



SOMETHING TO CEREBRATE

So, you think it's organic?

BY KATE MORSE, CCH

The USDA established the National Organic Program (NOP) in 1990 to regulate the food industry's use of the term "organic." By taking such a step, they began to define a complex set of standards having to do with: 1) food raising, processing, handling and shipping, for both animal and vegetable foods, raw and processed; 2) becoming a certified organic grower or producer; 3) and labeling requirements.

In the last couple of years, NOP fine-tuned the regulations, spurred by groups that were perturbed by lax enforcement especially in the organic dairy industry. The Obama administration appointed a new chair of the National Organic Standards Board (www.ams.usda.gov/nosb), but the Secretary of Agriculture also receives input from The Organic Trade Association (www.ota.com). To date, the heavy-hitters in organic foods in this country are Kraft, General Mills, Pepsi, Cargill, Dean Foods, and the like. Through their subsidiaries, these companies own the biggest packaged organic brands (e.g., Hain, Muir Glen, Horizon Dairy). Organic produce is a drop in the bucket.

Just reading the NOP regulations is a week-long job. What's interesting is the way they break down substances that are and aren't permitted in the organic production cycle. Now, organic poultry and livestock must get 100% organic feed, and the clearest new prohibitions are those against antibiotics in poultry and livestock, ionizing radiation, genetically modified organisms, and sewage sludge. (Note: This isn't about bacteria. Sewage sludge, particularly from municipal solid waste processing facilities, usually contains excessive amounts of heavy metals such as lead and cadmium. Leafy green vegetables that give you minerals get them—good and bad—from the soil they grew in, making sewage sludge a toxic fertilizer.)

Additionally, the regulations state that something that is produced organically must be handled, shipped, and packaged using methods and substances that are organic, so there is no later contamination. The organic substance's manufacture, use, and disposal must have minimal impact on human health and the environment (NOP defers to other federal agencies for definition here), and cannot be used to preserve, recreate flavor, color or texture, or replace nutrients loss in processing.

A long list of synthetic and non-synthetic things are permitted for fertilizing, cleaning, and weed, pest, and disease control. Among these are several forms of alcohol, chlorine compounds, copper compounds, and ozone. Petroleum-based

plastic mulches are permitted, except for those with polyvinyl chloride. Some of the permitted copper compounds are those exempted from EPA tolerances, provided the user assures that there is minimal accumulation in the soil.

Organic livestock can receive aspirin, vaccines, iodine, ivermectin (a wormer), furosemide (a diuretic), lidocaine (an analgesic), oxytocin (a hormone), tolazoline (a sedative) and other drugs. However, for each drug, the animal's milk must be discarded and the animal itself not harvested for meat for a specified number of days after its last dose.

Under the revised regulations, cows and other ruminants must be on pasture for the entire growing season, or not fewer than 120 days. The Cornucopia Institute (www.cornucopia.org), an organization that "seeks economic justice for the family-scale farming community," claims that 30- to 40% of the national organic milk supply comes from compact animal feeding operations (CAFOs)—the big industrial feedlot farms. Their website also contains reports and scorecards on various organically-labeled foods.

According to NOP, to be labeled "100% organic," a product must be just that. To be labeled "organic," a product must contain 95% organic ingredients. To be labeled "made with organic," 70% of the ingredients must be organic.

Enforcement laxity has been a big problem for the National Organic Program. A report from the Office of the Inspector General of the USDA found that organic regulations were grossly ignored during the past ten years. Serious violations between 2006 and 2008 are just now being addressed. Some states, such as California, have organic programs that don't meet federal guidelines, to the befuddlement of consumers. Additionally, third party organizations, not the federal government, handle organic certification enforcement. In the past, they weren't consistently testing for pesticide residues. That's changing now.

The NOP regs are rife with exceptions, and they relate strictly to food. Whether your shampoo is legitimately organic is anybody's guess.

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Editor's note: In case you didn't know the meaning of cerebrate, like me, it is to use the power to reason.

What about "natural"?

The USDA's earliest attempts to define what the word "natural" means on a food label date back to 1982. At that time, both the Federal Trade Commission and the Food and Drug Administration were wrestling with the issue, too, and the three agencies shared policy. Over time, the USDA modified its definition, usually following adjudicated cases. Eventually, the food industry couldn't tell what was law and what was an exception, and the agencies couldn't offer much concrete guidance.

Although the USDA attempted to rectify this in 2005, the regulations remain vague. In fact, the USDA "natural" definition applies only to meat and poultry.

"Natural," under USDA regulations means the meat/poultry contains no artificial ingredients or added color, and is minimally processed. Minimal processes are those processes which don't fundamentally alter the product, and function to preserve it, make it edible, or keep it safe. Examples include freezing, dehydrating, and fermenting. Of course, ill-defined exceptions remain.

Along with this, the FDA holds that it's difficult to call any food "natural" once it's plucked from the earth. They have chosen not to define the term, but generally don't raise a fuss if the so-called "natural" product doesn't include added color, artificial flavor, or synthetic substances.



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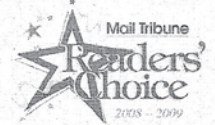
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