-site, and is typically of higher quality than shipped-in feed.

Higher-quality grass in the pastures and hay in the barn provide the cattle

more energy without requiring further expense or energy inputs.

What's more, authentic organic beef producers are often diversified. A diversified and grass-based operation can grow all the feed cattle require, while contributing ecosystem benefits and economic resilience due to a diversity of crops and livestock.

Proper grazing management contributes to, rather than depletes, soil quality, clean water, biodiversity, and other ecosystem services.

This closed-loop system has benefits beyond sustainability. Cattle typically thrive in organic pasture-based systems that allow them to express their natural behaviors daily, making medical treatments frequently unnecessary.

Consider supporting both the producers and policymakers who champion sustainable practices. After all, given the externalized costs, risks, and benefits, is industrial beef really cheaper?

Banking Cash and Carbon with Cows

BY HELEN KEES

This past year at Wheatfield Hill Organics in Durand, Wisconsin, 45 cows and their calves spent five months working on climate change. From May to October, this herd performed a simple act: They grazed certified organic pastures that provided 100% of their diet.

This act provided economic support and security to the farm family hosting them, as evidenced by calf weights of 600 pounds at October weaning and fleshy, high-yielding cows at slaughter.

Another benefit of utilizing pasturing is that atmospheric carbon dioxide, a major component in climate change, is taken in through the plants' leaves. Over time, this carbon is moved into the soil.

In the springtime, grasses and other plants in the pasture experience a spurt of vegetative growth and then, if not harvested, essentially cease cell division and stagnate in a senescent, or mature, stage. Through grazing, the cows grant the pasture a "perpetual fountain of youth," keeping the plants actively growing, while enabling carbon sequestration in the soil.



PHOTO BY CORNUCOPIA'S GAYLE NIELSEN

Helen Kees is co-owner and operator of Wheatfield Hill Organics and vice president of the board of directors at The Cornucopia Institute.

What do the cows eat during the seven months when pastures are dormant? Wheatfield boasts a closed-loop system, producing all other feed inputs for the cows—minus supplemental salt, mineral, vitamins, and kelp—on farm.

During the same season cows are grazing pastures, while evenly spreading their own manure and maintaining biodiverse plant communities, Wheatfield farmers are busy harvesting alfalfa haylage bales from other fields. Three to four times over the course of the growing season, they

mechanically simulate the effect of cattle grazing in their pastures. Last year, the cows consumed 296 of these 2,000-pound bales during the off-season.

Keeping inputs close to home has both local and global benefits. Over the course of 2020, 45 cows fulfilled 100% of their dietary needs with grasses and legumes grown on soil that was not disturbed by tillage. Undisturbed soil, covered with growing plants, sequesters carbon. Pasturing cattle during the growing season and feeding perennial forages during the off-season

enable carbon to be safely stored in the soil bank.

The marketplace determines whether these practices flourish. Your purchase of certified organic, grass-fed beef sustains an intricate and vibrant agricultural system that helps heal, rather than harm, the Earth.

Nourishing Community

Building capacity for change at Kalamazoo People's Food Co-op

An iconic mural in downtown Kalamazoo paints the picture of community: food, farming, music, intergenerational work and play. The artist was commissioned to create a scene that would proudly display the vision and values of the People's Food Co-op (PFC), housed behind that brick and mortar canvas on Burdick Street for 37 years. More than a decade later, with a new facade and a deeper purpose, the co-op still wears its heart on its sleeve.

Cornucopia's Rachel Zegerius recently caught up with longtime, and very busy, PFC General Manager Chris Dilley to learn more about this valuable treasure in her hometown.

What has changed most in your years as general manager of PFC?

The focus on local food in the community, and the broader focus on local and organic food, has ballooned. Programs and infrastructure have developed over time: Fair Food Matters (an experiential education garden program for youth) and the Can-Do Kitchen (an incubator providing commercial kitchen space), along with the strong backbone that is the Kalamazoo Farmers Market, have entrenched local food as part of the local culture here.

How has this local food movement impacted the co-op?

We expanded from a 700-square-foot retail space on Burdick Street (the mural is still there!) to our now 6,000-square-foot building, with dreams of expanding more.

Are co-op shoppers still interested in the source of their food?

Very! Our local purchasing increased from 24% in 2019 to nearly 30% in 2020. That represents an additional \$120,000 spent here in the community in support of local producers just last year.



Chris Dilley coordinated a purchasing program that generated nearly \$500,000 for local producers last year, a six-fold increase since he started at the co-op in 2003.

What sets the co-op apart from other natural grocers?

Owned by its members and governed by a board of directors, PFC is values-driven. All of the decisions we make—from the products on the shelves to how we engage in the community—are guided by our goals to nourish equity and resilience. One example of this: In 2010, when we were considering the location of our new store, we decided to build on Harrison Street, in an economically and racially diverse neighborhood. With so much to learn about how to address inequity, choosing this location was our first step to embrace diversity as a strength, allegorical to biodiversity, to help create stronger social systems.

Please tell me more about the work you have done to address inequity and dismantle systemic racism.

Ten years ago, we began training an Anti-racism Transformation Team. It's a leadership body with the role of creating an anti-oppressive culture within the co-op. Team members define the pinch points that are impeding true equity from happening

and help us do the work to address those. It's structural and systemic work, establishing policy and procedures, but also building the capacity of individuals and the group to understand how we've all internalized oppression.

What inspires you the most about the future of the co-op?

I'm most excited about working collectively as a community to address the issues of our time—including the climate crisis. Co-ops have systems in place to share experience and knowledge. For example, National Co-op Grocers' Co+efficient Program offers a common framework for co-ops to measure their sustainability baseline, analyze strengths and opportunities, and improve sustainability results. I want to see this commitment to local systems, sustainability, and "cooperatism" continue to grow, building the capacity of our community to work together and align across different mindsets and values systems. I think that's the potential of cooperatives.

A Legacy of Stewardship

Preserving Gullah farming traditions and food culture in South Carolina

STORY AND PHOTO BY LEEANN CHISOLM MORRISSETTE

I met Sara' Reynolds Green, lovingly referred to as "Mama Sara'," and her husband Bill when I was commissioned to interview them for The Southeastern African American Farmers' Organic Network (SAAFON) docuseries, *With These Hands*.

Farmers, educators, business owners, community leaders—so many titles can be given to these stewards of the Lowcountry, but what I found to be most riveting was their tireless commitment to feeding and cultivating their community.

Mama Sara' is the steward of Marshview Community Organic Farm, situated on five acres of ancestral land in St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

Bill Green is the chef and owner of Gullah Grub, a community staple and attraction on the Sea Island that uses produce from Marshview to create delectable, authentic Gullah recipes.

In 1989, Mama Sara' returned home to St. Helena Island, where she discovered a lack of viable food choices. "I couldn't find any decent organic vegetables. So I said, *I guess I'm gonna start growing my own.*"

The Greens trace their lineage to the Gullah people of coastal Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas, who hold the rich cultural tradition of their West and Central African ancestors.

Growing organic is a part of preserving traditional Gullah agricultural practices, along with eating only local, in-season foods, such as the oysters they harvest from September through December.

At the heart of Gullah tradition is a spirit of resiliency. Despite generations of erasure, racism, and land loss, it is only with toil, grace, and the curiosity of local

youth that these traditions live on in St. Helena Island.

Mama Sara's efforts to engage those younger generations sparked the passion that led to the birth of Marshview Community Organic Farm, which became the first certified organic farm in St. Helena.

Mama Sara's mission: Teach them to be stewards of the land. The "Young Farmers of the Lowcountry," ages 10 to 18, run the farm under the guidance of advisors, splitting their time between learning to cultivate food from seed and cooking that food with Bill Green at Gullah Grub.

While they've received much local support and even national acclaim, Marshview touts SAAFON as a reason for much of their early success.

The Black-led organization cultivates deep relationships with Black farmers throughout the Southeastern United States to provide hands-on work, infrastructure, resources, and conditions and spaces to support knowledge sharing and connectivity among farmers.

SAAFON, Mama Sara' says, is the reason they started their CSA program. "It's the best thing that I could have done. It brought the people to the farm."

Gullah Grub closed its doors this past year due to COVID-19, but the couple continues to feed their neighbors with produce from the farm, having transformed their industrial kitchen into a hot-meal program aimed at easing widespread food insecurity in their community.

Since the program's inception in April 2020, the Greens have provided over 36,000 nutritious meals. This is no small feat. Most of their labor is volunteer, although they are able to pay the youth who continue to be involved a small stipend for their time. "Work is worship," Mama Sara' says. "When you give, you receive so much more."

This is resoundingly evident for the Greens, stewards of culture and land, whose service will be felt for generations to come because of their purposeful and loving dedication to their community.



"We want to farm!" responded participants of a youth-focused community beautification project. Mama Sara', pictured here with the Young Farmers of the Lowcountry, listened.



The Cornucopia
Institute

P.O. Box 826
Viroqua, WI 54665

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
US POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 322

Return Service Requested

AS A DONOR OF CORNUCOPIA, YOU ARE A VALUABLE MEMBER OF THE ORGANIC FOOD MOVEMENT. WE ARE PLEASED TO CONTINUE TO BRING YOU QUARTERLY ISSUES OF THE NEWSLETTER AS A BENEFIT OF YOUR SUPPORT.

“I was diagnosed with colitis and my GI told me to go off of dairy, which made my symptoms worse. We tried all the mainstream recommendations (an elimination diet, additional medications, etc.). Then we found the Carrageenan Report from The Cornucopia Institute. It literally changed my life. After only 24 hours of eliminating carrageenan from my diet, my symptoms improved. The Carrageenan Report, complete with shopping list, made it simple for me to switch my shopping choices to avoid the nasty emulsifier. I make Cornucopia a philanthropic priority because it helped me immensely.”

**—Gayle Sudit,
Cornucopia Supporter**

Soil Matters

Below the surface of authentic organic



The Cornucopia Institute is adamant that the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) enforce the required management of the living soil.

Authentic organic farmers are systems thinkers who work to support the interdependence of diverse and abundant soil organisms. They steward helpful fungi and bacteria that engage

in complex subterranean relationships to nourish the plants, reach water, and sequester carbon. These relationships grow strong, resilient plants that are more resistant to disease and insect damage. The harvested crops contain the myriad nutrients and minerals available in healthy soil.

Conversely, industrial conventional growers require only a rudimentary understanding of plant biology and chemical pest control. Grown in monocultures, the plants are sustained entirely by inputs of synthetic fertilizer and pesticides. Soil merely holds the plants in place on these factory farms, so that nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium can be delivered directly to the root system.

Some industrial practices, including the use of fertilizer in place of cover cropping, have wormed their way into certified organic production. Cornucopia is digging into problems of certifier inconsistencies and NOP guidance that fail to ensure the biological management of the soil. Look for our report from the April 2021 National Organic Standards Board Meeting.