



ADVERTISEMENT

[HOME](#)  
[EVENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE PACKER](#)  
[INDUSTRY LINKS](#)

[MARKET TRENDS](#)  
[SUBSCRIPTIONS](#)

[CLASSIFIEDS](#)  
[ADVERTISING](#)

[CAREER CENTER](#)  
[NEWSLETTER](#)

[DIGITAL DIRECTORIES](#)  
[CONTACT](#)

The Business Newspaper of the Produce Industry

ThePacker.com

JAN 15, 2009

[REGISTER](#)

[LOG IN](#)

[SEARCH](#)

[GO](#)

## Featured Sections

[Pamela's Kitchen](#)

[Fresh Talk](#)

[Latest Video](#)

## News And Reference

[Recent News](#)

[The Guide](#)

[Video Archives](#)

[Weather](#)

[Packer Archives](#)

[Fresh Trends](#)

[Infographics](#)

[Packer 25](#)

[Going Rates](#)

[Executive Briefs](#)

## Marketing Services

[List Rental](#)

## Other Resources

Newsletters

[Packer Extra &  
Packer Newsbreak  
subscribe](#)

Publications

[Red Book Credit  
Services](#)

[Produce Merchandising](#)

[The Grower](#)

[Citrus & Vegetable](#)

Consumer Sites

[Fruit and Veggie Guru](#)

International Sites

[The Packer En  
Espanol](#)

## Current News

[Email a friend](#) | [Printer friendly](#)

### Growers look to move past fertilizer debacle

By Don Schrack

(Jan. 15, 4:25 p.m.) The organic growing community is moving quickly to put into the history books recent disclosures of a California company's distribution of tainted fertilizer — and to minimize the chances for similar problems to occur in the future.

"This one instance is not indicative of the entire industry," said Peggy Miars, executive director of California Certified Organic Farmers, Santa Cruz. "Buyers should not bash all of organics because of one instance."

At the center of the dispute is California Liquid Fertilizer, Gonzales, Calif. In January 2007, the California Department of Food and Agriculture ordered the company to halt sales of a fertilizer product that the agency found contained synthetically-produced nitrogen.

That the state agency's order came more than two years after it was alerted to the problem has generated little anger among California's organic grower-shippers, Miars said, but it has been upsetting. Overall, the fertilizer had been on the market about seven years.

"Most people would reasonably expect a quicker turnaround," she said. "But we don't want to put any blame CDFA for things that have happened in the past. We want to focus on the future."

To that end, the organization is working with state officials to improve the organic program and to help avoid issues like the fertilizer controversy in the future, Miars said.

A former California Liquid Fertilizer employee brought the matter to the state's attention, which Bob Scowcroft said points to weaknesses in enforcement. Scowcroft is executive director of the Santa Cruz-based Organic Farming Research Foundation, a national lobbying organization.

"It's sad that it took an individual to push for enforcement," he said. "I think that's worthy critique of the state's organic program and indicative of how little the state is invested in organics."

The Department of Food and Agriculture is, by law, the enforcement arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program in California. The state agency could have stronger enforcement rules, tools and processes, Miars said.

Media coverage of the issue, Miars said, signals the growth of the industry and the public's growing demand for organic produce.

"I think there's more attention being paid this kind of issue now than there would have been 20 years ago. Now it's more newsworthy," she said.

She pointed to the successful efforts by the Organic Trade Association, Greenfield, Mass., to get inserted in the federal farm bill crop insurance parity for organic growers.

In the wake of the tainted fertilizer disclosure, the trade association issued a written statement that read, in part:

"Shoppers can rest assured that organic farmers work in good faith to adhere to stringent

federal standards that prohibit the use of toxic and persistent pesticides and fertilizers. The organic farming community has taken these revelations seriously.”

The disclosure spurred quick action by many organic grower-shippers. Among them is Natural Selection Foods LLC, San Juan Bautista, Calif.

“We have instituted a testing program for all liquid fertilizers to ensure that the ingredients are coming from appropriate sources,” said Samantha Cabaluna, communications director for Natural Selection Foods. “Consumers who purchase organic foods purchase them because synthetic chemicals are not used in the production of the produce.”

Scowcroft said the organic produce industry would like to see at the federal level more vigorous organic programs and enforcement. The staff at the USDA has pleaded a lack of budget, he said.

“Some of us feel that while that is part of it, the lack of will and leadership at senior levels of USDA also impeded this type of oversight and backup to the state’s programs,” Scowcroft said.

The trade association, in its written statement, seems to echo that view:

“The OTA, which represents small and large businesses from all parts of the supply chain for organic agriculture and products, strongly supports both stringent standards for organic production and timely enforcement of those standards. For years, OTA as a leading voice of the organic industry has fought for proper funding at the federal level for those activities, and would also encourage proper funding at the state levels.”

Periodic re-evaluations of grower-shippers and other arms of the organic industry are required, Miars said, and a similar program should apply to state enforcement.

“Producers have to go through certification. Certifiers have to go through accreditation. My expectation is that the state should go through something similar with USDA,” Miars said.

The need for organic standards and enforcement surfaced 19 years ago, Scowcroft said, when news stories surfaced about violations by growers. The California Organic Foods Act and the federal Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 were a result those reports, he said.

The agriculture industry, organic and conventionally-grown, still does not receive the government attention it deserves, Scowcroft said. Part of the reason is the ignorance of lawmakers, most of whom represent urban districts, he said.

“It seems to be a point in time where sometimes very friction-oriented forces could find some common ground on some pretty simple items like making food a priority in the U.S.,” Scowcroft said. “They could really look at the role agriculture and its interface with urban consumers would have for the benefit of all.”

The industry is always ready to address concerns buyers may have, Miars said.

“The organic produce industry is very transparent,” she said. “For those who may have questions, we’re happy to talk about what we do and how we do it.”

Scowcroft sees continued growth by the organic industry.

“I think the next wave will be foodservice and nutrition, regional buying opportunities and networking,” he said.

[E-mail Don Schrack](#)

---

**The Packer | Produce Merchandising | The Guide | Fresh Trends | RBCS**

*The Packer, Produce Merchandising, Produce Availability & Merchandising Guide and Fresh Trends are registered trademarks with the United States Patent and Trademark Office.*

**Internet Explorer Upgrade | Firefox Upgrade**

 © 2009 Vance Publishing Corp. All rights reserved

**AMERICAN  
BUSINESS MEDIA**  
The Association of Business Media Companies

**[Our Privacy Policy](#)   [Terms of Use](#)**