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EDITORIAL

## When Wal-Mart Goes Organic

Even a couple of years ago, the thought of Wal-Mart selling organic food would have seemed unimaginable. The only question is whether it would have seemed unimaginably good or unimaginably bad. That question has now been thrust upon us by Wal-Mart's recent decision to start offering organic food at just 10 percent over the cost of conventional food. So let's consider the possible good that can come of this. It will put the word "organic" and the Agriculture Department's organic label in front of millions of customers. It may offer those customers the opportunity to choose organic food more affordably than they can at present. And it will probably — say the organic producers who support this move — increase the amount of acreage devoted to organic agriculture in this country and abroad.

But here are the pitfalls. Wal-Mart will now become the 800-pound gorilla among the other, slightly smaller gorillas that have tried repeatedly to weaken the Agriculture Department's definition of what organic means. There is no chance that Wal-Mart will be buying from small, local organic farmers. Instead, its market influence will speed up the rate at which organic farming comes to resemble conventional farming in scale, mechanization, processing and transportation. For many people, this is the very antithesis of what organic should be.

People who think seriously about food have come to realize that "local" is at least as important a word as "organic." The only thing local about Wal-Mart is its shoppers. For "Wal-Mart" and "organic" to make sense in the same sentence, the company will have to commit itself to protecting the Agriculture Department standard that gives "organic" meaning. Otherwise, it will become just another shill word, like "new" or "improved."