

CULTIVATOR

Fall 2023

News from The Cornucopia Institute

cornucopia.org

Is This Organic? Cornucopia Investigates

One by one, small dairy farms — from California to Wisconsin to Vermont — shutter their barn doors, while mega-operations expand in the dry high plains of Colorado, the Texas Panhandle and, now, the sensitive marshlands of Indiana.

The USDA, along with certain certifying agencies, continue to allow questionable products supplied by industrial players to carry the organic seal. As more and more eaters invest in organic, opportunistic producers coming out of conventional agriculture are cashing in on organic premiums. Nowhere is this more evident than in “organic” dairy.

In 2019, stomachs turned when workers at Natural Prairie Dairy’s organic operation in Channing, Texas were exposed for animal cruelty during an undercover investigation conducted by Animal Recovery Mission. Cornucopia responded with a formal legal complaint to the USDA National Organic Program (NOP). Fast forward four years. This same company has once again been accused of violating the national organic standards, this time at their certified organic industrial operation in Lake Village, Indiana.

Cornucopia’s policy team recently filed a formal legal complaint to the NOP regarding Natural Prairie Dairy’s failure to comply with the organic standards, based on allegations in a pending lawsuit. That lawsuit alleges that



Ansarfo / Adobe Stock

the company defiled sensitive environmental areas by filling and tiling a jurisdictional waterway without a permit from the US Army Corps of Engineers, in direct violation of the Clean Water Act.

Environmental conservation is a primary tenet of organic production: The organic regulations require certified organic operations maintain or improve natural resources. “Activities undertaken that contravene federal environmental law are in direct conflict with the text and intent of the conservation requirements of the regulations governing organic production,” says Cornucopia’s Policy Director Kestrel Burcham, JD.

This is the fourth complaint Cornucopia has filed with the USDA about Natural Prairie Dairy’s practices since 2010. To date, the NOP has allowed NPD to keep operating. Cornucopia is calling on

the NOP to examine the practices of this same group, requesting a full audit and inspection of the Indiana operation.

“These concerning environmental issues call into question whether industrial-style operations like this one are in full compliance with the organic standards and whether these kinds of operations really embody the core values of what it truly means to be organic,” says Cornucopia’s Organic Investigator Anne Ross, JD. “Ecological responsibility is more than an aspiration in organic — it’s the law.”

Cornucopia encourages dairy consumers to purchase organic milk from local producers and brands dedicated to organic principles. **Cornucopia’s Organic Dairy Scorecard helps discerning shoppers choose brands consistent with their values.**



Under Pressure

A letter from Cornucopia's executive director

Friends of Cornucopia,

Despite what the USDA suggests, organic is not *just* a label. It is not an investment system designed for industrialized producers, supplying monopoly retailers with commodities while they aggressively lobby for less regulation and more chemicals.

Corporations that pioneered animal confinement and chemical farming have organic lines now. There are real consequences to allowing factory farming in organic. Where local organic farmers are nourishing our communities and stewarding our soil and water, industrial organic operations are irrigating animal feed with precious fresh water pumped onto arid fields.

Daily water usage for Natural Prairie Dairy's 4,350-cow certified organic factory farm in Indiana is estimated to be 152K to 239K gallons per day. That's up to 87.3 million gallons every year! (Don't miss our cover story.)

At first, Big Ag scoffed at organic production, preventing the National Organic Program from ever claiming any kind of superiority over chemical-based production. Even now, USDA treats organic like a mere marketing tool.

Organic is a genuine alternative to our harmful food system. It's a community of people working together to build something *better*. At its best, organic offers a powerful solution to the most consequential economic, environmental, and human health challenges of our time.

Amid these challenges, Cornucopia remains your eyes and ears in the marketplace.

The Global Buyer for Walmart recently said the price gap between organic and conventional produce is too wide — are they out for value or the cheapest “organic” food they can find? Walmart also insists its organic vegetable growers minimize or remove biodiversity from their fields in the name of food safety. (Learn more about the alarming power of Big Grocery in Jon Steinman's *Grocery Story*, excerpted on page 7.)

We know you're willing to invest in organic. Cornucopia's scorecards contain more details about organic brands than you will find anywhere else. Armed with this information, many of you have dumped poorly rated organic brands for more trustworthy ones. **Together, we have made such a commotion that some industrialized brands have come to us this summer, seeking to improve their scores.** They are feeling the heat from their customers to do better!

Your purchases add up. Share this newsletter with people you know and introduce them to our scorecards. If we all get wise, their jig is up!

For people and food over corporations and commodities,

Melody Morrell
Executive Director
The Cornucopia Institute



Photo courtesy of Jon Steinman

Independent retailers and co-ops like BriarPatch Food Co-op in Grass Valley, California, make space on their shelves for authentic organic products.

Hydroponics is the Wrong Direction for Organic

Kestrel Burcham, JD

“Hydroponics and aeroponics cannot be classified as certified organic growing methods.”

Issued by a coalition of six certifiers, this public statement is an unprecedented rebuke to the National Organic Program (NOP) and the latest tactic in a protracted fight to implore the USDA to stop certifying soilless production.

The Cornucopia Institute emphatically agrees — we know how much you care about human health and the ability to make food choices that support it.

The food choices backed by your dollars exist because of the complex ecological web that thrives in healthy soil. Organisms in the soil break down organic matter, producing the nutrients we need. Authentic organic farmers play a crucial role in this symbiotic relationship, feeding the soil so you can continue to feed your communities and families with an alternative to industrialized agriculture.

We believe the USDA organic seal should assure you of that investment. But it's tough to know whether your organic produce was grown in water, or in the case of container-based operations, inert planting media.

Cornucopia champions the organic farmers and organizations that are upping their advocacy for the soil. The six certifiers leading this

latest effort have previously refused to certify hydroponic operations, pointing to their lack of expertise. Now they are unequivocally declaring the incompatibility of soilless production with organic standards — a bold move considering the NOP has historically issued noncompliances to those refusing to certify hydroponics, then looked the other way once the certifier pinned their decision on “capacity” rather than legality.

The organic rules state that organic agriculture is rooted in the principle that healthy soil is essential for healthy crops, animals, people, and our environment. They repeatedly refer to soil-based production. While the NOP seems to be fine with hydroponic solutions that use natural substances (and

avoid prohibited substances), organic food is premised on more than adding materials for crop fertilization or crop protection. It's why you rely on it for the most nutrient-dense food available.

The NOP's attempt to sideline soil is a direct threat to organic. We stand with the community of soil supporters and our community of organic advocates as we strive for integrity under the organic label.

Watch for opportunities to affirm that soil is the foundation of organic agriculture and Cornucopia's official comment to the National Organic Standards Board. Use our guide to avoid soilless “organic” produce: <https://tinyurl.com/tci-hydro>



Solidastock / Adobe Stock

The USDA calls this “organic.” A new coalition of six certifiers, supported by Cornucopia, disagrees. The group includes organic certifiers Vermont Organic Farmers, OneCert, Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York, Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, and the add-on label Real Organic Project.



Dear Costco, Do the Right Thing

Earlier this year, we sent a “gift package” to the executives at Costco — urgent appeals from 1,200 Cornucopia supporters outraged by the retailer’s seeming indifference to carrageenan’s known health impacts. Many of the pleas were from those with chronic illnesses, a population that views organic as a safe haven.

“Given the mounting evidence and the increasing number of individuals reporting health issues related to carrageenan,” wrote Cornucopia Executive Director Melody Morrell in her letter to the CEO, “we urge Costco to take immediate action by prioritizing consumer health and removing carrageenan from its products.”

“As you look at the enclosed materials,” Morrell continued, “the personal, passionate pleas for change warrant your special attention. These notes weren’t emailed or sent with a petition that required nothing more than a click of a keyboard. Consumers shared their experiences in handwritten letters, taking time out of their lives to print, sign, and mail in requests for us to share with Costco. How you respond to this chorus of concerned consumers matters.”

Turn up the heat on Costco. Add your voice to this call to action: Visit tinyurl.com/tellcostco (or scan the QR code below using a mobile device), search for your local store, and implore Costco to remove this harmful ingredient from its products.

Together, we can press this massive organic influencer to do better.



RED SEAWEED

This variety of seaweed is found around the world and has been used in traditional cooking since the 15th century. The seaweed may also be called Irish Moss.



- Has nutritional value
- A whole food when used in its natural form
- In traditional preparations, red seaweed is boiled in water or milk for cultural dishes or medicinal uses. (In Wales and coastal regions of China, this process is used to prepare jelly dishes.)
- Traditionally used in intentionally small amounts

 The Cornucopia Institute

CARRAGEENAN

A widely used food additive that is extracted from certain types of red seaweed, carrageenan is a common processing aid in food, particularly in dairy, plant-based beverages, and processed meat products.



- Has NO nutritional value
- According to research, carrageenan causes an inflammatory response in many individuals, with sensitive populations (like those with colitis or IBD) being especially susceptible
- A treatment & extraction process alters its chemistry, transforming it into a highly processed, synthetic ingredient
- Currently allowed in USDA Organic foods
- When used as a processing aid, can be legally omitted from the ingredient panel

To honor your reputation for integrity, please do your due diligence and understand that 1.) organic standard making is subject to industry pressure and 2.) this is an additive that does not belong in organic foods, or any food for that matter.

— Peggy N., Vermont

Three out of six members in my family have chronic Lyme disease. Food is huge in helping us live normal lives. Carrageenan is horrible for those of us who need to eat foods that are anti-inflammatory. Regardless of health issues, I agree with Cornucopia, all humans need to eat food that heals and protects our bodies!

— Mikkell T., Tennessee



On the Trail of Organic Impostors

An interview with John Bobbe, Cornucopia's newest advisor

Anne Ross, JD

Six years ago, John Bobbe and I connected over a common goal: stopping fraudsters who were duping thousands of unsuspecting consumers with imported fake organic grain. Our collaborative work helped push the USDA to implement stricter rules for organic imports and supply chains.

John, a former executive director of OFARM (Organic Farmers' Agency for Relationship Marketing), is now enjoying retirement with his wife on their third-generation Wisconsin family farm that's host to 20-25 colonies of bees and a small flock of chickens, fed organic feed purchased from a local family-owned mill.

In his free time, he serves as one of our advisors — meaning John and I are still teaming up to find out who isn't playing by the organic rules.

Why do you believe in "organic"?

I've gone from farming conventionally to growing organically. Organic, at its best, is an alternative to the massive harm caused by industrial farming. That's why I support local organic farmers and stay involved to make sure "organic" remains the choice I want to make.

Why does Cornucopia's work matter?

Cornucopia has an important role to play in keeping enforcement agencies like the USDA working to improve fraud prevention and detection. A lot has been put in place, but the USDA is a huge government agency and can be slow to react. It's going to take continuous pushing from Cornucopia and others to herd the USDA in the right direction.

What did we learn from the organic grain imports investigation?

The massive shipments of grain imports, which were used primarily for livestock feed, were the result of exploding demand for organic eggs and chicken. In the early years, the USDA didn't have a clue about the quantity of grain, where and how it was being brought in, or where it ended up. In a number of instances, they let

the fraudulent grain get into the domestic market with no way to stop shipments or track the grain within the US. We learned that our work has an impact and continues to be as important as ever.

What's challenging about "organic" investigations?

It can take time, even years, to obtain the knowledge necessary to put all the pieces together to uncover how and where organic fraud is occurring. It's important to gain the trust of insiders and experts who can provide information. Over time, sources came to know that you and I are discrete and confidential. Trust is earned. Verifying information is critical. And putting all of those different pieces together doesn't happen overnight.

Send your tips to Anne and John by emailing tips@cornucopia.org.



Photo courtesy of John Bobbe

Cornucopia relies on allies in the farming community to monitor and protect the integrity of organic.

Time for a Supermarket Shakedown

An excerpt from *Grocery Story* by Jon Steinman

I remember standing in a tomato field of DiMare Fresh, one of North America's largest conventional growers and distributors of "fresh" tomatoes. It was here where I really learned how subjective one's definition of "fresh" could be.

If "fresh" is harvesting a rock-hard, pale green tomato and placing it in a temperature- and humidity-controlled room with just the right amount of ethylene gas piped in to affect ripening, then "yes," these tomatoes were super "fresh"! If you've ever wondered why, rather than being a luscious ruby red, the internal flesh of your tomato is a pale pink, maybe even white — that's why — the tomato has never had a chance to fully ripen, the ethylene gas having never penetrated the interior of the fruit. Not surprisingly, these "factory" tomatoes are almost completely devoid of flavor.

Long-distance transportation requirements were not the only influence on the genetics of the modern tomato. To meet the high-volume, low-cost demands of the emerging grocery giants of the 1940s, growers looked to cut costs and expedite harvesting.

Harvesting a field tomato when dark-green presented a unique challenge — visibility. A green tomato is the same color as the leaves, making it more difficult to notice by the people picking the fruit. Enter the plant breeders and their capacity to select genetics that would yield a highly visible,



Photo courtesy of BriarPatch Food Co-op

Prefer the type of fresh, flavorful produce that's pictured here at BriarPatch Food Co-op in Grass Valley, California? With Steinman's mobile app, "Food Co-op Finder," 330 community-owned grocery stores are at your fingertips.

light-green tomato and promote even ripening throughout the individual fruit. It was a remarkable achievement ... until seventy years later, when it was discovered that the dark green color was responsible for flavor. It was also revealed that by removing the fruit from the plant prior to the tomato being fully ripe, flavor was even further reduced. The leaves of a fruit-producing plant or tree are the sugar-producing factories of the fruit itself. Remove the tomato from the plant before it's ripe and sugar production comes to a halt ... and sugar equals flavor. Eaters have effectively handed the keys to flavor over to the most influential grocers.

The long-term ripple effects of the grocery giants' requirements are fascinating. Losses in flavor, phytochemicals, and nutrients have accompanied the genetic development of most fruits, vegetables, grains, and animal products destined for the grocery store shelves. Also lost has been the assurance of safe food.

Meeting the cosmetic demands of the grocery giants has been linked to increases in the use of

pesticides. As one carrot grower puts it, "We use more pesticides than we'd like to try to meet the cosmetic standards set." Another grower: "They want a perfect product that will keep for a week ... but trying to make quality last a week logically leads to more pesticides."

While at times it may seem we eaters are powerless, we mustn't be fooled — we are immensely powerful. Our sheer numbers dwarf the number of retailers.

Just as their consolidation has granted them seemingly limitless powers, that same eroding of diversity upon which they draw strength also makes them all the more vulnerable to the whims of our almighty appetites. Often forgotten in the equation of the food economy is the one sector that likely invests the most time and energy into the planning, acquisition, transportation, and preparation of food — EATERS. And not just any eaters — organized, consolidated eaters.

Copyright @ Jon Steinman, 2019, Grocery Story: The Promise of Food Co-ops in the Age of Grocery Giants



The
Cornucopia
Institute

P.O. Box 826
Viroqua, WI 54665

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
US POSTAGE
PAID
ASHLAND WI 54806
PERMIT NO. 322

Address 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.

What's Inside



An industrial "organic" operation has been accused of violating the Clean Water Act. Our complaint calls on the National Organic Program to investigate.



Big Grocery is powerful, but eaters have the final word. You can learn more by reading an excerpt of *Grocery Story* by Jon Steinman.



We're celebrating soil-grown organic tomatoes with [our insert](#). Is your favorite tomato brand on the list?



Together we can pressure Costco to remove carrageenan from their products. Get the facts and take action!

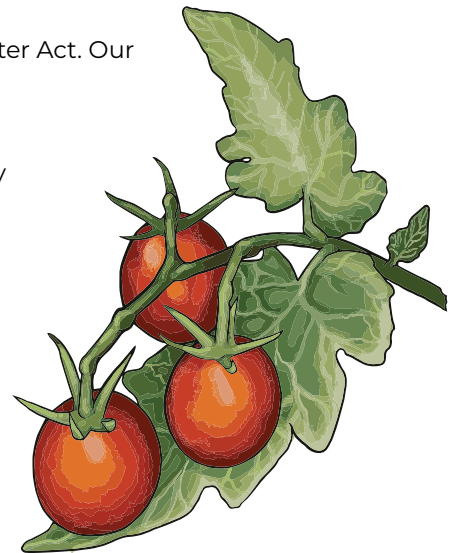


Illustration by Kestrel Burcham