

# Championing the Organic Label

## We need to be able to explain to consumers what organic really means

BY CISSY BOWMAN

**O**rganic has received a lot of bad press lately, from the Senate investigation on liquid nitrogen fertilizers to a *Washington Post* article questioning the “purity” of the organic label, published on July 3. And on July 7, *Brownfield Ag News* published an article entitled “Why consumers choose ‘natural’ over organic.” Both articles have created a stir within the organic community, from farmers to consumers, and have generated questions. Is the organic label really what we expect it to be? At the same time, in a suffering economy, people are wondering: What is the true value of any label that commands a higher price?

These are appropriate questions. In order to address them, we need to be able to explain to consumers what organic really means, compared with less-expensive “natural” products—or, for that matter—compared with the myriad other “green” labels popping up in the marketplace.

This writer admits to being biased. I have been an organic farmer, an accredited organic certifier, and a consumer of organic products for many years. I was around when the Organic Rules were being written, and I have seen the process from the ground up (the point of view of agriculture), from standards development to implementation of the National Organic Program (NOP). I have to say that recent media coverage is not based on the whole picture. It shows a tremendous lack of understanding of the organic-certification process. It also highlights the lack of any such process in the use of other labels.

### What it is and what it isn't

Let's start with the basics. The Organic Foods Production Act, which established the NOP, has a clear purpose: “(1) to establish national standards governing the marketing of certain agricultural products as organically produced products; (2) to assure consumers that organically produced products meet a consistent standard; and (3) to facilitate interstate commerce in fresh and processed food that is organically produced.” Has this purpose been met?

In order to evaluate this, we need to look at what organic certification really is. It is a quality-assurance system that exists to tell consumers that products with an organic label meet the standards as written in the regulations. Quality-

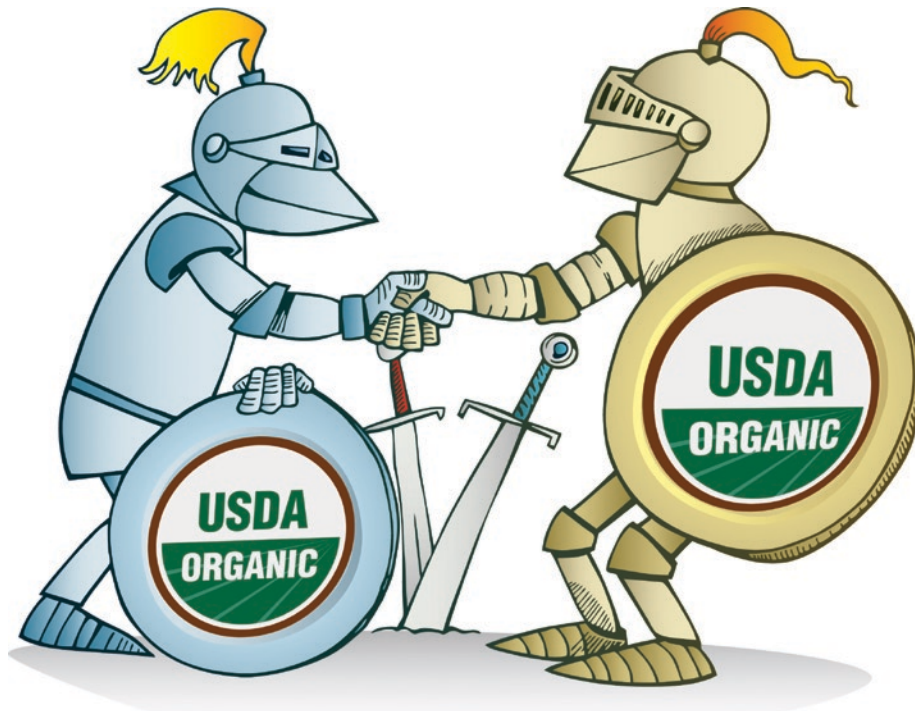


ILLUSTRATION BY IGOR KAZOWSKI

assurance systems are based on monitoring—through inspection and audit, evaluation and determination, and the opportunity to demonstrate improvement. When something is not up to code, a certified-organic operation must take action to come into compliance.

Nothing in the regulations state that organic means “pure,” which is a nebulous term. Nor do the regulations claim organic products to be synthetic- or pesticide-free. What the regulations do create is a systems-based way of evaluating whether or not an agricultural or processed product meets the organic regulations. This evaluation is accomplished by requiring those who wish to use the organic claim to follow a *process* that documents that they are following the rules.

This process is not taken lightly and involves a great deal of recordkeeping, oversight, and verification. Inspections of each operation take place at least annually. When things look awry, there are procedures for complaints, investigations and enforcement. Adverse action has been taken against farms, handling operations and certifiers who have been found to be operating outside of the regulations. Certifiers found to be in violation have been suspended or de-accredited. And the NOP itself is evaluated and investigated to make sure that it is doing its job and that it shows improvement when problems are identified. These levels of oversight do not exist

for products claiming to be “natural.”

We must realize that, since there is money to be made in organics, there will always be people who want to cheat, just for the premium. And there will be product manufacturers who will want to label as “organic” products that clearly do not meet the requirements of the organic regulations. There will be lobbying to allow this to take place. It happens in every industry—attempts to cut corners, to reduce costs.

But when we look at the many other green labels, what do we really see? Why would a consumer prefer “natural” or any other eco-label? Is it because, as Suzanne Shelton states in the *Brownfield Ag News* article, “it only costs a little more?” Where is the quality assurance for the “natural” label? Who monitors the use of the word? Anyone can claim a food product to be natural—food *is* natural. But what makes “natural” food different from any other food product? And why should something command a price of even “a little more” if it is no different than a product that doesn't use the word on its label?

### How natural is “natural”?

What do these other labels really mean, and how do they compare with organic? There is no regulation on the use of the word “natural.” There is at least one organization, “Certified Naturally Grown,” that purports to verify that

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the growers using its label are following a set of standards, but unlike organics there is no third-party inspection—basically these growers inspect one another. In certified-organic production, we are required by law to have an educated and qualified inspector and to prove that there is no conflict of interest during the certification process. Based on this criterion alone, “Certified Naturally Grown” would never be able to meet the requirements of the NOP—but it is at least an attempt to verify that its label has some meaning.

Additionally, there is no regulation of the label claim of natural. At this time, there are no regulations that address most eco-labels, so basically anyone can make a green claim without oversight so long as it doesn't violate someone's trademark or make a false statement. The exception to this is in the meat industry since meat labels fall under the authority of the Federal Safety Inspection Service, which must pre-approve meat labels.

Without definition and a quality-assurance system to apply to green claims, these label claims tend to have little consistent meaning. Some organizations are currently working on creating programs, similar to those of the NOP, that will provide such credibility. However, none of them is regulated by the government at this time. Most eco-labels are, in essence, either self-regulated or not regulated at all.

### Watchdogging organics

The NOP is seven years old. When I was growing up I was told that seven is “the age of reason.” It was supposed to be the age where we could tell right from wrong. Perhaps this is where we are with organics today—entering the age of evaluating where we are in the process of the rights and wrongs of this unique program.

It is important and appropriate to question where we are, but it is also appropriate to take what the press is saying with a grain of salt. They don't tell the whole story, nor do they understand the whole picture. The fact that the Office of the Inspector General is investigating organics is a positive thing: proof that the organic program is being watched over. And, if you pay close attention, you see it is the organic community itself asking for the NOP to do its job of strictly regulating the program. Watchdog groups such as the Organic Consumers

Association and Cornucopia Project also closely monitor the progress of organics and assist the public with communicating to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) when things are not shaping up the way they should.

Why does organic food cost more than products with other green labels? Farmers pay to be certified—a cost above and beyond just their cost of production. Certifiers pay to be accredited, insured and staffed. None of this is cheap, and it does add to the cost of organic food. But if people want strict standards to be truly enforced, then it simply will cost more. Organic farmers have not historically been subsidized like conventional farmers have. Only recently have we seen programs to provide them with incentives to go organic. Yet, even with the \$50 million Organic Initiative through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program, most farmers cannot get funds for something they are already doing, so most long-term organic farmers aren't eligible for the money. The announcement of these funds carried a three-week deadline for application. Some states have extended this deadline. However, organic farmers across the country are saying that getting the funds is difficult to impossible, and time is running out or already has.

Maybe the consumers mentioned in the *Brownfield* article say they think “natural” is better. But are they the informed consumer public that we know the organic market to be? Organic is not just a fad or another unregulated eco-label. We work hard to make the label mean something. The fact that we are finding holes in the system tells us that we are identifying problems and addressing them.

### A label worth supporting

The public has the right to know what is really organic and how to participate in what the label means. Anyone can contact a certifier and verify that an operation is certified. Such accountability is required by law. From the original proposed Organic Foods Production Act through to this very day, there has always been an avenue for people to give public comment. Public comment is what shaped the organic rules. Has this kind of participation been offered to us in the development of other labels?

Yes, mistakes have been made along the way. In a fairly new government program, in ■>



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<■ any government program for that matter, there will be plenty of room for mistakes. But the beauty of a quality-assurance protocol is that you identify your mistakes and have the opportunity to fix them. Pointing out the bad in anything makes for a good press story. Some say that the bad press about organics is biased by the influence of conventional agriculture. Some believe it is an attempt to kill the success of organics. Some just want to create their own unregulated label and capitalize on it.

Many people obviously do understand and support organics. Otherwise, the industry would not be growing as fast as it is. It certainly is suffering from a bad economy, and farmers, organic or not, are suffering, too. The answer to this dilemma is not to turn our backs on the one regulated green label we have. It is to uphold it and get involved with the improvement part of the process. With Kathleen Merrigan on board at the USDA and additional funding for the program, we should see improvement.

The *Washington Post* article states that we are waiting for standards for access to pasture. Yes, these have been a very long time in coming. However, the NOP has listened to dairy farmers concerning the issue and at this time, 19,000 public comments are being taken into consideration. Don't we want the government to listen to us? The decisions that will be made will have a serious impact on organic dairy farmers and consumers, and the comments need to be taken seriously.

Consumers who listens to reports that tell only part of the story and stop buying organics are turning their backs on the real organic community—the farmers—who are the ones proving to us that they are following the standards by going that extra mile and getting certified. It is not a fun, cheap, or easy process, but they do it, and the vast majority of them take real pride in the organic label. When you buy organic food, you are supporting the farmers who grew the raw commodity. The most transparent and best watched-over "green" label remains the organic label. ■

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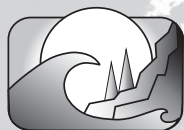
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