

Retail Organic Certification

A branding resource from the USDA

BY SUSAN STEWART

Based on the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, the National Organic Program (NOP) was put into effect in October 2002. As rules go, the organic rule, fondly known as Title 7 Part 205, is relatively new but maturing with intention, focus, and goals.

The NOP administration gave clear warning last year when they emphasized that their focus on enforcement was meant to establish trust for the organic label and to increase consumer awareness that organics are the most strictly regulated sector of the food industry. The NOP even gave it a name, the “Era of Enforcement,” and took up a catchy slogan, “Organic integrity from farm to table. Consumers trust the organic label.” The Era of Enforcement is all about separating fact from fiction, with a goal to increase consumer confidence from the farm to the table—and enforcement includes retailers.

For co-ops, our relationships with our producers, our members, and our co-workers remind us constantly that organic integrity is a resounding statement about how much we care about the products we sell and that we are committed to organic agriculture and our organic producers. The USDA organic logo is shorthand for all this, and consumers are becoming more and more aware of it.

Food co-ops should be all over the partnership with our growers to maintain organic integrity from the farm right to the hands of our co-op members, but they aren’t. In fact, some co-ops might actually be noncompliant without even knowing they are.

“Organic,” as a regulated term, means produced under the authority of the Organic Foods Production Act. Only those who can prove they have complied with the law can use the word organic. This regulation was established so that consumers would recognize and trust the organic label. But

manufacturers and producers, aware of organic growth, have designed many savvy labels to use the term “organic.” Some of these labels are authentic, but some are noncompliant, some are without certification backing up the label claim, and some are without organic ingredients. Noncertified co-ops, unaware of being required to prove compliance, use a variety of signs and labels for organic products in perishable departments, and certified co-ops may not be using the USDA logo at all. All these labels work to sell products, but they also confuse consumers. The USDA organic logo is the single icon that best represents support for organics.

It is true that getting a store certified by an accredited certification agency is a lot of work. It means strict cleaning and sanitizing regimens, logs for recording cleaning procedures between handling conventional and organic produce, logs for recording the use of organic ingredients, resets in

Defending Organic Against the GE Alfalfa Threat

Members of the sustainable food movement are furious and, frankly, we have a right to be. Last month’s decision by the USDA to fully deregulate genetically engineered (GE) alfalfa isn’t just a minor skirmish in a long and exhausting battle. It threatens the existence of organic farming and organic food, and flies in the face of USDA’s mandate from Congress under the Organic Foods Production Act to promote and preserve organic agriculture....

Tensions following USDA’s action have run high as members of the organic industry reacted to the news. Now, sustainable agriculture advocates including National Cooperative Grocers Association, Organic Valley, Stonyfield, and organic champion Maria Rodale are calling for organizations to “stand together in opposition to GE alfalfa.” As we regroup and redouble our efforts to protect organic agriculture, these unifying messages are more important than ever. The USDA’s decision last week was a tremendous setback, but the fight is far from over.

In order to preserve organics, the sustainable food movement must unite. Here’s what each of

us should do today to take action on this issue:

1. Let the White House know that organic food has a right to exist and thrive, and that you do not support the deregulation of GE alfalfa or any crop, by signing this petition. (<http://ota.capwiz.com/ota/issues/alert/?alertid=24747501>).
2. Support organizations like the Center for Food Safety (CFS) as they raise funds for legal action against the USDA’s deregulation of GE alfalfa. CFS and others have legal grounds to contest the USDA’s Environmental Impact Statement assessment as being incomplete. While Monsanto has billions in lobbying funds, the sustainable food movement has legal precedent on its side. Let’s support groups who aim to take the USDA to court. You can also sign up to receive CFS action alerts here.
3. Continue to support the farms and processors that bring us organics. Although growing, organic is still a small part of the agricultural industry. By increasing our market power, we can have a greater impact in Washington and throughout the nation. Let’s vote with our dollars.

4. Continue to demand that the USDA and Congress protect farmers and consumers from the risks of GE crops, products, and ingredients. Farmers have the right to use organic farming methods and should be protected from losses due to GE contamination. GE-free seed programs must be developed. Long-term research on the implications of GE crops must be conducted. Consumers have a right to know what’s in their food and to make informed decisions about what they choose to eat. These fundamental principles are part of a seven-point plan National Organic Coalition created to provide clarity and focus for the organic movement on this issue.

By uniting around common goals, the sustainable food movement has established an organic standard with high integrity; one that includes certification, accreditation, and consumer labeling. We must continue fighting for organic protections. We must demand that our government recognize organic’s right to exist and thrive.

—Robynn Shrader, CEO of National Cooperative Grocers Association, Feb. 7, 2011 at www.grist.org

storage and retail displays to prevent commingling and contamination, and training staff to understand and consistently implement the steps necessary to maintain a product's organic integrity.

There are exceptions. Operations whose gross income from organic sales totals \$5,000 or less do not have to be certified, but still must comply with all the rules if they want to call their product "organic." For retailers, organic certification is voluntary. But if you want to call the products coming out of your deli, bakery, and in the bulk bins and produce displays "organic," you still need to adhere to the organic rules to prevent commingling and contamination, to meet product labeling requirements, and to maintain records sufficient to prove that organic integrity remained intact throughout the process, from farm to display. There is no better way to stay in compliance than by being certified and staying certified. And there is no better way for co-ops to participate in strengthening the USDA organic logo than by using it on signs, labels, and weigh scale tags.

What does this really mean for a co-op? It means that foods that are not raw and ready to eat cannot be labeled "organic" but may list organic ingredients. It means that if your deli makes a "raw and ready-to-eat food" such as a sandwich, and you can prove that you are compliant with all the organic rules, the sandwich can be labeled "organic." But, unless the deli is certified, it cannot use the "USDA Organic" logo. And that is the logo consumers recognize; it is the icon for organic growers, organic processors and handlers, and for certified-organic retailers.

Organic retail certification is difficult, but that is why organic certification is a gift to co-ops. The challenges of organic certification are suited to small stores with motivated, intelligent staff who can internalize the NOP organic rules and develop department operations that adhere to those rules. By contrast, Title 7 Part 205 does not make it easy for corporate chains where directives trickle down to disinterested employees who are expected to learn and implement the organic rules, on every shift, all the time.

Co-ops take great pride in being friends with and supporting organic farmers, producers, and handlers, whose issues, practices, and livelihoods are important to co-ops. Our members depend on the success of their businesses in consistently providing the products we stock in our stores. Producers depend on the USDA organic logo to gain price premiums that balance their higher costs for producing organic products. Co-ops are the ideal place for the USDA organic logo to be seen and for it to become familiar to our members. They will recognize the difference between a produce sign with a prominent USDA organic logo and those without.

The health benefits of organic foods are being more broadly researched and more widely marketed, as are the benefits of organic agriculture for



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ecosystems and the environment as a whole. When consumers associate beneficial attributes to organic that are not written in the law, these consumers are associating the intent of the organic law with products. They know that the primary goal of organic agriculture is "to optimize the health and productivity of interdependent communities of soil life, plants, animals, and people" (NOSB, 1977).

When consumers want to be certain the products they purchase contain no harmful chemicals or pesticide residue, they choose organic. When consumers want to support the humane treatment of animals, they choose organic. And when consumers choose to support processed products that strictly prohibit genetically modified organisms, they look for products with the USDA organic logo.

The principal guidelines for organic production focus on materials and practices that enhance the balance of natural systems and integrate the parts of a farm system into an ecological whole. The USDA organic logo also represents sustainable agriculture practices that can reduce dependence on non-renewable resources and the amount of chemicals that end up in our water and food supplies. When consumers choose to support the environment, they look for the USDA organic logo.

Certified-organic food handlers, processors and retailers adhere to standards that maintain the integrity of organic agricultural products. They label products organic, provide the name of the certifying agent on the label and use the USDA logo to identify their organic products in the food industry.

But is the USDA logo really necessary, when members already have a relationship with a co-op and an understanding of the care and attention they give to the products in the co-op? Absolutely. According to the Organic Trade Association's 2010 Organic Industry Survey, U.S. sales of organic food and beverages were up 5.1 percent in 2009 over 2008. Increasingly, consumers are looking for the USDA organic logo, and this tells us that prospective co-op members are also looking for it.

Retail organic certification makes co-ops better at what we are already doing because organic is a production and processing claim; it's about how food is grown and processed. It provides training that improves our staff's knowledge about food, food handling, and food labels, and it gives staff a higher level of awareness while carrying out the details of everyday co-op activities. The USDA organic logo gives our members and prospective members another level of trust with an authority that backs up what we claim about how we operate our stores. The use of the USDA organic logo provides a clear and concise marketing message about your co-op.

On the farm, organic certification is a way of telling people about the farm and something about the farmer. In store marketing, it can tell members and potential members something before they even walk through the door. But right now, it's just as important to tell the farmers we do business with that we absolutely believe that organic farming practices are a shared value by our co-ops, our staff, and our members. Co-ops that are certified organic can demonstrate that shared value by using the USDA organic logo.

NCGA, as a co-founder and member of the National Organic Coalition, sees the importance of organic agriculture and the value of the USDA organic logo to consumers. They know that more and more people are looking for the organic label. It should be the real one they see in co-ops, the USDA organic logo. ■

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