

# THE CULTIVATOR

NEWS FROM THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE

WINTER 2021

## We're All Watchdogs

Our Organic Scorecards deliver the intel you need to navigate the marketplace



Have you ever scrutinized a label on the back of a milk carton? Wondered if the pasture on that egg carton is a work of fiction? Paused before throwing ground beef in your cart?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you are a watchdog in the marketplace.

Cornucopia's Organic Scorecards provide a big assist. A defining facet of our work, these research-based tools help consumers identify and find ethical community-scale farms and brands, while exposing factory farm imposters. (Your store-brand milk is one to scrutinize.)

In our recent donor survey, 44% of respondents rated our Organic Scorecards as the most important component of our work. We were

pleased to learn that some of you even use our scorecards to challenge brands that fail to meet Cornucopia's "authentic organic" gold standard. "I don't want to be fooled by companies that claim to be organic but are just doing the bare minimum," remarked one supporter.

This year, we leveraged your gifts and feedback to make that work even stronger. Recent updates to our Organic Scorecards & Buyer's Guides include:

- Our brand new Organic Beef Scorecard ranking more than 175 brands of domestic organic beef sold at retail, used by more than 6,800 people in the past four months
- Updates to the Buyer's Guide to Avoiding Carrageenan in Organic Food

detailing products to avoid, used by more than 77,000 people in the last two years

- Updated scoring criteria for our popular Organic Egg Scorecard, which is getting an overhaul next year
- New brands throughout our scorecard work, with plenty of additions to plant-based beverages (Is your favorite organic brand missing from our Organic Scorecards? Let us know.)

In 2022 Cornucopia will continue to demystify the marketplace, empowering you to make choices that align with your environmental, animal welfare, and human health values. We'll be keeping a close eye on Big Ag, utilizing Google Earth and other technologies to uncover what's really happening on these operations.

### THE UNDERSTORY

Letter from Our Director . . . . . 2  
Q&A with Hanover Co-op Food Stores . . . . 3

From the Policy Desk . . . . . 4  
The Chef's Pick . . . . . 6



# 'You've Got to Start Somewhere'

A letter from Cornucopia's executive director

Dear supporters of Cornucopia,

In a year that restricted travel, Cornucopia expanded its reach with new collaborations and friends.

Thank you for being part of this community and supporting our work with your investments of attention, shared stories, and financial gifts.

Even as we have helped thousands of eaters find the best organic food in the marketplace — what we call *authentic*

*organic* — we have seen a continuous rise in industry consolidation and private investment firms buying organic farmland and brands.

Many of you have asked us to expand our focus into vegetables, fruits, and plant-based foods, and we have heard you! In 2022, we will launch an online tool that will show the relative safety of organic and conventional produce for you and for pollinators.

At the heart of the organic movement is the quest for continuous improvement. We know it's needed. Our soils and water are depleted, industrial livestock farms are being propped up by industry lobbyists and incomplete rules, and native ecosystems continue to be ransacked and repurposed into farmland.

Our “efficient” agricultural system is cranking out food with fewer nutrients and more pesticide residues and heavy metals. I hear my recently departed mother's voice in my ears: *You've got to start somewhere and then work at it a little every day.*

Visit our website to sign up for Cornucopia's eNews and learn more about organic food, and use our Action Alerts to advocate for sustainable, regional food systems and marketplace transparency. Consult our Organic Scorecards to ensure your grocery money makes it into the hands of organic farmers and not Big Ag. Make a gift of any size you can.

Our actions, together, add up. *Start somewhere and work at it a little every day.*

Warmly,



Melody Morrell  
Executive Director

*This year, commit to trying something new from your farmer. Norwich Meadows Farm in Chenango County, New York, specializes in unusual produce, like Tongue of Fire beans and cucamelons. Learn more about the farm on page 6.*

# A Legacy of Local

86-year-old Hanover Co-op stands with dairy farmers

Hanover Co-op Food Stores source \$17 million annually out of the New Hampshire and Vermont local foodsheds. A significant portion of those sales comes from organic dairy.

Cornucopia recently caught up with Allan Reetz, Hanover Co-op's director of public and government affairs, to discuss the role of dairy in the co-op's history and how the local icon continues to support the farmers “who are carrying so much on their shoulders.”

**What brands of certified organic dairy products do you sell?**  
We have been a longtime outlet for Thistle Hill Farm, Strafford Organic Creamery, and Butterworks Farm. Those are three incredible stories. (*All are top-rated dairies on Cornucopia's dairy scorecard.*) It's one thing to say, *I'm going to get you on our shelf*; it's another thing to try to process their payments on farm-friendly terms. Being extra prompt with our payments helps local producers grow.

**What are the biggest barriers to sourcing organic dairy?**  
Distribution. It's among my biggest fears. Consolidation is gobbling up small local and regional distributors. If a farmer launches into organic yogurt and cheese, because they need to diversify to make ends meet, they still need a truck to pick up what's left of their milk. But if all of a sudden

they're hearing, *I'm sorry, you aren't worth it anymore, I can't swing by*, that's a huge worry for our \$88 million co-op. And it's happening.

**What values drive purchasing decisions for dairy products?**  
We were founded in 1936, during the Great Depression, with 17 local families just trying to buy better quality food at fair prices. In our founding doc, it says, ‘it shall be the policy of this consumer club to buy from local merchants as much as is practicable.’ The founders wanted to allow their members to vote with their dollars, but provide information to help them be better educated. As our co-op grew, that's been its centering point. So while I've got Danone yogurt on the shelf, we also have kefir in a glass jar with a dollar deposit that comes from a little farm in New Hampshire.

**Danone (owner of Horizon Organic) abruptly ended contracts with 89 Northeast organic dairy farm families. How has the co-op responded?**  
Early on, an organic famer asked if we were planning on pulling products or boycotting, but we care about these farmers who still have a contract (the farms were given 12 months' notice). When the issue hit, we joined the New England Organic Dairy Task Force. It is our obligation. Co-ops are all about education, communications, and training. And not just for their consumers, but also for employees and for legislators. Access to safe and



healthful food, in good times and in bad, better be an issue of every consumer, every retailer, every distributor. To think otherwise is beyond short-sighted.

**How do you work to change policy?**  
My job is to understand the issue beyond the headline so I can be an advocate for lasting change. And it requires long-term involvement. I did the 2018 Farm Bill fly-ins [to meet lawmakers in DC], but I also knew once the document was signed, we'd still be fighting. And you're fighting until the next one is signed, and then you're fighting on that one to make sure appropriations come through.

**Your Hanover career started in communications. What story did you tell?**  
Dairy is a vibrant part of our economy. It gets a bad rap. But these organic farmers are doing it for us. We've got to fight back with them.

*Above: Dairy headlines a 1984 Hanover newsletter. For 30 years, the co-op held its annual Dairy Day, which started with milking contests on the green.*



# Behind the Scenes of the Policy Desk

An update from Policy Director Marie Burcham, JD

Even though it is not always front and center, policy undergirds Cornucopia’s work. Policies steer legislative outcomes, and we carefully follow the agricultural strategies of each administration.

### Climate Policy

President Biden’s Executive Order, Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, laid out the administration’s plan to mitigate climate change. The order initiated working groups representing multiple federal agencies to consider and, ideally, address the growing climate crisis.

The USDA requested input, and Cornucopia’s comments asserted that organic agriculture already presents an opportunity to mitigate climate change while creating economic, environmental, and health benefits for all.

The USDA should focus on improving and creating programs that encourage conventional farmers to convert their operations to organic production.

Reports from farmers across the country, particularly from the fire-and-drought-embattled West, underscore the promise of organic agriculture: Organic fields and pasture generally retain more water than conventionally farmed soils.

Since the National Organic Program (NOP) and the organic standards already exist, there is enormous potential if the USDA offers additional support. Cornucopia recommended improvements to grant programs, increased funding for conservation lands, and expanded resources for new and existing farmers who use climate-friendly management.

### Origin of Livestock

This year, Cornucopia also offered comments to the NOP regarding the painfully longstanding issue of origin of livestock in organic dairy. The NOP opened – once again – the proposed-but-never-finalized rule from 2015 for public comments while raising a few new questions.

Cornucopia recommended clear language and definitive terms to help move the needed regulation forward as quickly as possible as it may finally prevent the continuous transition of conventional cattle into organic production.

The lack of this regulation has allowed factory farms to gain a foothold in the organic marketplace and fill supermarkets with a glut of organic milk – presenting an inordinately high risk for organic integrity.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HUTCHINSON ORGANIC RANCH

# Why Processors Matter

Small-scale and mobile processing would be a boon to rural communities

In July, the Biden administration issued the Executive Order Promoting Competition in the American Economy, directing the USDA and other federal agencies to develop strategies to improve competition in agricultural markets. Cornucopia responded to the USDA’s request for feedback on meat processing infrastructure.

In order to be sold as organic, livestock must be slaughtered, and the meat processed, at a certified organic plant. However, many

slaughterhouses and processors have been squeezed out of business by massive industrial processing facilities. Those that are left are in high demand and have little incentive to take on organic certification.

When COVID-19 struck, large processors with long supply chains utterly failed, frustrating livestock producers and consumers. But regional food systems were able to adapt. While small processors are efficient and resilient, there are not enough of them.

In a formal comment, Cornucopia asked the USDA to increase grants and funding for organic transition and to update infrastructure and equipment for small processors.

We support grants and incentives for new plants or mobile processors in areas where organic and sustainable farmers need them.

The future viability of authentic organic livestock and poultry production relies on a remedy to the processor shortage.

Our policy team determined that in 2019, less than 1% of all organic dairies provided more than 25% of the organic milk produced in the US. Twenty-two of these mega-dairies operate in arid regions of Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas.

Massive, industrial organic dairies have great power, but far less to lose than the dairy families who provide authentic organic milk from a closed herd on legitimate pasture. Rulemaking and enforcement must consider the risks to these operations and our overall food security.

### Native Ecosystems

As the organic marketplace evolves, so must rulemaking. The conversion of native ecosystems to organic production is a flagrant practice in dire need of sound policy.

Native ecosystems such as wetlands, native grasslands, and rainforests that have experienced little human

*Hutchinson Organic Ranch adapts its practices to the needs of the Nebraska Sandhills — one of the country’s most fragile ecosystems.*

## "In 2019, less than 1% of all organic dairies provided 25% of the organic milk produced in the US."

disruption are increasingly rare in the world. These important habitats, which contain most of the biodiversity on the planet, provide superior ecosystem services that cannot be achieved through cultivation.

A perverse incentive in the organic regulations allows native ecosystems, because they are pesticide free, to be converted to organic agriculture without the required three-year transition period.

In 2018, the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) recommended rulemaking that would protect rare species and help uphold organic integrity. The NOP has yet to take action. Working with partners, including movement leader Wild Farm Alliance, Cornucopia has been pushing for policy to help preserve these dwindling resources.

The NOP has stated it has “no legal authority” to enact protection for

native ecosystems. However, federal agencies are given broad authority over what rules they create, and Cornucopia responded with a detailed legal argument to that effect. Biodiversity and climate health are at stake.

### What’s Next

Both the Origin of Livestock and Strengthening Organic Enforcement Rules are expected to land for public comment in the spring.

The new year may also see the release of a new Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices (OLPP) Rule. If done right, the OLPP will provide an important animal welfare update to the organic standards.

In spite of USDA gridlock and fraud concerns, the organic seal remains the most trustworthy label in the marketplace when we cannot know our farmer.



# The Chef's Pick

New York City’s most memorable meals start in the fields of Norwich Meadows Farm

BY MICHELE MARCHETTI

On a November morning in New York City, the pink-tipped kale was turning heads.

Grown by Norwich Meadows Farm and on display at the city’s famed Union Square Greenmarket, the Brassica was one of many items drawing shoppers accustomed to the farm’s penchant for unusual produce.

Home cooks examined Watermelon, White Daikon, and Bordeaux radishes, as the city’s top chefs gathered larger quantities for first-course salads and ferments.

Directing the flurry of activity was owner Zaid Kurdieh, a Palestinian American who started the farm in 1998 with his wife, Haifa, because they wanted to feed their community — and themselves — the nourishing food they grew up eating.

In Kurdieh’s opinion, grocery store vegetables typically leave much to be desired. Take broccoli. “The organic broccoli is generally smaller than conventional,” he said, holding up one of his stalks. “Synthetic nitrogen pumps up the conventional, but they lack flavor.”

Chef Michael Anthony of Gramercy Tavern is one of many chefs who appreciates the difference. He stocked his home kitchen with produce from the Norwich booth for two years before disclosing his profession and buying for the restaurant. Now there’s an off-menu item at Gramercy featuring Norwich’s produce. (You’ll have to ask Kurdieh for the Arabic word that tells waitstaff you’re in the know.)

Zaid and Haifa are betting that their shared yearning for high-quality produce will continue to sustain their

organic farm, while also benefiting the regional economy. With 170 acres and 180 high tunnels, the farm supplies more than 1,500 vegetable varieties to farmers markets and restaurants from New York City to southwestern and central New York.

Kurdieh certified the farm with only a half acre. He views organic as the correct way, an antidote to the destructive industrial food system. But ethical doesn’t mean easy.

“We always had bugs and pressure, but now you have super bugs and super pressures because of the use of chemicals,” he said.

The Norwich Meadows team is uniquely suited to the challenge. In the farm’s early years, Kurdieh connected with a colleague in Egypt who operated a certified organic farm run by a crew skilled in organic growing practices and high tunnels (structures that provide protection from wind, cold, and pests). He’s been employing workers from Egypt ever since and has helped some of them obtain green cards.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOWNTOWN MAGAZINE/MICHAEL FIEDLER

# Toward Truth and Integrity

Why Park Slope Food Coop supports Cornucopia

Plump Vermont cranberries, Jack Be Little pumpkins, and mini Honeynut squash fill the boxes and bags of member-owners at Brooklyn’s iconic Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC). The crowd-pleasing shelves awash with produce display laminated signs reporting each item’s origin and growing practices. With a commitment to food transparency, PSFC puts idealism into action — in more ways than one.

To broaden their impact, PSFC also invests in organizations aligned with their mission. Joe Holtz, general manager and co-founder of PSFC (in 1973), earmarked the co-op’s first gift to the organization in 2006. “We recognized from the beginning that Cornucopia was trying to keep the whole industry honest,” Holtz says. “It is wonderful that Cornucopia holds people in the industry accountable.”

We are honored to have among our ranks one of the nation’s oldest food co-ops, an organization that has shaped its regional economy. In their own words: “We go for local, but we also try to go for ‘little,’ which allows us to help to sustain

family-owned farms and farming cooperatives throughout our region.” The co-op’s buying practices support people who, in general, are dedicated and conscientious stewards of the land.

Those principles apply to both supply chain management and to community endeavors. The co-op’s longstanding partnership with Cornucopia has had a significant impact on our small-but-mighty organization. Together, we have seeded deeper integrity and trust in food supply, while inspiring shoppers to think critically about their role in the food system.

While no business has been spared by the uncertainty of the past 18 months, Holtz trusts in the resiliency born from the co-op model. During an unpredictable economic time, PSFC increased their investment in Cornucopia this year (marking 16 consecutive years of giving). “Cornucopia’s role in the food system is so valuable for an organization



PHOTO COURTESY OF PARK SLOPE FOOD COOP

like ours who puts integrity and truth about food in the forefront,” Holtz says.

If you’re ever lucky enough to visit PSFC (no shopping allowed unless you’re an owner), thank the co-op for playing such an important role in our community of conscientious eaters and organic advocates. Even better, become a member (enrollment opens again in two weeks) and tell them Cornucopia sent you!

*Pre-pandemic, PSFC boasted 17,000 active members and \$56 million in annual revenue. At this size — selling approximately one case of produce every minute! — the co-op provides a huge boost to the regional economy.*

## Every gift counts — there are many ways to make one!

### Recurring gifts

A sustaining gift from your checking account or credit card (choose monthly, quarterly, or annual) is the easiest and most powerful way to support our work. If you’re already making a recurring gift, thank you! Consider increasing your contribution to grow the watchdog work you rely on.

### Give the gift of knowledge

Make a gift in someone’s name so they

too can read the one-of-a-kind organic food and farming stories found in the *Cultivator*.

### Donor advised funds

A donor advised fund gives you the flexibility to decide how much and how often money is donated to Cornucopia. Call or email for our Tax ID.

### Planned giving

Leave a legacy to the organic food

movement by designating Cornucopia as a beneficiary.

Contact us for more info.

Fill out the enclosed form, call 608-637-8278, email cultivate@cornucopia.org, or head to cornucopia.org/donate/ to donate with any of these giving options.

*Thank you for supporting us. We can’t do this important work without you!*



PO 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.**

## NOSB Watch

---

Updates from the fall National Organic Standards Board meeting:

- Carrageenan was greenlighted for another five years. The NOSB vote came despite the additive's known health impacts and the inability of consumers to reliably identify or avoid it in organic food (since it does not always appear on labels).
- The NOSB voted to prohibit highly soluble sources of ammonia from use in organic production.
- Sodium nitrate extracted from mines in Chile was officially put back on the National List. After years in regulatory limbo, the controversial fertilizer will once again be subject to sunset review. Sodium nitrate cannot meet the high bar for organic inputs, but it is widely used on mono-cropped fields. Cornucopia seeks a ban on this highly soluble form of nitrogen.

Read the full update on our website.

## 2022 Preview

---

Your support makes our work possible. In 2022, we will continue to research, analyze, and demystify the organic marketplace for you. Highlights include:

- **Continued investigations into factory organic**
- **Produce, Pesticide & Pollinator Project**
- **Updated Organic Egg Scorecard**
- **Updated "Who Owns Organic" Infographic**
- **Thorough reviews, formal comments, and reporting of critical rules expected to drop in the spring**

Together, we will turn grave concerns about climate, toxins, and industrialization into actions that help improve our food supply.

As a bold industry watchdog, Cornucopia tells the complete story of how your food is produced and cared for, from regulation to table, to protect the organic marketplace and defend the integrity of the USDA organic label.