

# CULTIVATOR

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News from The Cornucopia Institute

cornucopia.org

Photo Courtesy of Clover Mountain Dairy

## A Win for Authentic Organic Dairy

**Long overdue rule underscores the cost and care of raising organic calves**

For years after they purchased their land, and before they even welcomed their first calf, Virginia and Stacy Thomas of Clover Mountain Dairy contemplated how to thoughtfully steward calves to heifers and onto motherhood, studying old extension magazines and touring dairy farms. One morning during the first grazing season, the couple watched in awe as Buttercup, the cow that officially made them dairy farmers, chewed grass in the April sun while simultaneously nursing her calf Rainy.

Meanwhile, through a loophole in the law, the industrial organic mega-dairies dominating the market have been able to skirt this process altogether by purchasing and “converting” animals raised on antibiotics and pesticide-sprayed, GMO feed.

This gamesmanship is finally getting flagged. After years of pressure from Cornucopia and its colleagues, USDA’s final rule on Origin of Livestock goes into effect this June (with a compliance date of April 2023).

“We have all spent far too long pressing USDA to stop this conveyor belt of conventional animals entering ‘organic’ dairies,” says Cornucopia Policy Director



*The small herd of Clover Mountain Dairy Jersey cows is moved daily on pasture. Their milk is vat pasteurized and bottled on site. With help from a grant from PCC Community Markets, Clover Mountain is building a cave for its new line of cheeses.*

Marie Burcham, JD. “We are cautiously optimistic that this rule will get the job done, if it’s enforced.”

Along with their cheap milk, “organic” mega-dairies sell you a narrative of “sustainable” or “regenerative farming” that will never live up to authentic organic dairy production.

At Clover Mountain, calves are not separated from their mommas. It’s a practice that plenty of people questioned, saying it would cost them money and hassle. But the small certified organic dairy in Northeast Washington is thriving,

and the health of the herd is undeniable. The calves run with the cows on pasture, learning from their elders by mimicking their behaviors.

Together, they are teaching the farmers the value of getting out of nature’s way.

**Authentic organic dairy production provides benefits for soil, human, and environmental health. Support these options by choosing local organic dairy or using our Organic Dairy Scorecard. Learn more about the organic dairy crisis at [tinyurl.com/ogdairy\\_crisis](https://tinyurl.com/ogdairy_crisis).**



# Remaining Vigilant

## A letter from Cornucopia's executive director

Dear supporters of Cornucopia,

Our efforts – together – are paying off! Thanks to our collective voices, the USDA has finally given us a fair and final Origin of Livestock Rule for organic dairy. We are thrilled to report this huge win for the organic movement in the fight against industrialization.

We remain vigilant. “Organic” mega-dairies have built empires on regulatory loopholes. Transforming conventional calves into certified organic cows for more than a decade has fortified their stronghold. They have plunged the price of organic milk below the cost of authentic production, eviscerating some of the best organic dairies in the US.

Cornucopia's Organic Dairy Scorecard helps you support people over profits. It champions farmers who care for the soil, water, and animals who actually fill their bellies with fresh grass. Farmers who can usher in a brighter, more nourishing future for all of us. Your local, organic farmer can thrive with your support, and your community will be better for it.

Do you know anyone with fire in the belly for these values? We are looking for experienced board members, particularly those with a finger on the pulse of consumer interests. Reach out at: [cultivate@cornucopia.org](mailto:cultivate@cornucopia.org).

We are honored to name Ted LeBow our newest board treasurer. His deep passion for community-scale farms is accompanied by a sharp wit and loads of practical advice.



*Viroqua Food Co+op staff provided feedback on an early version of our redesign.*

Finally, I hope you like the clean new design of the *Cultivator*. We have elevated our newsletter to better share stories with our diverse and dedicated donors — your generous gifts fund our investigations and analysis. (Supply chain issues stopped us from printing our redesigned envelopes for this issue, so you will find a standard envelope and donor card inside.)

As part of the new design, we are including a letter to Costco, asking this heavyweight to remove carrageenan from their organic products. Please sign and mail it back to us, even if you don't shop

there. Costco's decisions influence the wider marketplace. If you've already signed, you can share it with a friend.

Every action — commenting to the USDA, signing letters for change, supporting authentic organic farmers, and making a gift to Cornucopia — builds the world we want. Thank you for striving alongside us. You give us hope for the future of food.

In solidarity,

Melody Morell, Executive Director

## Our Newest Board Member

Newly elected board member Ted LeBow of Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania brings decades of experience in farming, business management consulting, and food systems to The Cornucopia Institute.

Ted is the CEO and co-founder of Kitchen Table Consultants (KTC), a national, food and farm business management consulting firm founded in 2009. With a mission to make farm and food businesses profitable for good, KTC has provided advisory services to over 500 farms, food hubs, co-packers, e-commerce companies, direct to consumer food marketers, and nonprofits in 35 states.

# What the Grocery Industry Isn't Telling You

## A conversation with Dr. Phil Howard

*Just a handful of companies control your food. Yes, even your organic food. Cornucopia's director of advocacy and development, Rachel Zegerius, caught up with food system expert Dr. Phil Howard to learn more about the alarming concentration among organic food companies and brands, how these food behemoths gain economic and political power, and what we can do about it.*

### How have mergers and acquisitions shaped organics over the past three to five years?

Some of the biggest firms, having acquired many organic subsidiaries, are now merging and combining with each other. Not just in food processing, but in every sector of the (food) economy. Those big firms do not have the same values: They are very quick to switch suppliers if it's cheaper, to reduce their commitment to organic, to perhaps go behind the scenes to pressure organic policymakers. The ownership boundaries between organic and conventional are getting blurrier.

### How does this consolidation impact the way we experience the grocery store?

It limits our choices, even though there is still the appearance of choice. These big firms have so much power over what goes on the shelves. They have the resources to sell at below cost for years, while also spending an

enormous amount of money on marketing. And they can afford "slotting fees" of up to tens of thousands of dollars just to get in the door at regional stores. In this environment, it's nearly impossible for smaller, values-based companies to break onto supermarket shelves.

### What's the ripple effect on the food system?

Supply chain disruptions, and the resulting shortages at retailers, are revealing the fragility of our food system. As it becomes more and more uniform, particularly for the breeds and seeds we rely on, the system becomes even more vulnerable to climate change and other disruptions. Diversity — one of the values that the mainstream system doesn't support very well — is a prerequisite for resilience.

### What role can consumers play?

Consumer choice can help to rebuild less centralized food

systems. Innovations like food cooperatives and CSAs create cracks in the system. I'm hopeful that some of these innovations will be successful, so we see shorter supply chains where the values of consumers and producers are communicated to each other.

**Cornucopia encourages you to buy local, authentic organic food whenever possible. Stay tuned for an updated release of Dr. Howard's iconic infographic, *Who Owns Organic?*, along with a list of national, independent, organic-only brands to support.**

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*Below Sanu Chhetri collects tea leaves at Singell Tea Garden in Darjeeling, India as part of a long-term trade partnership with employee-owned Equal Exchange. It is difficult to build capital, vision, culture, and economic viability while remaining on mission. There are relatively few values-driven brands in the world — and we need them.*

Photo Courtesy of Equal Exchange





*At Oatman Flats Ranch in Gila Bend, Arizona, Dax Hansen and his team combine traditional knowledge with agro-ecological principles to restore fertility on a family farm that once raised horses and grew cotton. The creation of topsoil, soil structure, biological activity, moisture retention, and biodiversity trump yield. “Our first crop is soil,” Hansen says. Image by “Kiss the Ground.”*

# Labels 101: Decoding Labels Built on the Organic Seal

**What it means to be ROP and ROC certified**

**Michele Marchetti  
and Marie Burcham** 

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At Oatman Farms, Dax Hansen is putting his faith in eaters who want nourishing food grown with care for local ecosystems. A newly added label will signal these values: Mixes made with *Regenerative Organic Certified (ROC)* stone-milled heritage grains from Hansen’s Southwest farm will soon be available for purchase. Regenerative Organic Certification (ROC) and Real Organic Project (ROP) are certification options with an important distinction: **they are only available to brands and farms that are USDA certified organic.**

“As flawed as it might be, organic means something,” says Hansen, whose Oatman Farms earned ROC certification in 2021. “It’s table stakes for doing more.”

Here’s what you need to know about both labels that go above and beyond the organic seal:



### Real Organic Project

Started by farmers, the Real Organic Project is a grassroots response to the industrialization of organics and the hundreds of millions of dollars spent annually by lobbyists working on behalf of the agriculture and food processing industry. In an increasingly confusing marketplace, the ROP label promises crops grown in living soil and animals (if present) raised humanely with real access to pasture.

ROP goes beyond the rules laid out for USDA certified organic products. For example, ROP standards do not allow “organic” hydroponics. Farms must grow their tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, and berries in biological soil.

A list of farms carrying ROP certification — currently over 800 farms and ranches — can be found at [realorganicproject.org](http://realorganicproject.org).

That list includes nearly 40 farms on Cornucopia’s Organic Scorecards, three of which are operated by Cornucopia board members: Engelbert Farms (the first certified organic dairy in the US) in Nichols, New York; Wheatfield Hill Organics, a diversified farm in Durand, Wisconsin, specializing in Black Angus beef; and Greener Pastures Chicken in Austin, Texas. (New Morning Farm, a vegetable farm in Hustontown, Pennsylvania, is another ROP certified farm founded by a Cornucopia board member.)

Cornucopia Board President Cameron Molberg, owner of

Greener Pastures, says ROP differentiates his farm from industrial organic operations, which do the bare minimum to meet the standards. “Authentic organic producers follow practices that align with consumer expectations,” he says. (He’s recurrently awaiting inspection from Regenerative Organic Alliance, aiming for the top tier of ROC certification. Read on for more info about that label.)



### Regenerative Organic Certification

Regenerative Organic Alliance is premised on a lofty mission: to “heal a broken system, repair a damaged planet, and empower farmers and eaters to create a better future through regenerative organic farming.”

In 2017, an esteemed group of farmers, businesses, and experts in various fields joined forces under this alliance to create the ROC label, which focuses on three tiers: soil health, animal welfare, and social fairness.

**The Soil Health tier** prioritizes practices that increase soil organic matter over time and sequesters carbon above and below ground. Soilless production (including hydroponics) is prohibited. At Hansen’s farm, Oatman Flats Ranch in Gila Bend, Arizona, every acre of farmland makes room for cover crops and native species habitat. Weeds are tackled with a roller crimper, instead of tillage. When it’s time to plant, the roller crimper mows down the cover crops and creates a mulch that suppresses weeds, making way for vibrant organic crops.

### ROC’s Animal Welfare tier

explicitly follows the Five Freedoms, internationally accepted standards of care that affirm every being’s right to humane treatment.

Organic CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations) need not apply.

**ROC’s Social Fairness tier** requires practices that provide economic stability and fairness for farmers, ranchers, and workers. These include fair payments for farmers, living wages, and transparent processes for listening to and addressing working complaints.

ROC recognizes the work of existing animal welfare (G.A.P.’s Animal Welfare Certified, for example) and social fairness standard groups (such as Food Justice Certified) and leverages these as part of the pathway to its own certification. Farms are eligible for ROC Bronze, Silver, and Gold certification, allowing producers to adjust and improve over time.

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*Cornucopia appreciates the role of ROC and ROP in countering the increasing industrialization of the organic marketplace. Farms that carry ROC and ROP labels receive extra points when rated in Cornucopia’s scorecards, a hallmark of Cornucopia’s work that showcases ethical farms and their brands.*

*Whether the motivation is climate change or a health crisis, or both, Cornucopia supporters are demanding the continuous improvement signaled by ROP and ROC labels. While products with these labels are not widely available in the grocery store, you can accelerate their arrival by requesting them at your favorite independent retailer and co-op.*



## Changemaker Fighting for Transparency

Advocating for kids with an allergy to carrageenan

**Michele Marchetti**

Food Service Director Amanda Warren first discovered carrageenan on the cartons of strawberry milk served to kids in her school lunch program. After some digging, she was quickly inspired to remove the milk from the menu.

Four years later, carrageenan's problematic nature has become personal.

"I suffer from Alpha-Gal allergy," she wrote on the back of Cornucopia's carrageenan proxy (see yours enclosed).

Alpha-Gal syndrome or AGS is a tick-induced allergy to red meat. Although carrageenan is derived from seaweed and not mammals, it contains the same allergen.

"The research on Alpha Gal is so new that many of us are left on our own to piece it all together," Warren wrote, addressing the CEO of Costco. "We should be afforded the right to safe foods. If this was your loved one at risk, I know you would take action."

Warren isn't waiting for industry to make changes on their own. Taking matters into her own hands to protect herself and the Staunton, Virginia kids she's charged with nourishing, Warren highlighted Cornucopia's carrageenan research in an industry publication for school nutrition employees.

She also partnered with the child advocacy group Life Time Foundation to add carrageenan and

mammal byproducts to a software program with a searchable list of harmful ingredients and allergens in school foods. And she made comments to the federal Tick Borne Disease Working Group that reports to Congress, advocating for changes in child nutrition standards, including adding carrageenan as an ingredient of concern.

"Food can be a force that brings people together to mobilize change," Warren said in her testimony.

It's time that the USDA, Costco, and the entire food industry get the message.

**The Cornucopia Institute has been tracking research on the inflammatory effects of carrageenan for nearly a decade. Fill out the proxy inserted, then learn more about our research and advocacy work by visiting [cornucopia.org/carrageenan](http://cornucopia.org/carrageenan).**

## The Long Haul

"Farm families are the fabric of rural America, and they are unraveling at the seams. Many people have tried to 'tie off' the loose threads, to apply a patch or give 'belt tightening' suggestions. Since 2004, Cornucopia has not stopped fighting for rural America. That's 6,500 days of standing shoulder-to-shoulder with farmers (like you!) to defend the markets that you've created and showcase the value of organically produced food. Cornucopia has paired the most powerful food group in the world, consumers, with trusted producers to protect the integrity of your food. I am honored by Cornucopia's effort, and invite you to continue your support of this movement at a time when the stakes are high and the opportunities for change are auspicious. Give today."

— Helen Kees, co-owner and operator of Wheatfield Hill Organics and Cornucopia board vice president



Photo by Chris Kees-Winkler



Photo courtesy of Green Heffa Farms

## Wisdom Keeper

### Why 'Farmer Cee' is Investing in Organic Certification

**April Jones**

Early one morning before most people had even poured their first cup of tea, Clarenda Stanley, known as "Farmer Cee," set her phone on her dashboard and pressed record.

Her YouTube videos, useful for any beginning farmer, target Black female farmers returning to the land. Stanley speaks honestly about the funds and fortitude needed to grow a sustainable small farm and afford the type of investments that are often below ground. "It takes green to be green," she quipped on the video, shot en route to a meeting for her second, off-farm job.

Sharing wisdom, whether through social media or her growing practices, is Farmer Cee's calling. "We will encourage farmers to use the best ecological practices to protect soil health, maintain crop yields, and increase farm profitability," she says. "By having a model farm, farmers are able to see firsthand how environmental stewardship can benefit a farm's bottom line."

On nearly 15 acres outside Raleigh, North Carolina, Stanley grows medicinal plants and herbs for Green Heffa Farms, which is focused on healing the land and providing high-quality teas. Those teas are processed in a restored sharecropper's cabin built in the late 1800s.

Stanley is in the early stages of implementing an Organic System Plan, the foundation of the organic certification process.

She views the paperwork, details, and hard work as vital steps in a learning process that will benefit her business, her family's legacy, and the planet.

Raised by her maternal grandparents on an Alabama farm that thrived without harmful chemicals, she set her sights on the certification process from the moment she purchased her first seed.

"I opted to get the certification because I am a Black woman farmer in an agricultural system that was not designed for farmers like me to be a leader or in acknowledging the heritage knowledge of my ancestors."

**Stanley's products are available online and at all Weaver Street Market locations.**

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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.

## Scorecard Spotlight



Photo courtesy of New Barn Organics

### New Barn Organics

New Barn Organics' plant-based beverages are made with ingredients from small farm collectives that use regenerative organic practices.

Their coconuts come from suppliers who control weeds by covering the soil with palm fronds and coconut husks. Their almonds are a product of dry farming, lessening their impact on the dwindling freshwater supply.

Learn more about Cornucopia's Plant-Based Beverages Scorecard, which favors products with a short ingredient list (sans carrageenan) and a strong commitment to organics. Visit [cornucopia.org/scorecards](https://cornucopia.org/scorecards)