

THE CULTIVATOR

NEWS FROM THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE

WINTER 2020

Why I Farm

Building on our traditions and collective values

BY CAMERON MOLBERG

This is personal. As an organic farmer and the board president of Cornucopia, I understand what we're up against: corporations perpetuating exploitative agricultural systems and threatening our grassroots industry.

Now is the time to take on the agri-giants and turn our values into action—to leverage our collective power to protect a system that's foundational to the health of our families and communities.

My organic values took root as a young boy, pulling endless weeds from my grandparents' abundant garden.

Oma and Opa Pehl sustained their five kids and countless grandchildren with nutritious food from the land, managed without the use of synthetic chemicals. This tradition—and the services it yields to the Earth, our bodies, and our communities—is fundamental to why I farm.

These traditions and values are also why I continue to serve on the board of Cornucopia, an organization emboldened by authentic organic farmers who protect the health



DEPOSITPHOTOS IMAGE

and wealth of our soil. Together with your generous support, we have co-created the most effective and trusted watchdog in the organic industry.

This year, through extensive planning led by Interim Executive

Director (IED) Jonathan Rosenthal, we invested in sustainability. This critical work cannot be undervalued.

Research shows that organizations that utilize an IED model emerge from leadership transitions stronger and more financially sound.

After consulting widely with organic stakeholders, we have reaffirmed our focus. Cornucopia is doubling down to protect the integrity of the USDA label as the cornerstone of authentic organic and regenerative agriculture.

It is clear that our work has never been more critical than it is today. If you can, join me in donating to defend the values we hold dear, the same values my grandparents instilled in me when I was a child visiting their bountiful homestead.

With your support, we will tenaciously uphold the principle of continuous improvement—in our own organization, in organic policy, and on the land.

This is our commitment to you.

Help us keep authentic organic agriculture alive. Together we can inspire future generations and build a brighter, healthier, and more prosperous future.

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The Truth Matters

Cornucopia's quest to expose organic grain fraud

BY MICHELE MARCHETTI

Huddled inside a trade show booth, Anne Ross, JD watched dozens of icons, each representing an international shipping vessel, inch across a computer screen.

Behind the scenes of the bustling MOSES Organic Farming Conference, Ross was getting schooled in how to track grain shipments traversing a vast ocean, thousands of miles away.

She reflects on that day as the first thread in the unraveling of a massive story.

A few weeks prior, Ross sat in her packed-up house, ready to embark on a move from South Carolina to California, when a job posting surfaced in her email. On a whim, she sent her resume. "It wasn't strategic at all," she says. Yet it was life-changing.

For the next three years, Ross embarked on a high-wire journey worthy of a screenplay. As she spearheaded an extensive investigation into the scourge of organic grain fraud, she quickly became immersed in the shadowy world of informants and the unsavory side of global trade.

With courage, tenacity, and wisdom, Ross turned her findings into cogent commentary, advocating for regulatory changes to improve the traceability of organic food imports in the global supply chain and, ultimately, helping to shift government policy at the USDA National Organic Program (NOP).

A TANGLED WEB

Ross plunged deep into a global industry that plays a starring role on nearly every American family's plate.

Cloaked in secrecy, the fraudulent organic grain trade originates

PHOTO COURTESY OF RUTH AND JON JOVAAG, MINNESOTA



The uneven playing field created by fraud is crippling. Agronomists have estimated that one bulk cargo ship of imported grain may be equal to the annual production of 50 to 80 US certified organic grain farms.

on farms overseas and infiltrates domestic markets that provide a source of feed for organic livestock. The industrial dairy and poultry operations allowed under the USDA seal offer a lucrative customer base.

Without vigorous enforcement mechanisms, incestuous corporate relationships create an environment ripe for fraud. Just a handful of overseas companies are responsible for the bulk of this deception.

The US imports 70% of its organic soybeans and 40% of its organic corn, mostly used in organic livestock production. Well over half of corn imports come from overseas regions that don't even have sufficient acreage to support this level of purported organic production.

The influx of cheap, imported grain of questionable legitimacy lowers the market price for authentic organic grain farmers, a devastating competitive disadvantage for organic

producers who either grow their feed on farm or purchase from a legitimate source. This bias disincentivizes new farmers, as well as those considering a transition to organic.

TRACKING THE BAD GUYS

Ross began her career as a corporate litigator before pursuing an advanced degree in agriculture & food law from the University of Arkansas, where her studies focused on the federal regulation of pesticides and food labeling.

She approached the grain fraud investigation like a lawyer taking on a case, US organic grain farmers her de facto clients and confidants.

She cultivated a trusted network of unflagging farmers who took her calls, often from the fields, patiently walking her through the intricacies of grain farming and trade.

As Ross set out to expose how the fraud was perpetuated, she began to receive calls from informants, insiders in the grain industry. She formed close, trusted relationships with the tipsters, strategizing daily with them for three years. “They had information that, had it been known they were sharing it, could have gotten them fired.”

One of Ross’ informants warned her of grain fraud’s ties to organized crime. He had been personally threatened and carried a weapon. At another point in the investigation, an informant and former contractor for the FBI offered this pointed suggestion: *I’d look into a more secure internet platform.* Ross, who embodies equanimity, continued.

A big break in Cornucopia’s case came in 2018. At the time, Ross had been training for the Boston Marathon, a passion that provided necessary stress relief.

On the eve of her flight to Massachusetts, she received a call in the middle of the night from one of her informants, who pointed her to a complaint that had been filed in California federal court.

A company wanted to unload 25,000 metric tons of purportedly “organic” corn from a vessel lingering off the coast of California. A massive importer was suing the USDA and US Customs for rejecting the shipment, worth millions of dollars.

Those court filings, combined with other databases and her sources, allowed Ross to piece together a web of major international players. Instead of running her race, she logged hours at her computer, working on a release about the lawsuit, news that Cornucopia was the first to break.

Several months later, Cornucopia published a groundbreaking white paper that meticulously turned hundreds of hours scouring lawsuits and databases into a compelling story of how the international grain trade operates. “No one before had actually named some of these companies that are involved in the importing.”

That white paper was circulated to more than 1,000 industry insiders on email lists. It made its way to the agriculture ministry in Romania, and resulted in a confab with the Ministry of Agriculture in Ukraine. The USDA’s NOP also took notice. “It put pressure on them in a way—if I can figure this out, then there’s really no excuse for a government agency not to be out in front of this.”

ADVOCATING FOR FARMERS

The uneven playing field created by fraud is crippling. Agronomists have estimated that one bulk cargo ship of imported grain may be equal to the annual production of 50 to 80 US certified organic grain farms. US organic grain farmers have suffered losses exceeding \$400 million to fraudulent grain shipments, originating primarily from the Black Sea Region.

“It wasn’t just *grain* unloaded from those vessels, but financial hardships and erosion of confidence in an enforcement system that failed to protect them,” Ross says.

After years of tracking vessels, notifying authorities of questionable incoming shipments, and pressing the USDA to act, Ross finally received the news she had been waiting for: The USDA was unveiling a draft Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) rule meant to address organic fraud by giving the USDA stronger tools to ensure compliance and traceability.

While the rule is far from perfect, Ross is heartened by any progress that hinders the bad actors who are hurting the dozens of organic farmers she befriended over the course of her saga.

Those farmers were on her mind when, throughout the investigation, people wondered why she was spending so much time on something they contended “wasn’t really hurting anyone.”

They’d ask: *What’s the big deal?* Ross’ answer: Integrity. “When you’re talking about intentional deceit for monetary gain, there is no relative truth,” Ross says. “There is a right and there is a wrong.”

Finding the truth, and amplifying it for the USDA and thousands of Cornucopia supporters, provided Ross with ample motivation. Despite years as a litigator, it’s the one case she’ll never forget.



Ross on the ground at Shevchenko Park in Kiev, Ukraine.

As she continues her role as a consultant and international policy advisor for Cornucopia, Anne Ross can also be found working on her primary passion, food justice and access, as the new executive director at Food Democracy Now.

There Is No Normal Anymore

North Dakota seed breeders safeguard the future of food

BY MARIANNE LANDZETTEL

Theresa Podoll breathed a cautious sigh of relief. The harvest on her North Dakota farm had gone well and, at the time of our conversation in early October, snow was absent from the forecast for the rest of the month.

“In 2018 and 2019, we had snow on the ground by October 10,” she says. “Both those years were incredibly wet; we had water everywhere.”

Climate change has brought a host of challenges to Prairie Road Organic Seed, a family business comprising 480 acres close to the South Dakota border.

Rising temperatures mean more hot and humid days, increasing the risk of unseasonal storms and the presence of fungi and other plant pathogens.

The region’s short growing season now starts earlier and ends later, posing the possibility of late frost hitting spring crops or early snow ruining the harvest.

Area wetlands are increasing and the groundwater table is rising. That isn’t to say the risk of drought has disappeared; north of the Podolls’ farms were far too dry.

Prairie Road Organic Seed was founded in 1997. All seeds are open-pollinated, certified organic, and grown on the farm. The hallmarks of good seeds are plant vigor and yields, but because of the climate crisis, the Podolls also select for resilience.

“Plants need to experience whatever goes on in the environment,” Podoll says. “That’s why a bad

production year is a good year to select stock seed.”

She and her husband Dan carefully observe the growth of the plants, which can then be correlated with the year’s weather data. At harvest time, they are able to see what traits individual plants express particularly well and select accordingly.

In spring of 2017 and 2018, temperatures remained low. Plants

This view is backed by science—epigenetics can silence or activate genetic sequences as a response to changes in the environment.

Genetic and crop diversity are crucial for food security. By selecting exclusively for yield, we risk losing the vast genetic pool inherent in varieties that are less productive and therefore not maintained.

Already, the same varieties of carrots, lettuce, or peppers can be found in just about any US (and European) supermarket.

If one of them fails because of a new pest or disease, the impact will be experienced on a global scale.

“Seeds need to be grown for the area of intended use,” Theresa says. “We need genetic diversity spread over the landscape.”

Prairie Road Organic’s seeds are perfectly adapted to the climate of the North Central Region of the

US. And some may well flourish “out of area”: The Dakota Sisters muskmelon, for example, is doing just as well in Texas.

Every Prairie Road Organic seed variety first has to prove its credentials—flavor, yield, and resilience—in the Podolls’ farmhouse garden.

Their business ensures that they eat well. And their livelihood also provides thousands of home gardeners and farmers with the seeds, genetic diversity, and knowledge to feed themselves and others.

Marianne Landzettel is a journalist and author who lives in London.



PHOTO COURTESY OF M. KUNZ

Theresa and Dan Podoll assess the corn after a storm. The few that remained standing are selected for their strong root system.

that grew well had therefore been better able to tolerate the cold soil.

In years with unseasonal storms, only plants with strong root systems remained standing. And in hot, dry years, plants that produced a healthy leaf canopy were selected for their ability to protect the fruit against sunburn.

“You need to have a relationship with the plants,” Dan Podoll told me when I first visited the farm. He believes that each seed holds in its genes a record of everything its forebears endured and, therefore, can adapt to changing conditions in a relatively short span of time.

A Cornucopia Homecoming

Welcoming back nutrition and food policy expert Charlotte Vallaeys

BY MICHELE MARCHETTI

A central member of the brain trust that built The Cornucopia Institute is returning as a consultant.

Charlotte Vallaeys served as Cornucopia's director of farm and food policy from 2007 to 2013, helping build Cornucopia's mission and shape the educational initiatives that turn consumers into activists.

One of her early Cornucopia projects included a public awareness campaign that led many companies to remove carrageenan from their products.

At the time, the scientific studies underscoring the negative health impacts from food-grade carrageenan had been largely ignored outside scientific circles.

When carrageenan came up for "sunset review," a National Organic Standards Board process that reviews entries on its National List of allowed materials, she started digging.

"I discovered these studies—they were right there in the scientific literature, but nobody was paying any attention to them," she recalls. "Cornucopia brought attention to these studies, linking carrageenan to gastrointestinal inflammation, and we really changed the marketplace by informing consumers. I'm proud of that work, especially because this positive change happened thanks to the actions taken by consumers."

Vallaeys' return to Cornucopia represents a restoration of a fundamental tenet of the organization's roots: the notion that consumers have tremendous collective power in the marketplace.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARIJKE VALLAEYS

When not researching, Charlotte can be found in her family's orchard, garden, or pasture with the sheep and chickens.

Once again, her robust background will embolden Cornucopia's science-based approach to educating good food advocates about the importance of the organic label.

Throughout the upcoming year, with Vallaeys' guidance, Cornucopia will launch a brand new investigation and analysis of chemicals in our food supply—with a specific focus on produce.

"Pesticides are toxic by design," Vallaeys says, "Yet these chemicals end up in our environment and our food, where they can continue to do harm long after their intended use. Their use should be approached with much greater caution than is currently required. Fortunately, the organic regulations do have this principle of caution built into them."

Most recently, Vallaeys served as Consumer Reports' (CR) expert on food labeling, nutrition, and sustainable diets. She led work informing CR's data-driven ratings, featured on their magazine's October cover, aimed at reducing risk from pesticide exposure.

For Vallaeys, the project's findings reaffirmed the value of the organic

label. It also underscored how scientific knowledge about the myriad effects of pesticides continues to evolve.

"There are many impacts that we're just starting to understand, like the effects of pesticides on the microbiome—both inside our bodies and in the soil where our food is grown."

Conducting investigations designed to yield informed consumer choice is familiar ground for Vallaeys. She began her first term at Cornucopia with a Master's of Theological Studies in social and environmental ethics from Harvard and a Master's of Science in agriculture, food, and environment from Tufts.

Professionally, she performs scientific literature reviews on food and agriculture topics, then translates these findings for consumers, enabling them to make ethically motivated food choices that are also backed by solid science.

"Coming back and doing this work at Cornucopia is exciting," she says. "I believe in Cornucopia's mission, and I feel passionate about the issues it works on."

The seeds of a career dedicated to food and agriculture were planted in a childhood in Belgium, where life lessons and family connection were served at the kitchen table over home-cooked meals. She credits her mom and grandmother for cultivating early awareness about the importance of good food.

Vallaeys lives in a small town in Massachusetts, with her husband and two sons. She is currently pursuing a PhD at Tufts University, learning how to design the research studies that will continue to advance our knowledge in the critical topics she currently investigates.

We Need You

Why Cornucopia supporters say the feeling is mutual

Cornucopia supporters are in good company. Family-scale farmers, co-op grocers, business leaders, health care workers, and good food advocates from across the country propel Cornucopia's work.

Each unique organic food champion has a natural foods story, the reason they support an alternative to extractive, conventional agriculture.

Thank you for keeping our organization vibrant and resolute. We are honored that you all trust Cornucopia to represent you in defense of organic food we can trust!



The essential staff at First Alternative Natural Foods Co-op continues to safely serve its community of local farmers, businesses, and member owners.

“At First Alternative, we are dedicated to helping our customers navigate an ever-changing food system; this includes changes that may bend the true meaning of organically grown, such as “hydroponic” organic. We continue to rely on Cornucopia for up-to-date information about which products may be produced hydroponically and why this is an issue we should monitor so we can give our customers accurate and timely information.”

— CINDEE LOLIK, GM, FIRST ALTERNATIVE NATURAL FOODS CO-OP, OREGON

“I love to make sure that I am voting with my dollars by supporting companies that are truly organic/biodynamic, with healthy living soil, free-range/pastured animals which, in turn, helps the farm workers and water supply not be filled with more toxins. And I don't want to be fooled by companies that claim to be organic, but are just doing the bare minimum. Although I don't eat meat, I am glad that you inform people of where they can buy healthy pastured meat. I love knowing which eggs and yogurt to buy that are highly rated on your scorecards, that come from happy, pastured animals. I also appreciate the milk alternatives scorecard, as we use almond and oat milk.”

— CAMI LEWTON, CALIFORNIA

“I am an organic farmer and find your information and activism very useful, informative, and encouraging. Thank you for being there.”

— PHIL BARBATO, BIOPHILIA ORGANIC FARM, NEW YORK

“I am a retired pediatrician who has been organic farming 22 years. I also grew up on an organic farm. I remain very concerned about the negative effects on children from constant exposure to toxins and hormones and antibiotics via food.”

— KAREN OLNES, MD, MINNESOTA

“Thank you so much for the excellent guidance you shared on how to take action when commenting on the Strengthening Organic Enforcement draft rule. I really appreciate that about you. Many organizations just take you to a page where you sign their letter, but you empower us to make our own, individual comments.”

— MARGARET DWYER, WASHINGTON, DC

“We are a small organic farm, 150 acres, certified since 1997. We have supported Cornucopia as an advocate and mouth piece to attempt to keep organic farming as profitable and as true to its roots as possible. I try to spread the word about your work every chance I get, because we're all in this together.”

— CRAIG MCCREARY, IOWA



The Cornucopia
Institute

A Sustained Mission

Because of you, Cornucopia is poised for a successful year ahead. In 2021, we will continue to research and analyze the organic sector, identifying high-leverage issues where action and impact align. Stay tuned for updates on the following issues and projects:

Produce, Pesticides, and Fraud
Organic Egg Report and Scorecard
Hydroponics and Soil Farmers
Distressed Organic Dairy Market

Working together, we will empower consumers to exercise their informed purchasing power and reward authentic organic farmers and producers by shifting market share. Our commitment to marketplace advocacy, combined with our bold role as an industry watchdog, aims to protect the organic marketplace, impact agricultural policies to defend the integrity of the USDA organic label, and amplify the voices of thousands of authentic organic and local farmers, along with the millions of consumers who depend on them.

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Origin of Livestock Rule Redux

NOP turns its cards



Organic dairy production exemplifies the pernicious influence of industrial agriculture combined with a failure of the USDA to protect the integrity of the organic label.

At the fall National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) meeting, Cornucopia Director Melody Morrell denounced the new “organic” heifer factory in the arid High Plains of

Colorado that plans to irrigate pastures and water 7,000 heifers from the depleted Ogallala Aquifer. The Aurora operation provides a cynical alternative to the continuous cycling of conventional cattle into organic production.

In the wake of massive destruction to the organic dairy marketplace, a languishing rule intended to prevent the continuous cycling of conventional livestock into organic operations will finally reappear as a second proposed rule for public comment.

Reporting on this news from the fall NOSB meeting, Dr. Jennifer Tucker, director of the National Organic Program (NOP), attributed the five years of limbo for the Origin of Livestock (OOL) Rule to complex legal questions that could jeopardize the agency’s position. The Office of Inspector General first flagged an uneven playing field in 2013, noting that the transitioning of conventional dairy animals allows offenders to save on feed costs, while increasing their dairy herd and market share—potentially leading to dairy producers “shopping for certifying agents who allow this process.”

The OOL draft rule’s forward momentum is imperative for the continued existence of authentic organic dairy farmers. But the pace is unconscionable.

Stay tuned for more Cornucopia coverage on the OOL redux. If you can, support the ethical organic brands highlighted on our Organic Dairy Scorecard. They need our collective support to survive.