

THE
GREAT

Organic



Debate

AN UPDATE

ORIGINAL ARTICLE BY KATHLEEN MARSHALL

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Consumers want it, the USDA currently allows it, but several organizations are fighting it. Kathleen Marshall explains why certified organic hydroponically grown foods are under scrutiny, and what changes may come from the hotly contested battle.

Around the world, most countries require that organic crops must be grown in soil. This includes the European Union, Australia, Canada, Mexico, and Japan. Because other countries do not allow hydroponically grown produce to be sold as organic, those products are shipped to the US so they can use the coveted organic label. In the US, hydroponically grown lettuce and tomatoes from Mexico have been allowed to carry the organic label despite the 2010 recommendations of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) to the contrary. Spurred by a lawsuit filed by the Cornucopia Institute alleging that the USDA was illegally allowing organic labeling on hydroponically grown foods, the NOSB revisited the topic last November in St. Louis, MO.

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BIOPONICS AND ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

More specifically, the NOSB discussed a proposal to allow bioponics (hydroponics, aeroponics, and aquaponics) to be considered for organic certification. While the board did concede to send the issue to its crops subcommittee to more clearly define these growing systems and consider them each individually, they also restated their 2010 recommendation to prohibit growing systems that use entirely water-based substrates.

The resolution stated, in part, "The NOSB recognizes that the foundation of organic agriculture is based upon a systems approach to producing food in the natural environment, which respects the complex dynamic interaction between soil, water, air, sunlight, and animals needed to produce a thriving agro-ecosystem." Still, they encouraged the board to take a wider perspective as they considered innovations in agriculture that may also be compatible with organic principles. They also reaffirmed that most members didn't feel that entirely water-based substrate hydroponic systems qualified as organic. Interestingly, consumers don't agree. According to a 2016 survey conducted by The Coalition for Sustainable Organics, more than 91 per cent of consumers agree with the current USDA policy allowing hydroponically grown food to be certified organic.

DOES ORGANIC REQUIRE SOIL?

Those who are opposed state that organic is more than just natural fertilizers and approved pesticides. It's about balanced ecosystems and caring for the soil beyond the production of food. This makes the future for hydroponic organic certification look pretty bleak with one small silver lining: "While the majority of NOSB does not believe that the liquid substrate systems should be sold under the USDA organic label, these growers deserve the chance to promote their very commendable qualities and objectives in their own right."

Organic pioneers have always spoken of soil building as the basis of organic gardening, but this was before there were alternatives. When organic gardening became the gold standard, soil was the only practical way to grow crops and feed the world. Even so, people still go hungry and organic food is out of reach for many. Now, other options can make organic food more accessible and may even feed more people.

The Coalition for Sustainable Organics is taking a similar stance. They feel that everyone should have access to organically grown food and if hydroponics is banned, obtaining organics will be more difficult for many people. Executive director Lee Frankel stated, "By restricting the organic label only to plants grown in the ground, the USDA would be choosing to supply fewer consumers with the quality organic produce they want and expect."

In fact, the ban would be even more far-reaching because it would also ban the way almost all seedlings and nursery stock are produced.



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FOCUS ON IMPROVED AFFORDABILITY.”



Hydroponic growing is also beneficial for the environment and more sustainable—something that should be a major consideration for those favoring organic growing methods. A 2015 study published by International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health showed that hydroponic systems showed a water saving of more than 90 per cent over soil-produced growing systems. Hydroponics also requires less land and causes less soil erosion. So, hydroponics really is beneficial for the soil, contrary to common misconceptions.

ALL ABOUT THE MONEY

Growing more crops in less time using less space hold another appeal: affordability. Consumers want easier access to organic foods and that includes lower prices. According to the survey from the Coalition for Sustainable Organics, 89 per cent of consumers stated that the organic industry should focus on improved affordability.

Really, money may be what the whole issue boils down to. Traditional organic growers can charge a premium for organic produce. If hydroponic growers help fill the ever-growing demand, prices will have to come down. Colin Archipley, owner of Archi's Acres, a hydroponic farm in Escondido, California, says, “Maintaining current standards for certifying organic containerized growing simply makes sense. These production methods have brought new growers and more local production into the supply chain to serve the growing organic market. Changing the rules now would unfairly and unnecessarily limit the amount of organic produce available to the public.”

Vermont congressman Peter Welch referred to hydroponic growers seeking organic certification as “freeloaders.” He says, “They want to get the benefit of the hard work that organic farmers do and take some of that market share with a label that wasn't earned.” But it could also be said that traditional organic farmers just want prevent competition so they can continue to charge higher prices. This has to make you wonder, is it really about protecting the earth or is it about protecting the cash cow?

While a final decision by the NOSB was originally expected to occur this April at their spring 2017 meeting in Denver, CO, it was once again delayed to allow for even further intake of information. No further deadline has been set at the time of this writing and for now, hydroponically grown organics are still considered legal in the US.



UPDATE:

Hydroponics (Certified Organic)

While both sides still feel they're in the right as to whether or not hydroponic produce should be certified as organic, that argument ended on November 1, 2017, with an industry decision that such certification was allowable.

The highly emotional status declaration came down at the Fall 2017 NOSB meeting in Florida, where the advisory body to the USDA ruled that hydroponic and aquaponic farms could carry the organic label. They've been allowed to be called organic for a number of years, but now it will be official.

Still, the proverbial Hatfield and McCoy battle on the issue remains pretty heated. Both sides still believe they have the best idea.

The Coalition for Sustainable Organics put the approval in the win column for them, pleased that NOSB rejected a number of proposals that would revoke the certification of many hydroponic, aquaponic, and container growers. President Lee Frankel's contention was that more, not less, organic product was needed to feed a hungry world. "Everyone deserves organic, and this proposal would have made it harder for consumers to access organic produce as a meaningful solution to environmental challenges faced by growers (who) need to adapt to site-specific conditions," he says. Another supporter, the Recirculating Farms Coalition, was equally pleased with the vote. "NOSB made the right decision," says executive director Marianne Cufone. "Many products already carry a USDA Organic label and to now withdraw that would be irresponsible and confusing for both farmers and consumers."

Conversely, The Cornucopia Institute group had sought rejection of what they called a "watering down" of organic standards supported by "big money and powerful corporate lobbyists who want their piece of a growing organic pie." They advised a "no" vote to "protect soil-based farmers who raise fruits and vegetables in a sustainable, healthy fashion."

The NOSB ballot count wasn't an overwhelming landslide but a squeaker win with an 8-7 final tally to reject proposals prohibiting hydroponic/aquatic production certification. By a much larger margin (14-0, with one abstention),

however, aeroponics was denied the organic certification.

Biosystems engineer Dr. Stacy Tollefson of the Controlled Environment Agriculture Center at the University of Arizona, a member of the Hydroponic

and Aquaponic Taskforce, says she's dumbfounded the NOSB didn't support aeroponics. She asks, "If they support aquaponics and liquid systems, why not aeroponics?"

The NOSB recommendation is now in the hands of USDA. The federal agency and the staff of the National Organic Program will decide on the rules to modify existing organic standards. Once that is done, there will be a public comment period and a regulatory review before the new classifications become regulation.

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Going forward, "This decision should promote more innovation in organic production," Tollefson says. "There may be increasing pressure to be more transparent within the USDA Organic label, perhaps a push for mandatory labeling that differentiates 'soil grown' versus 'container grown.'" **MY**