

Global developments in organic agriculture

by

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Ecological Agriculture Projects recently reported to the Canadian Agricultural Research Council (CARC), which has established an ad hoc sub-committee on natural and organic foods on the subject of possible government actions to regulate the use of the terms natural and organic.

We were asked to provide background information on definitions, certification, verification and control of these terms in Canada and other parts of the world.

The term organic has been widely used since the 1940s to describe food production systems and their products. These systems have evolved to achieve one or more of the following overlapping goals: food self-reliance; resource conservation and environmental protection; and the sustaining of rural communities.

Incorrect

In the agricultural community, the term organic is often incorrectly understood to have the same sense as that used in organic chemistry.

A number of definitions of organic are already in use. They can be placed in three general categories: those that focus on what products are not permitted in organic production; those that focus on the products and practices that substitute for prohibited products; and those that emphasize the design of the farm, the goal of ensuring food quality, and how production is synchronized with ecological processes.

Each category of definition has advantages and disadvantages with regard to regulation and labelling.

A number of private and public agencies have also defined transitional organic, which is used to describe farming systems that are moving, in a planned way, towards organic production but have not completed the transition process.

Mainstream

The term natural was originally associated with the counterculture. It has since been adopted by most major food corporations, and this has contributed to substantial public confusion regarding its meaning. There is widespread agreement that the term natural is confined to processing, in contrast to organic which also focuses on production. Minimal processing and the absence of synthetic ingredients and additives are the generally recognized criteria for use of the term, but much disagreement exists on the meaning of minimal processing. It is a widely held view that the term natural is almost impossible to regulate.

Organic certification programs have been in existence since the early 1970s. Early program organizers had seen how the term natural had lost its meaning in the marketplace and wished to avoid a similar fate for the term organic. Successful programs establish standards, and certification, verification and control procedures. Standards are based on the principles of agroecology, although a number of factors, such as the state of the regional farm economy, and different schools of thought in organic production, can lead to regional differences. Most standards, however, are based on guidelines prepared by two international agencies, the Organic Foods Production Association of North America (OFPANA) and the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). This ensures a basic consistency in the standards from one location to another.

Certification

There are differences in verification and control procedures. Six models are used: farmer association, public interest, corporate, professional chapter, licensee / franchise, and government. The principal concern is that each system have independent, third party certification, including independent inspection, a certification committee that is not compromised by commercial interests, and controls over the use of its mark. The corporate and licensee / franchise models are thought by many to be insufficiently independent. Many agencies using a corporate model are now joining more independent programs.

The Canadian government published a definition of organic in December of 1988, and is providing funding to OFPANA to help the organic food industry develop market opportunities, and an evaluation and accreditation program.

Blocks

A number of other federal initiatives, however, are blocking the development of an organic food industry. These include the absence of a legal definition, marketing board rules, and limited access to credit and crop insurance.

British Columbia, Manitoba and Quebec are all developing systems to control the use of the term organic, in consultation with the organic food industry.

The US Department of Agriculture, Food and Drug Administration, and Federal Trade Commission do not regulate the term organic, although initiatives are underway in the USDA and FDA to do so. There exist some federal controls on the use of the term natural, especially with regard to meat. The absence of a US federal definition of organic food is restricting interstate and international trade of certain products.

Five USA states (Colorado, New Hampshire, Texas, Washington and Oklahoma) have state-run certification programs. Eleven others have regulations to control the use of that term. In those states, the certification process is carried out cooperatively with private certification agencies. Minnesota, for example contracts with a certification agency to do the standard setting and verification work. Most of these states have legal definitions of the term organic, and some provide minimal standards for production. Others support financially a private agency's standards. Some have fines for violations and provide financing for enforcement. At least 6 other states are presently considering developing comprehensive regulations.

Around the World

The EEC has a regulation on organic food and farming that will facilitate the flow of organic foods within the EEC. The regulation has been developed with the assistance of IFOAM. Its existence will likely force non-EEC states to develop regulations consistent with the EEC regulation if those external states, including Canada, wish to export organic products to the European market.

Europe

Of the EEC member states, Denmark, France, The Netherlands, and the UK are the most involved in protecting the term organic in the marketplace. Denmark works closely with a certification agency to provide subsidies to converting farmers, and to ensure the integrity of the certification process. France requires certification agencies to register with a commission responsible for evaluating the quality of certification programs. The Netherlands helps fund the costs of a private certification programs. The UK has established the United Kingdom Registry of Organic Foods Standards (UKROFS) to register certification agencies, but also to provide certification for producers who do not belong to a private agency.

Of the non-EEC European states, Sweden and Norway provide the most support to organic producers, including subsidies for converting farmers, and funding for the principal certification agency.

Asia

Two Australian states are supporting the development of an organic farming sector, but are not involved in controlling the use of the term in any significant way. The federal government is not involved. In New Zealand, the federal government works

cooperatively with the country's major certification group to improve the quality of the agency's certification program.

Japan does not have a certification system because most organic produce is direct marketed to consumers or consumer associations. Consumers often help make decisions, so they are very familiar with an organic producer's practices. As a result, export or import of organic produce is limited. The government does have an Office of Organic Agriculture.

Three LDCs are supporting the development of organic agriculture. Burkina Faso and Nicaragua view organic agriculture as an integral part of their agricultural development strategy. Guatemala is interested in organic primarily as a marketing opportunity. Organic produce is being exported from approximately 20 LDCs. Most of the certification and verification work is being performed by North American and European private certification agencies.

A number of international organizations, such as UNICERT and the International Organic Trade Association, facilitate the upgrading of certification and verification procedures, and trade in organic goods. Global harmonization of the organic foods industry is underway through the accreditation and evaluation of certification programs, and through the development of reciprocity agreements between different agencies. The independence of the inspection process is being strengthened by the existence of an international body of trained inspectors.

Demand

The demand for organic foods in North America and Europe exceeds the supply. A number of surveys have concluded that at least one quarter of consumers are interested in buying organic foods on a regular basis, especially if the organic premium is no more than 25%.

The organic foods industry has made great strides in the past three years to improve both the quality of the certification programs, and their ability to control food quality and fraud. The general view of the industry is that it can control the use of the term organic amongst producers and processors who participate in certification programs. It is unable to control, in the absence of a Canadian legal framework, the use of the term organic by those who do not participate in a program. The most successful control of the term organic arises when private agencies and government jurisdictions work cooperatively to implement a program with definition, standards, verification, certification and control mechanisms. Generally, the government takes responsibility for creating a legal framework for certification and for providing enforcement of the regulations. A private certification agency is given responsibility for standard setting, inspection and verification. The federal government is likely to be advised by the Canadian Agricultural Research Council to develop such a legal framework and partnership with a private agency.

This article was a summary of a presentation given in February 1990 to Challenging the 90's: A farm business management conference by Rod MacRae, Ecological Agriculture Projects, Box 191, Macdonald College of McGill University, Ste-Anne de Bellevue, ac. H9X 1CO

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