



ORGANIC FOOD FIGHT

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As organic foods grow in popularity, members of the big food manufacturers are eager to get in on the action. But in doing so, some companies have pushed to lower organic standards.

Organic food has traditionally been associated with a certain subculture: granola, health food and Birkenstocks. But lately organic foods have been moving more into the mainstream.

In an industry where typical growth is around 1-2 percent, organics have recently seen growth in the 20 percent range.

Some small organic companies have been bought by big “agribusiness” companies, and supermarkets like Giant have begun to market organic foods under their own store brands.

The most popular organic supermarket, Whole Foods, has grown into a megastore with \$4.7 billion in sales last year.

What is organic?

Organic farming developed in response to the industrialization of agriculture, beginning in the early 20th century.

As people began to see the effects of widespread fertilizer and pesticide use on rivers and other animal species, they began to worry about how those chemicals affected human health.

In 1990, the U.S. Department of Agriculture first defined national standards for foods labeled as “USDA Organic.” They could contain only organic ingredients, meaning grown without any synthetic chemicals, including pesticides, herbicides, or fertilizers.

Organic foods also could not contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs), crops whose genes had been manipulated in laboratories to produce desired traits.

Do strict standards limit organic foods?

These strict standards made growing organic crops labor-intensive and expensive.

Food industry lobbying groups, such as the Organic Trade Association, say that if standards are so strict, organics will remain an expensive niche item, available only to those who can afford them.

Relaxing the rules would allow for more widespread adoption of organic methods, which in the long run will mean more organic production overall, they argue.

"Regardless of the amount of organic ingredients within the products, every organic choice encourages farming methods that build healthy soil and a healthy environment," said Katherine DiMatteo, former executive director of the Organic Trade Association.

The OTA says that varying levels of standards are indicated by labels, giving consumers greater choices.

But purists like the Organic Consumers Association maintain that the organic label should indicate 100 percent organic, and that opening the door to even a little standards adjustment would invite corporations to write their own rules.

"Consumer spending on organic has grown so much that we've attracted big players who want to bend the rules so that they can brand their products as organic without incurring the expenses involved in truly living up to organic standards," said Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association.

Changing rules

In 2002, the National Organic Standards Board allowed certain synthetic substances to be included in foods labeled organic.

Those substances included harmless non-organic ingredients such as baking soda, a naturally occurring mineral that is processed into a white powder for baking, or pectin, a natural gelling agent found in some fruits.

But last year a federal judge ruled in a lawsuit that the organic label should only be allowed on foods with no synthetics whatsoever. That was followed by a move by the Organic Trade Association to push Congress to return the standards to what they were in 2002.

Currently, there are three different labels associated with organic foods.

The "100 Percent Organic" label allows only organic ingredients and organic processing aids.

The "Organic" label allows only foods containing 95 percent or more organic ingredients and only a limited number of strictly regulated non-organic ingredients.

Finally, food labeled "Made with Organic" must contain 70 percent or more organic ingredients.

Organic farmer Steve Sprinkel says the issue of organic purity applies mostly to processed organic "convenience foods."

"Consumers can send a message by buying 100 percent organic, as labeled," he said on the radio program, "Beyond Organic." "And they can also make an effort to buy more fresh products ... and not depend on all these [processed] products."

--Compiled by Emily Birr for Newshour Extra

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