

Letter from Washington

The Time to Act Is Now. . .Like Never Before; Stop the Attack on Organic

Your voice is needed now like never before! We and other organizations are launching a campaign to raise awareness and take action to protect the integrity of the organic food label. I'm hoping that you are as outraged as I am and will join me in defending organic against a shocking attack by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that threatens the value of the organic label and the future of organic. Ironically, this comes just as we enter what I believe is the Age of Organics, when more and more people are recognizing that chemical-intensive practices in agriculture and our communities is not sustainable and are moving in larger and larger numbers to embrace organic practices and products. If you eat organic food and understand what it means to your health and the health of the environment, I know you'll want to join me.

Save Our Organic

I'm asking you as a member or friend of Beyond Pesticides to think about how you can help: voice your concern to your U.S. Representative and Senators, the companies whose organic products you buy, the places where you shop for organic products, and President Obama that they need to stand up and protect the transparent process that has built organic for over two decades.

Here is the simple and immediate action you can take. Go to the webpage *Save Our Organic* at www.beyondpesticides.org/SaveOurOrganic. Then, please read on, get the details, and become an activist with me in your community.

What the USDA Takeover Means for Organic

The organic label and standards that support it are being threatened by a **USDA takeover and undermining** of the: (i) **independent public board** (National Organic Standards Board/NOSB) that was set up by Congress to oversee the setting of organic standards, (ii) **transparent and democratic public participation policies** and procedures in decision making, and (iii) **historical decisions that have limited synthetic materials** in organic production and food products, **protected biodiversity, and improved water quality and food safety**. USDA wants to control decisions on all organic standards, ignore core values and principles that ensure rigorous public review of any synthetics that are permitted, and put economic interests ahead of health and environmental values that protect biodiversity. If public trust in the organic label is undermined, so is the incredibly important transition to organic nationwide that you and I have supported and want to see grow to become the norm.

It is not an accident that this issue of *Pesticides and You* extols the virtues of organic production and warning of its possible demise. The data is clear. Organic does offer us a cleaner environment, safer and more nutritious food supply, less dependency on fossil fuels and water, and increased carbon sequestration in slowing global climate change. However, this USDA takeover of the standard-setting process could, if successful, reverse decades of work to build a credible, respected, and accountable organic label.

Keep Organic Continuously Improving

As I begin my fifth and final year as an environmental and conservation representative on the National Organic Standards Board, I am honored to be a part of an independent board, reliant on public, farmer, and scientific input to recommend policies that set a moratorium on nanotechnology, prohibit soil-less hydroponics, keep synthetics out of infant formula, require organic hops in organic beer, take antibiotics out of organic apple and pear production, advance organic beekeeping, allow greater limitations on synthetics deemed unnecessary, take hazardous secret inert ingredients out of allowed materials, and advance organic systems management practices. As the NOSB and public began to advance recommendations that asked USDA to stop allowing genetic drift from genetically engineered crops onto organic lands, and increase standards to keep contaminants out of compost, the public minutes of meetings reveal that USDA began to curtail the independence of the NOSB – removing from the workplan issues the public asked the NOSB to address. This is being done without public discussion and established published criteria or standards of review.

In an interview with the Burlington Free Press (VT), an NOSB consumer representative, Jean Richardson, emeritus professor of environmental studies and environmental law at the University of Vermont, said, "We're there to provide checks and balances. . . We're the voice of the people." According to the Free Press, which cited a USDA-called NOSB meeting in February, "[S]he said administrators at the National Organic Program 'thoroughly lectured' the 15-member advisory board for acting with too much independence. . . [and she] found the NOP's dressing-down disconcerting."

The Time to Act Is Now

The agenda for the upcoming NOSB meeting in San Antonio Texas on April 29 – May 2 has been severely restricted by USDA action, but it will be an opportunity, through comments to the *Federal Register* at www.regulations.gov and at the meeting, to voice your concerns about the government takeover of organic standards.

If you feel, as I do, that organic offers us a way forward to define a sustainable future and say no to toxic chemicals that invade our lives, please join me in telling USDA to restore the independence of the NOSB, the public participation process in standard setting, and the integrity of the organic label to one that is trusted by a growing number of organic consumers.



Beyond Pesticides' members supported the core values and principles that we wrote into the organic law and its implementation. Now we must protect the organic label. Let's make our voices heard!

Jay Feldman is Executive Director of Beyond Pesticides.