

Organic certifier targeted

USDA seems set, for first time, to pull such a firm from program

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By PAULA LAVIGNE / The Dallas Morning News

A company that allowed an organic farm to use banned chemicals and broke several other federal regulations will likely be yanked from the federal organic program.

It would be the first time that the U.S. Department of Agriculture revoked an organic certifier, which is a government agency or company that oversees organic farms and operations.

Certifiers are responsible for ensuring that organic farmers and food producers follow a host of rules, which include not using most chemical bug and weed killers.

Certifiers are supposed to forward records about organic rule breakers to the USDA.

Questions have been raised recently about whether shoppers can trust USDA-stamped organic food.

The key reason to doubt the label is the USDA's spotty oversight of its 96 organic certifiers, a *Dallas Morning News* analysis found. Despite known organic violations across the country, the USDA has never removed a certifier.

But on June 20, the agency issued a notice to revoke the certification of American Food Safety Institute International in Chippewa Falls, Wis., according to records obtained by *The News*.

It's unclear whether the company appealed.

The company's president, Karl Kolb, didn't respond to voice or e-mail messages.

Mark Bradley, the associate deputy administrator with the National Organic Program who investigated the company, also didn't return messages or calls.

Other USDA officials refused to comment on the pending investigation.

A report from the investigation said the company certified a seed farm that was treated with banned chemicals even after another certifier turned the farm down for that reason.

It also allowed a bottled-water company to use the USDA Organic label despite federal rules against designating water as organic.

American Food Safety is a four-person company overseeing about 30 organic operations in seven states and Mexico, according to USDA records. It is part of the High Sierra Group, which also owns companies that make specialty chemicals for the food industry.

The audit recommended that the USDA revoke the company's ability to grant organic approval to food producers and to pay for them to be approved by another certifier.

Jim Riddle, a former appointed adviser to the USDA when the organic rules were enacted four years ago, has criticized the agency for not cracking down on rule breakers.

He said Thursday that he was pleased that the USDA is planning to take action.

"It sends confidence in the program that they're willing to enforce the law and protect the integrity of the organic claim," he said.

"That's why we wanted the law in the first place, to protect the claim and minimize and prevent these types of bad actors from taking advantage of the organic market."

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