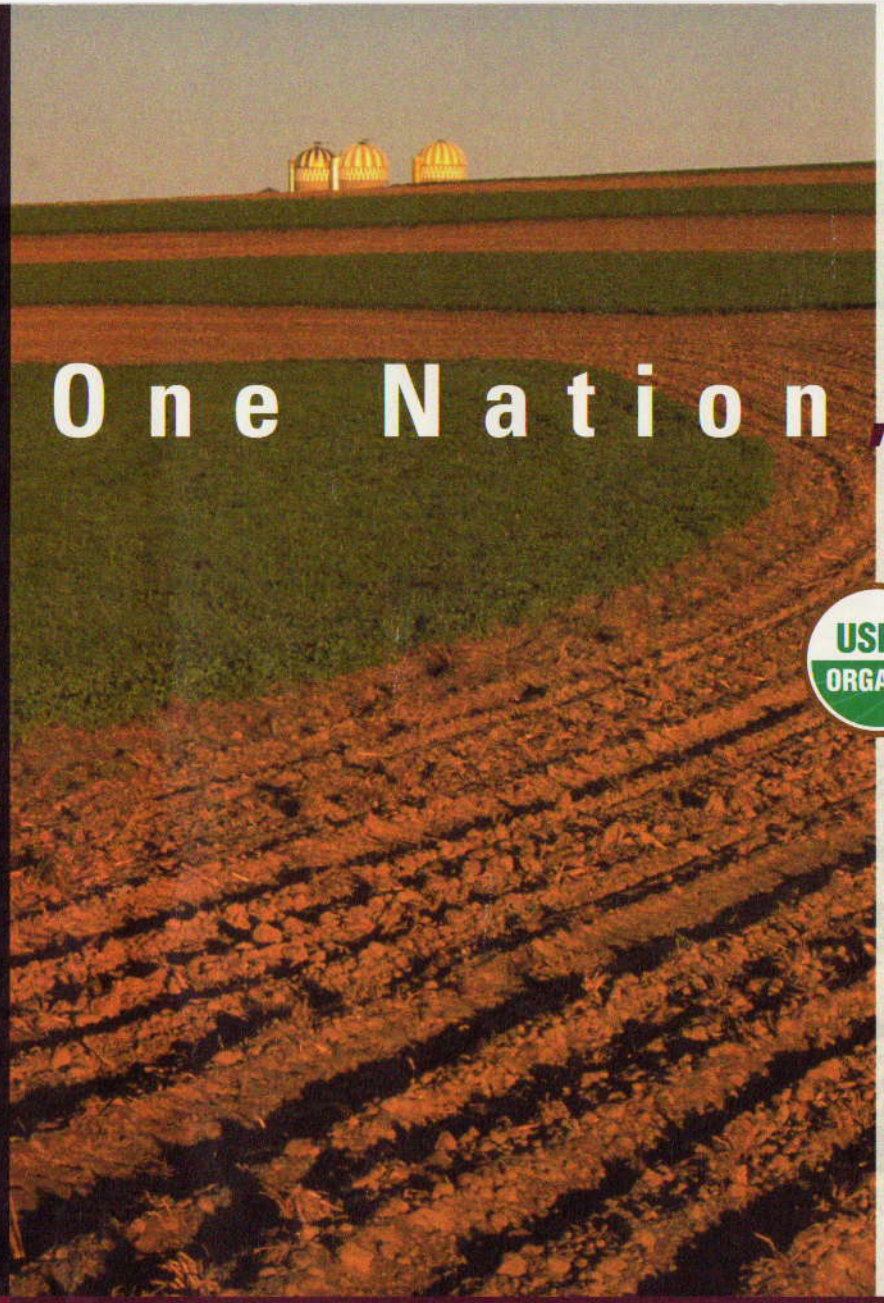

One Nation, *Organically Grown*

How does the new National Organic Program affect organic foods and farming, today and tomorrow? For consumers, it informs, guarantees, and still leaves a lot to think about.

Organic foods and organic farming have truly become a part of our culinary and agricultural landscape. If you've been an organic eater for some time, even if only occasionally, it's hard to imagine being without organic choices. With the appearance of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "USDA Organic" seal on foods as of October 21, 2002, you may logically be asking what organic means now, and how federal regulations change a food production system that you've embraced.

The USDA Organic seal is the culmination of a long journey toward uniform national standards for the organic label with oversight by USDA's National Organic Program (NOP). What will it mean for you? First, we'll look at the practical highlights of the legislation: what's allowed, what's prohibited, and who must comply; then, some exploration of the broader implications for food, farming, and consumer choices.

by Elaine Marie Lipson

Organic Today

Understanding the Organic Standard

The legislation that we'll call the "organic standard" includes a tremendous amount of specific detail, much of it most meaningful to growers and food processors. The good news is that USDA did in fact listen to the hundreds of thousands of consumer and industry comments that followed their first attempt at a national standard, released in late 1997. As a result, much of the revised standard, finalized in December, 2000, reflects consumer beliefs, at least in the broadest strokes, about what organic means. Some highlights:

- *Synthetic pesticides, including herbicides, fungicides, and other chemicals, are prohibited;*
- *Genetic modification, or the splicing of genes between species, is prohibited;*
- *Irradiation of foods is prohibited;.*
- *Use of processed sewage sludge, or biosolids, as fertilizer is prohibited;*
- *Livestock must be given access to pasture;*
- *Livestock are not given growth hormones or antibiotics (sick animals are treated, but removed from the herd and not sold as organic);*
- *Livestock are given organically grown feed;*
- *Land must be free of chemical applications for three years before its crops can be considered organic;*
- *Written farm plans and audit trails are required.*

Under the national organic standard, all growers and food processors who label their food *organic* must be certified by an independent third-party agent accredited by USDA. Very small producers (those who make $5,000 or less from an organic enterprise) are exempt from third-party certification to verify organic practices, though they still must abide by the organic standard if their goods are labeled *organic*.

How We Got Here

Organic farming's greatest benefits are a safer, cleaner, healthier environment and more sustainable use of resources. By eschewing pesticides and using methods that promote soil fertility and strong ecosystems, organic farming helps protect our topsoil from erosion and our groundwater, air, and soil from chemical contamination. Organic farms are safer for workers and communities, and organic foods have been shown to have substantially less of the pesticide residues that may present real health risks, especially to infants and children. Through the conservation and protection of resources that are fundamental to organic agriculture, future generations will have better opportunities to survive and thrive.

Consumers have shown that these benefits are of value, and the certification process is intended to independently verify the practices that will generate such results. But does the new national organic standard really provide a foundation for sustainable organic principles? For many, the marriage of federal regulation and environmental protection through alternative agriculture seems like a doubtful pairing.

If you think that the organic movement and the federal government seem like strange bedfellows, you're not alone. But organic industry leaders, including farmers, actually sought out federal oversight, asking for rigorous regulation that would protect both consumers and farmers from fraud.

Organic certification began to take shape in the 1970s and 80s. Farmers and advocates organized private agencies, such as Oregon Tilth and California Certified Organic Farmers, to develop standards and create a framework for independent certification of organic methods.

Eventually, several dozen different private and state organic certification bodies provided third-party organic certification to growers, processors, manufacturers, a few retailers, and at least one restaurant (Nora's, in Washington, DC). While standards did tend to be similar, they were not uniform. And because not all organic foods were certified (though many natural foods stores did require certification for organic products), it was sometimes said that organic "didn't mean anything."

Organic did mean something, though not exactly the same thing everywhere. It was widely understood by consumers to mean "no pesticides," but also to have a level of purity, integrity, and environmental wholesomeness that went beyond the simple omission of chemicals. As USDA discovered when the agency released its first proposal for a national organic standard in 1997, organic meant a great deal to those growing, manufacturing, and buying organic products, and they would fight for integrity and strength in the organic label.

Keeping Organic Organic

The Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA), passed in 1990, dictated the development of a national organic standard. Sponsored by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt), OFPA was intended to protect the growing organic marketplace from those who wished to either outlaw the label altogether and those who wanted to create weak standards or use the term indiscriminately.

OFPA mandated the formation of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), a citizens' advisory board that would make recommendations to USDA for defining and regulating the organic label. With representatives from all sectors, including farmers, retailers, consumers, environmentalists, and food processors, NOSB labored for many years to arrive at a comprehensive set of policies to recommend to USDA.

In late 1997, USDA released its first proposed national organic standard to a watchful organic community. But in a stunning dismissal of NOSB recommendations, USDA proposed a standard that did not reflect

organic principles as they had developed over the years, and that angered both consumers and farmers. Opposition focused on what became known as the "Big Three"—allowing genetic modification, irradiation, and the use of processed sewage sludge (biosolids) to be used in organic farming.

There were other transgressions as well, such as allowing antibiotics in organic livestock ranching. To the surprise of government bureaucrats who were accustomed to industries fighting against regulation, a large and very vocal segment of the population, including organic industry members, wanted restrictions for organic farming and foods that were stronger, not weaker.

USDA received an historic number of comments on their proposal (in part because, for the first time, comments could be made via the Internet). A write-in campaign called "Keep Organic Organic" united many somewhat disparate groups opposed to the Big Three in organic. USDA capitulated and began the process anew.

In late 2000, then-U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman released a new proposal for the national organic standard, calling it the most rigorous organic standard in the world. Though not perfect—and, as we'll see, perhaps just now revealing some troubling aspects—the national organic standard, finalized in March, 2001, with an 18-month implementation period ending October 21, 2002, held true to much of what consumers and the industry expected and had asked for in response to the first proposal.

Organic Tomorrow

Where Do We Go From Here?

How do national standards benefit consumers? Where previously dozens of certifying agents with differing standards operated in the organic arena, now these same certifiers, accredited by USDA, will operate with one consistent standard, in every state. The requirement of certification for most producers protects consumers against fraudulent use of the organic label. Since most organic foods still have a price premium, the risk of fraud can't be discounted. Under the national organic standard, anyone knowingly misusing the organic label is subject to penalties.

Thus, a national organic standard offers consistency and continuity. The explicit details of the rule, along with requirements for a written audit trail and farm plan, also provide a level of transparency that doesn't exist in the conventional food system.

For some food production concerns, the organic label offers the only sanctuary. In the United States, where foods with unlabeled genetically modified ingredients (primarily corn, soy, cotton and their byproducts) are profuse in the supermarket, the organic label is a concerned consumer's only guarantee that this technology is not used.

If there is a dimension to the national organic standard that concerns both organic farmers and organic consumers, it is the specter of yet another agricultural system that favors large-scale production at the expense of small, local, regional and community agendas. Even before the rule's finalization and implementation, the promise of a federally regulated national organic standard helped shape the market. Conventional food companies saw that organic was here to stay, and that its benefits drew premium prices in the marketplace. With appealing bottom-line numbers showing rapid growth in sales and volume, the organic marketplace began to see consolidation through acquisitions of smaller companies by larger ones, and then by some of the largest in the world.

The integration of organic practices into the conventional food industry can also be seen as a victory, of course. If organic foods and those who want them were once mocked, then ignored, then held in contempt, they are now seen as highly desirable. This means more organic crops being grown, more agricultural land being cultivated without chemicals, and greater choice and accessibility in the marketplace.

In turn, this may mean more consumers—and more diverse consumers—able to enjoy the right to know how their food is grown, to protect their children from potentially unsafe residues, and to support a food system that rejects chemicals as an absolute necessity. It may also mean more respect and funding for organic farming research, so fundamental to the evolution of successful farm systems and to our understanding of the full potential of organic methods.

A Valuable Tool, Not Panacea

The benefits of the national organic standard, then, are substantial. It provides a great deal of information about how food is grown, and better guarantees than any other established and widely available label for food production.

Critics say that the farming methods may be different, but the philosophical distinctions between organic and conventional food industries are increasingly blurred, and mandatory certification under USDA is no help at all.

The cost of certification is an obstacle for some small farmers who exceed the low $5,000 annual threshold for exemption. Indeed, according to the Santa Cruz, Calif.-based Organic Farming Research Foundation, most organic farms are still relatively small. Many of these growers feel the squeeze of a USDA-accredited certification requirement that adds to financial pressures. Without certification, these small farmers will lose the market advantage and lifeline that the organic marketplace has provided.

Because the national organic standard does have the

capacity to evolve and for adjustments to be made, this is one area where farm advocates will be watchful as the practical applications of the National Organic Program take shape. If, under USDA, only larger organic farms can successfully participate, it's likely that many will demand that aspects of the program be re-evaluated to better accomodate small and family farms.

So what's a consumer to do? If your values include supporting small farms and rural communities, you'll still have to make the effort to choose foods from companies that share these values. The USDA Organic label is no guarantee that your purchase will do so (and as we've seen, the organic label alone has for some time now been a signpost to, but not an assurance of, small-scale farming). If you are concerned about the environmental consequences of increasing "miles to market," or the distance food travels, if you want to encourage local and regional food production over uniformity in the marketplace, if you want a direct relationship with those who grow your food— these conditions are outside the scope of the national organic standard. Building local and community food security remains something we'll have to work for, create support for, and articulate through further legislation if that's the best way to effect change.

In short, we can have a great deal of confidence in the provisions of the national organic standard and the organic label, but we cannot abdicate our responsibility to know and understand where our food comes from to any food label. It may have been naive to ever imagine that we could, or that we'd want to. Wasn't that the root of the problem in the first place— that we were willing to put too much faith in labels rather than arming ourselves with information? That we allowed ourselves to be passive consumers, making food production invisible and assuming that industry and government had our best interests at heart?

As food consumers, we can no longer afford to be naive. Five to six billion pounds of pesticides are used each year, transforming our world and our habitats. Crop diversity is at an all-time low. Chemical-based industrialized farming has not successfully addressed the root causes of hunger and poverty. Risks of antibiotics and growth hormones, gross waterway contamination, and food safety issues plague the livestock industry. Fewer and fewer companies control more and more of the worldwide food production system.

Organic production is not the problem, but is a viable and very valuable part of the solution. The USDA Organic seal will help to make organic agriculture a more powerful force in the complex global food system. But on the way to a better world, the national organic rule is not a be-all and end-all, only a tool that may be either productive and effective, ineffective, or misused.

Appetite for Action

Through the creation of the Organic Foods Production Act, we've seen that committed and thoughtful farmers, advocates, and consumers can have significant impact on how legislation is created and written. Through the experience of the first, calamitous 1997 proposal for a national organic standard, the organic community has proven that it can organize to reverse attempts to relax long-held principles.

Now, as conscious and concerned consumers, we have the opportunity to exercise vigilance and act on our intentions. We can expect USDA to vigorously enforce its rigorous standard for the organic label and those who use it. We can work to protect small farms and ask government and the organic industry to make small farms a priority. We can participate in local food production, buy from local and regional producers, and support companies that in turn source from small and family farms. And we can buy organic foods knowing that, indeed, organic does mean something. The visionaries and pioneers who built the organic movement can take pride in having changed our food production system beyond all expectations.

Consumer choices and purchasing dollars helped build and will help shape the future of the organic foods system. Each of us has the responsibility to ourselves and to future generations to care about what we eat and how it's grown and produced. Only we—consumers, farmers, activists, eaters—can ensure that the tools and resources of the National Organic Program are wielded with integrity and care, and in ways that protect and restore our environment, our farms, and our future.

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Organic Categories

Because processed foods with organic ingredients are widely available today, USDA has devised four categories of labeling, as follows:

100% Organic

this means just what it says

Organic

95% of ingredients must be certified organic

Made With Organic Ingredients

70% of ingredients are certified organic

Less than 70% Organic

organic ingredients can be listed on the side panel only

For each of these categories, the law specifies additional requirements for use of the seal (*allowed only in the first two categories*), display of certifier's name and address, and restrictions for non-organic ingredients. To learn more about the details of these stipulations, visit the USDA National Organic Program Web site (***www.ams.usda.gov/nop***).