

Policing the organic label

Some consumer advocates question foreign-grown food

By Laura Hodes, Special to the Tribune

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These days, if you see the "USDA Organic" food label, you probably take for granted that the food is more healthful and better for the environment and that organic standards were followed.

But what happens when that fresh or frozen organic produce is from outside the U.S.? Some consumer advocates are questioning whether that label is backed up in the same manner that domestic organics are.

To meet the booming demand for organic food--in 2005 sales were \$13.8 billion, a 16 percent increase from the previous year, according to an Organic Trade Association survey--grocers are increasingly turning to foreign-grown produce.

Liana Hoodes, organic policy coordinator with The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, Inc., said the USDA has been understaffed and overworked since the implementation of the national organics program four years ago. The agency is feeling pressure from all sides regarding the enforcement of existing standards.

But Joan Shaffer, the USDA's

National Organic Program spokeswoman, countered that any agricultural product, livestock or crop marketed as organic in the U.S. must be certified that it meets the standards.

"We are committed to the integrity of the standards," Shaffer said. "If anyone thinks there is a violation, we have a Web site set up [for complaints]. We check out every complaint."

How certification works

The organic label on a bag of produce, whether domestic or foreign-grown, does not mean that USDA inspectors actually have visited the farms. Instead, a certifier visits the farms and reports to the USDA, which reviews the paperwork.

China presents one example of the problem encountered with the credibility of foreign certifiers, said Joe Mendelson, legal director with the Center for Food Safety, a non-profit consumer and environmental protection association based in Washington D.C.

"Do we know whether the government or the certifier has

the will to crack down on fraud?" Mendelson asked. "I doubt it, because [a crackdown] would have direct impact on China's ability to export product."

When foreign countries export organic food, even with the USDA certification label, there is cause for concern because of a language gap and a knowledge gap in farmers' understanding of U.S. regulations and what organic means in the U.S., said Jim Riddle, organic outreach coordinator of the University of Minnesota and former chair of the USDA National Organic Standards Board.

China is the primary country under question, he said, because of its incredibly rapid growth in converting massive amounts of land to organic production in order to reap the price premiums of organic.

"I have been an organic inspector (and have trained inspectors throughout the world, in Japan, Taiwan and Russia) for 20 years--it takes time to convert to organic production," Riddle said.

"There are concerns about China's past agricultural

processes and toxic inputs, the possibility of toxic residue in the soil and possibly in the food, and there are concerns about the long-term commitment to following the organic standards and the depth of understanding of the organic requirements," Riddle said.

Whole Foods Markets is among the grocery companies that rely sometimes on foreign suppliers. Although Kate Lowery, national public relations director for Whole Foods, emphasized that the company strives to acquire organic and local produce, it buys internationally when a product cannot be sourced in the U.S. because of seasonality. But the company takes care with suppliers.

"If it adheres to USDA standards and is verified by a third party certifier, we do have some product from China, when we cannot get it locally in the U.S.," Lowery said.

Farmers in China maintain their own paperwork and may not always report infractions, according to Ron Khosla, an organic farmer and international consultant on organic certification to the United Nations. Khosla has created an alternative certification system for foreign and U.S. produce called Certified Naturally Grown, which relies on peer review.

His idea is to get rid of the middlemen and to focus on the farmers. Instead of inspectors, his system has farmers monitoring other farmers and deciding whether a farm should

be included in the certification system. With farmers educating each other, they are less likely to cheat the system, such as using pesticides if a pest attacks their crop, Khosla said.

This peer review approach is a central part of the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) programs that are being supported internationally by the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements. Khosla is working with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UN-FAO) to implement them in India.

But until the day that these changes are put into action, what's a consumer to do?

Evaluate the certifier

It's time-consuming for harried shoppers, but one answer is to evaluate the certifier.

The product will have a seal from an organic certifier, which allows a consumer to check to see if the certifier is accredited by the U.S. government on the USDA National Organic Program site (www.ams.usda.gov/NOP). Or the consumer may research the background of the certifier at ecolabels.org (run by Consumers Union).

"If it's certified by more recognizable U.S. certifiers--long-standing certifiers, like California Certified Organic and Oregon Tilth--then you have a sense their program is strong and that they are going to be adhering to the standards as

much as possible," Mendelson said.

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Thoughts on buying local

For consumers concerned about organics, another approach is to buy locally grown and/or organic food instead of products shipped long distances, with the attendant fuel and shipping costs.

"Buy local from a diversified farm," said Ron Khosla, an organic farmer and international consultant on Organic Certification to the United Nations. "It doesn't have to be certified organic. Go to local food stores and farmers markets--where you can buy straight from the farmer--and ask questions."

He also recommended CSAs, or community sponsored agriculture programs, through which participants subscribe to a share of a farm's harvest.

Ronnie Cummins, national director of the non-profit Organic Consumers Association, added, "If you can establish trust with a farmer who is in transition to organic, give your dollars to that farmer . . . you can help [him] make the transition and build up the regional organic food and farming network."

For a listing of CSAs, visit localharvest.org/csa.

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