

Certification victory

Supporters of alternative agriculture won a major legislative victory in Congress last month. A roll call vote in House of Representatives provided a comfortable 50-vote margin to a plan for implementing a federal organic certification program.

Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-OR) was author of the House legislation. Although it was not supported by a majority of the important House Agriculture Committee, the Institute for Alternative Agriculture (IAA) and other members of a consumer and farmer coalition believed it was important enough to take to the full House floor. Most Committee members favoured an amendment by Rep. Charles Stenholm (D-TX) to merely study certification and make recommendations for further action. We feel there was adequate information on the subject," said Jim Aidala, IAA's Director of Policy Development. "A study would have delayed action which is vital to consumer interests, as well as interests of farming and alternative agriculture."

This House vote came on the heels of a Senate win for alternative agriculture in July. An attempt by Iowa Senator Charles Grassley (R-IA) to alter definitions of sustainable agriculture was defeated by a 2-1 margin. That proposal would have affected a range of federal policies on the issue.

Organic certification is important in the context of national agricultural policy. A Harris survey last year showed that 84 percent of the public is willing to purchase foods and produce. While 22 states have certification programs in effect, inconsistencies in labelling hinder commerce in organic foods. Also, they result in confusion for consumers and farmers alike. While only 2 percent of all food sold in the U.S. is organic, the market is growing at levels of 40 percent annually.

Organization such as the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture and the Farm Bureau Federation endorse the idea of a national certification program. Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Chairman of the senate agriculture Committee, earlier championed a successful Senate fight on this issue. Rep. DeFazio calls his parallel legislative effort "a pro-farmer amendment" to the Farm Bill. "A consistent, nationwide standard is the only way consumers will know whether or not they are getting what they pay for," he said.

In the House, support was "bipartisan" and "along broad lines," according to Jim Aidala. "Even some state Farm Bureaus went along with our position." Observers believe that considerable momentum for sustainable agriculture's long term objectives resumed from the vote.

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