

The Organic Conversation Begins Anew (again)

By Bob Scowcroft

Consider the word “organic.” I suspect that readers of this journal would conjure up an incredibly wide range of images. Maybe it was the restaurant patronized last night. How about nutritionally superior and locally farmed produce? Others might find themselves going right to what their youthful consumption of heavily processed, pesticide exposed, highly preserved fast food has wrought. For some it brings to mind a culture of garden, home and family. And, yes there are many who visualize market share, mergers, and investment opportunities when the word is spoken. How can one word evoke such a wide range of responses?

I think some of the images might be framed according to age, maybe location (urban or rural) and of course “the day job.” Then again maybe I’m wrong. “Organic” has been in the news almost daily over the last several years and perhaps readers of this publication are far more advanced in their thinking: industrial vs. artisan organic; regulatory or legislative “organic”; or, maybe even “beyond organic”.

For a better understanding of just how fast this term “organic” has come of age we need to look back over 30 years for key reference points. For example the first state regulation defining organic was posted in Oregon in 1974. (Yes, sure, the term has been used in the marketplace since the early 40’s but until 1974 that label had no legal standing anywhere.) The first actual law defining “organic” was approved (after a two year trial period) by the California state legislature in 1980. It was two pages long and “managed” by the California Department of Health Services (the famous DHS-26569.11). No enforcement language was included in the law. No budget was approved to monitor the term. No marketing agency promoted this new industry.

By 1989 almost 30 states had organic definitions enshrined in either the regulatory language of a specific agency (like Washington and Texas) or as law. That year an agricultural economist published a paper estimating that the most active organic economy existed in Northern California and that it was generating about \$89 million dollars in annual sales. When one conventional supermarket chain offered six feet of certified organic

produce shelf space in its San Francisco Marina district store, the major daily newspaper covered it with front-page headlines and the TV cameras followed.

That same year there were several other major developments that framed organic issues we are still trying to address today. First there was a fraud case of conventional carrots being sold as organic. Not only did the Carrot Caper make news in over 60 major media outlets around the nation, but it also served to catalyze the transformation of three states’ (Washington, Oregon and California) organic standards into one, largely standard legal definition. For the first time we had a common agreement on transition times, a basic understanding of materials allowed and enforcement protocol in place.

In short order, conversations among other regional organic activists (largely farmer initiated) led to the introduction and passage of the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 in Congress. It’s hard to imagine now, but at that time the organic packaged and processed food industry was in its infancy. The natural food retail industry was highly decentralized and mostly led by individual entrepreneurs. There were no real box store chains and even the conventional supermarkets had not yet begun to merge and cannibalize each other. One regional supermarket chain carried a few organic items, though most of its advertising was more focused on its “pesticide-free” testing program than on certification of organic fruits and vegetables.

Most of our conversations back then were about changing the materials dialog from “natural” vs. “synthetic” to “prohibited” and “allowed.” Most wanted similar provisions established for processed organic products, but since we (collectively) had few organic food technologists to advise us, we felt the National Organic Standards Board would be the best forum in which to put systems in place to maintain our relatively strict interpretation of materials used in all organically labeled products. Size and concentration wasn’t an issue because most mainstream food purveyors considered (at best) organic labeled food a fad or (at worst) a threat. I remember conversations among organic farmers

bemoaning the fact that big growers were placing 40, 100, even 200 hundred acres into organic certification. “How could any small grower compete against that type of operation?” was the question of the times.

Throughout 1990 it was largely the use of pesticides and herbicides that kept “organic” in the public eye. The Alar contamination of apples story at the beginning of the decade went national, then full circle to local when toxic chemicals were found as residues on conventional produce, water reservoirs and in our ground water. At the same time a new dialog was under way on how to incorporate environmental and consumer based perspectives in the form of federally mandated organic regulations needed to actually implement the 1990 OFPA. It was no longer a matter of adopting a certification handbook or two and declaring them regulations. So-called new issues such as the approval of allowed materials in all facets of organic production, the role of the National Organic Standards Board in relation to the USDA; meat labeling and ranch management; and genetically modified organisms (GMO) were raised and debated by an ever-widening group of organic stakeholders. Farmers, and our friends who had developed small and successful organic corporations, could no longer write the rules ourselves.

The first publication of the Organic Rules by the USDA in 1998 brought an outpouring of comment – almost universally opposed to the Agency’s draft – to the public’s attention. For the first time, over 275,000 people, most of them consumers, not practitioners, weighed in with their perspective of how an organic definition or rule should be promulgated. Thanks to a consumer uprising and the national media attention, interest in organics had clearly expanded to all corners of our nation’s conventional food system.

What started as an initiative among organic producer groups to legally define (and enforce) organic agriculture had, over a very short period of time, grown in complexity to include processing, packing, and retail organic standards. Veterinary medicine, food processing aides, import/export documentation and the fine print surrounding the exposure of a new technology called the transgenic transfer of genes all had to be addressed (we thought) through the implementation standards of an organic regulation. If that weren’t enough, some of our poets and visionaries also wanted to include size of operation, labor standards, corporate ownership and the purity of our organic fresh food into the regulatory dialog. They represented (and still do) an important constituency that saw organic farming as a transformative tool to change our fundamental food system. The concern was that any set of final rules would represent a bottom that we would never be able to expand upon.

By 2001 the Rules had been rewritten, finalized and published in the Federal Register as the national standard for the use of the term “certified organic” on any food product. For some the conversation was complete. For others it had just begun. Body care and clothing products wanted organic labels. Venture capital arrived en masse to look for companies to invest in or to purchase outright. GMOs were now making news on a regular basis, particularly as they were being introduced into our milk supply. Starlink contamination of our feed corn and the news that even human genes had been (experimentally) spliced into rice brought a new wave of consumers to the organic table.

Fifteen years after an economist had noted that it was approaching \$100 million in sales, organics was a \$14 billion dollar industry representing over two percent of our nation’s food economy. Conventional agribusiness companies had purchased many of the original organic brands. Regional organic outlets had been consolidated under a couple of national name brands. The enormous success of these chains required another look at organic by the nation’s (already consolidated) supermarket chains. The two major box stores announced the arrival of organically labeled products in their outlets. It seems everyone wanted to capture the valuable organic consumer dollar.

What does that mean for our industry today? Where do the nation’s organic farmers fit in our nation’s agricultural landscape? Can we reach a consensus on issues that have bitterly divided some longtime organic activists? How (and where) do we identify the next wave of changes sure to impact the organic production community? Within what context do we begin the next organic conversation?

First, I think the debate has not taken into account that at two percent of the food economy we have little room for interpersonal confrontations. Bitter debates among consumer activists and certain members of the organic trade only serve to diminish the general consumer’s understanding of organic production systems. Organics’ standing has always grown when we put our differences on the table, in public, and worked to come to agreement. Until we have a better understanding of what we have to lose, specific litigation initiatives or back room legislative deals only generate more collateral damage that will need to be addressed repeatedly in the future.

Second, external contexts change. The regulatory brilliance built into the National Organic Standards Board (the only USDA Advisory Board with statutory powers) process should have allowed us to debate controversial issues based on the availability of new information and organic science. We really thought that we had a public/private partnership in place with the

USDA that would work. We were wrong. The USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service has utterly failed to build a cooperative relationship with this advisory board and the larger organics community. We must renew our efforts to hold AMS and its National Organic Program accountable to the "public interest" in seeing organics' enforcement and regulatory objectives met if not exceeded.

Third, organics is going to grow. Fast. Most agree that just the "pipeline" of organic products in development and the expansion of retail opportunities to sell them will increase the organic marketplace to five percent or more of our food economy in the next three to five years. Some project an even greater market share. Though most of us make every effort to promote the positive aspects of organic food, just imagine what kind of stampede could occur if human genes are found in our "amber waves of grain" or animal meds and growth hormones appear en masse in our dairy and meat supply.

Fourth, size is in the eye of the beholder. We have thirty thousand organic acre farms (spread through many states like a patchwork quilt) working with 1000 unit supermarkets. Some environmentalists were only focusing on the dramatic reduction of suspected carcinogens from the environment when these operations went organic. Some consumer activists have applauded the promise of reduced prices for consumers who can't afford organic as presented in the natural food retail system. However, history has taught us that many large companies cannot sustain their operations, particularly if they are not open to macro changes within the scale they operate. Many box stores are built on the premise of cheap energy (to grow and transport food from far away) and for that matter on serving lower income consumers who will "walk" away if driving there becomes too expensive. As a policy matter we're learning that food security is too important to be left to three or four multi-national food purveyors. Certainly many hundreds, if not thousands, of organic family farmers have already reduced their dependency on wholesaler buyers and have started direct marketing Community Supported Agriculture Programs. The rise of farmers' markets can

be described as meteoric, too. Essentially organic entrepreneurs are operating successfully at every level of our food economy.

Personally, I feel that we will never expand our dialog without writers and scientists commenting, studying and yes, criticizing our work. I welcome and encourage thoughtful commentary on how to improve organics. In particular I'm interested in how rapidly the context we are currently operating in has changed. Global warming, energy use, urban sprawl and water management have massive implications for the future of agriculture.

New conversations that encourage the inclusion of rural activists, labor leaders, research scientists, consumer activists, the progressive financial community, and for-profit businesses must occur. With one single exception (The Vivid Picture Project's New Mainstream Report) no one has developed a futuristic outline of what we want to see in place twenty or thirty years out. We are investing too much of our limited resources on print so fine that the longer-range big picture is in danger of being lost.

Organic food emerged in the 70s as a product that reflected consumers' right to know how their food was grown and processed. Many different social, environmental, and farm-based objectives merged to promote organics as the only labeled alternative to an impersonal, chemically dependent, agro-industrial complex. Once again these very different times call for a renewal of the organic conversation. In an era of instant iPod gratification and human genes inserted into rice, how do we introduce the wonders of a summer organic peach to a new generation of consumers? Imagine the work that needs to be done, the capital needed, the research to be conducted and the conversation to be enhanced to grow the organic industry and its inter-related community of activists from two to 40 percent of our food supply. The organic pioneers might already be among us but it's the next generation that will lead our expansion. It's time to nurture them and send them on their way.

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