

alert

BY RONA CHERRY

Has the organic movement lost its way?

Growing food without chemicals, treating animals humanely, supporting small farms and healing the environment are the founding principles of the organic movement. But as America's appetite for organic food grows, so do the attempts to undermine all that the term "organic" has stood for.

Organic consumer groups charge that large manufacturers are weakening organic integrity by lobbying the government to lessen requirements. For instance, between 1995 and 2005, only 38 synthetic additives—all vetted by the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Organic Standards Board (NOSB)—were allowed in organic foods. But with the passage of a rider to the 2006 Agriculture Appropriations Bill, 500 synthetic substances can be used in organic products despite the opposition of 200 organic companies and more than 350,000 protest letters sent to Congress. Moreover, these ingredients haven't been submitted for review by the NOSB.

"Washington politics at its worst came to the organics industry," says Mark Kastel, senior farm policy analyst for the Cornucopia Institute, a public interest group that represents organic farmers. The organic label has been further weakened because now the USDA can approve a synthetic substance for an "emergency" period of one year without any review by the NOSB.

Organic milk is one example of where manufacturer integrity has recently been called into question. The Organic Consumers Association (OCA), an industry watchdog group, has spearheaded a boycott of two organic milk brands. "Young calves are being imported from nonorganic conventional farms where they have been weaned on animal blood plasma and treated with antibiotics, even though the companies are selling dairy products labeled as USDA organic," says Ronnie Cummins, OCA's national director. "Cows are supposed to be able to graze on pasture, but instead they are crowded into feedlots."

It now falls to consumers to be more careful than ever about buying from companies that truly promote organic values. Look for the "100% Organic," label, meaning the food is fully organically produced; plain "Organic" means it contains at least 95 percent organically produced ingredients. Shop from local farmers who use pesticide-free growing methods and fertilizers. Check out the OCA's website, and learn about organic brands. Finally, urge congressional representatives and senators to preserve strict organic standards.

"For the sake of the earth and the health of its people we have to keep making noise as an organic community," says Cummins. "If we raise the volume, we'll have the best results."

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The amount of the USDA's \$100 billion budget allocated to help farmers and ranchers transition to organics.

Source: Organic Consumers Association

Rona Cherry is a New York-based journalist who has written about health and the food industry for more than a decade. ■