

A Report from the Front Lines

USDA hearings across the country generate public outrage.

Steve Sprinkel

The following is a reprint from Acres, USA, appearing under the title "USDA Underestimates Organic Community Response to the National Organic Program, U.S. Congress Now Seen As Major Play in Rescue Operation."

Now, seventy days into the public comment period on the USDA Proposed Rule on the National Program (ending on April 30th), the U.S. Congress is making preliminary inquiries on the issue of organic standards.

A "rogue wave" of public outcry, unforeseen from the USDA wheelhouse, now threatens to swamp the proposed rule, as consensus builds for a withdrawal, revision and resubmittal of a new proposed rule.

In rapid response to concerns of consumers, environmentalists and organic farmers, Austin, Texas Congressman Lloyd Doggett was among the first to raise his concern that the proposed rule is not in conformance to the *Organic Foods Production Act*. Representatives Sam Farr of central California and Ron Kind of Wisconsin, and the Senate author of the act, Patrick Leahy of Vermont, oppose the new definitions and criteria of the proposed rule that fatally flaw USDA's attempt to dilute the strength of national standards for organic farming and handling.

At formal USDA hearings in Austin, Ames and Seattle, 100% of the testimony given was strongly in opposition to the proposals. In sometimes heated and angry attacks on the integrity of USDA personnel, consumers in particular gave stirring and eloquent support for traditional principles of organic farming, organic food processing and organic handling.

Sierra Club Lonestar Chapter spokesman Neil Carman reported that "never in nearly twenty years experience in regulatory review and rulemaking have I ever seen anything that comes close to the quality of public testimony on the National Organic Program (NOP). Consumers have gotten 'beyond the sludge' and are responding with knowledgeable articulation on the details, and those details are where we find the most severe violations of the organic label."

At the Austin hearing, it was gratifying to see that National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) Chairman Robert Anderson of Walnut Acres in Pennsylvania, NOSB Crops Committee Chairman Steve Pavich, and NOSB member

Margaret Wittenberg of Whole Foods Markets attended voluntarily and added their perspectives. Tom O'Brien, special assistant to Agriculture Marketing Service (AMS) Director Enrique Figueroa, was also in attendance, which is a measure of USDA's recognition that the NOP was causing some major waves. Eileen Stommes, the AMS administrator to whom all the public comment is addressed officially attended all three hearings held up to this date. She must be incredibly resilient, because some of the criticism she has had to weather has been deafening.

Steve McCargar of Oneota Co-op of Decorah, Iowa said it best in Ames: "The stakes are high, and the Department should listen carefully to the people who have created, monitored and regulated this growth industry with little or no help from the federal government up until now." McCargar identified that the "problems with the rule...are directly related to the specific language or limitations imposed in the *Organic Foods Production Act*. Chiefly among those concerns is the USDA's "authority to establish and change the rules (through) new definitions, categories and exemptions not envisioned in OFPA."

"Live up to the spirit and letter of the law. Failing that, get ready for a battle, for it will surely come." McCargar concluded, to an ovation from the crowd.

There were some significant differences between Ames and Austin. In Texas, 80% of respondents were consumers and environmentalists, while in Iowa, more organic producers were in attendance than any other stakeholder sector. The results were largely the same. The battle McCargar alluded to has already become a siege that lobbyists and the synthetic chemical manufacturing sector may be hard pressed to escape from. But it will take an immense amount of public pressure to rescue the OFPA.

The broadly based organic stakeholder community created an innovative and multi-faceted campaign early in the Comment Period that is now breaking on the government's shore like an El Nino charged storm wave. The Pure Food Campaign had specially-built green "ballot boxes" sent to hundreds of natural food coops and independent grocery stores so that folks could obtain some basic information and write to Pure Food Campaign for more. National organic and natural foods retailers Whole Foods Markets and Wild Oats have published thousands of flyers on the NOP

"Hi-Hi, Hi-Ho, Organic Standards Have to Go"



Certified organic farmers and consumers enjoy getting together.

now distributed at their stores.

National radio hosts like Jim Hightower and Susan Powter have been hammering the proposed rule frequently. The Associated Press ran a story on the Austin hearing that was published in newspapers coast to coast. European and Asian newsmedia have given great attention to the issue as well. One key factor in getting news coverage has been the creativity of Greenpeace. An organic advocate and Citizens For Health founder Craig Winters wrote recently after the Seattle hearing:

“At first I was a little concerned. There were only about 100 people in the room at that time and only two protest signs. After all, Seattle is a very progressive city and Washington State is quite positive on alternative medicine. Shortly thereafter, things started changing for the positive in a wonderful way. Jennifer Hillman of Greenpeace arrived at 11:00 dressed as Fishberry, Greenspace’s anti-mascot for genetic engineering. My eyes lit up as I saw about 75 people with lots of protest signs. Fishberry was soon joined by several others costumed as fruits and vegetables. There was a person ingeniously garbed as a “bunch of purple grapes,” complete with a gas mask. There was the Puget Consumers’ Co-op Carrot, and five other fruit costumes. It was quite a sight to behold.

The crowd continued to grow to close to 100 people. Finally we started our march with the local television channels filming the excitement. To the beat of conga drums, we walked around the Seattle Center. Someone finally started to chant “Hi-Hi, Hi-Ho, Organic Standards Have to Go.” We continued this chant until we reached the out-

side court area where the USDA meeting was taking place. There was a PA system and podium set up outside and four people, including myself, spoke for about ten minutes. Again the cameras were rolling. Then everyone in the audience threw mock versions of the proposed rules into a large garbage can. Next we began our march into the meeting room, again chanting with conga drums beating. I cannot express the incredible energy in the room as 100 chanting activists with signs and conga drums entered. The over 100 people already in

the room stood up and gave a standing ovation to the new participants. Now the room had over two hundred people with dozens of signs, human fruit, and folks in Fishberry T-shirts. We quieted down after a few minutes and the speakers continued to give their presentations.

Overall, the energy was great and I am sure the USDA got the message loud and clear. A statement one of the USDA representatives made was cause for optimism. He stated pretty definitively that the USDA would re-submit new proposed rules for additional comments. In other words, rather than the USDA taking in all the comments and then issuing final rules, they will issue new proposed rules, receive comments again on those, and then issue final rules. So, on that level, there is reason for optimism.”

But that will not happen unless the effort reaches many more than the approximately 12,000 respondents who have already written to USDA.

Utilizing telecommunications technology on the Internet and the World Wide Web, the organic community has made available detailed analysis via websites created by the Organic Trade Association, Organic Farmers Marketing Association, California Certified Organic Farmers and others. A new organization called the Save Organic Foundation has links to most of the websites providing information on the NOP at <http://www.saveorganic.org>. Those who don’t have access to computer technology may have a neighbor who does. If not, make use of such systems at your local public library, and ask a librarian for some assistance. You may make another convert in that librarian while you are at it.