



Organic Standards Raise Hopes, Questions

by Paul Williams and George Kuepper

The standards for organic food production and handling that the National Organic Program brought into effect on October 22, 2002, were the result of more than a decade of work by organic growers, processors, and their supporters to establish comprehensive guidelines for organic production. The burgeoning growth of organic food sales, the expansion of acreage in organic cultivation, and the proliferation of third-party organic certifiers, all demanded uniform, enforceable standards for determining what could and could not be called "organic," if that label were to have any consistent meaning.

Today, more than a dozen years since Congress passed the 1990 Organic Foods Production Act, we have those national standards. It is clearly a victory for the organic community—producers, processors, and consumers alike—but like any victory, it is not without costs. And it is not the last battle to be fought.

The National Standards guarantee consumers that foods labeled Organic will be free of GMOs, synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, and human biosolid wastes. They further mandate a three-year transition period from conventional to organic production and require organic farmers to use practices that build healthy soils, promote biodiversity, and reduce losses to erosion. Meat, eggs, milk, and other animal products will be free of antibiotics and artificial hormones. The animals will be raised and processed humanely, given only organic feed, and animal wastes will be managed in ways that protect the environment.

For farmers, the Standards are intended to promote a level playing field, one in which everyone must meet identical criteria in order to be certified organic. Meeting these Standards means

being able to use the Organic label and receive the premium prices that organic foods command. Farmers, however, are finding that what seems so rosy at first blush also has its thorns.

New regulations mean new paperwork, and lots of it. Many farmers we have talked to find the amount and complexity of the paperwork involved in becoming certified to be daunting, if not

fiers to be more or less rigorous than others, and nothing to prevent a farmer in state A from getting a more accommodating certifier from state B to come in and approve his operation. What's more, many farmers see the regulations as confusing if not outright conflicting. There will be changes in the rules and Standards, and farmers and consumers alike must be vigilant to see that these changes do not dilute the organic label. We have already seen an attempt by special interests to weaken the Standards for organic livestock feed, and it will not be the last effort to make an end-run on the rules.

On the whole, however, the public should be greatly encouraged by the USDA's National Organic Program and the Regulations. It validates the public interest in cleaner, healthier food, a better environment, and sustainable agriculture. But in order to reap the full benefits of the Standards, we will all have to tend to their health and nurture them to a robust maturity.



overwhelming. Added to the cost of paying for third-party certification, the time required to draw up the planning documents and keep the records necessary to get and maintain organic status is hard for many smaller producers to justify economically. (Producers in compliance with the Standards but with less than \$5000 in annual sales are exempt from certification and may still sell their products as organic, but without the USDA label.) There are provisions in the 2002 Farm Bill to help farmers pay the cost of certification, and many states also have cost-share programs to encourage the transition to organics.

Certification standards are themselves already revealing some prickly issues that will need to be resolved. There is enough latitude for some certi-

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Staff Spotlight:

Linda Coffey

As a youngster growing up on her family's diversified farm in central Missouri, Linda Coffey's job was looking after the sheep, but she didn't consider it a chore. She built 4-H and FFA projects around the sheep, and sheep sales helped pay for her college education. In fact, she liked sheep so well that when she went to college, she worked on the sheep farm at the University of Missouri and later interned at the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station in Dubois, Idaho. She eventually went on to earn an M.S. in

Animal Science at the University of Missouri in 1988, where her graduate work focused on companion grazing of sheep and cattle.

In 2000, Linda joined NCAT, working with the ATTRA project out of the office in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where she has continued her work on small ruminants. She is the author or co-author of nearly all the ATTRA publications on sheep and goats. Recently, with funding from a SARE PDP grant, she has been working on a sustainable sheep and goat production checklist for farmers and educators. This checklist is a practical farm-assessment tool to help educators and producers evaluate and improve sheep or goat enterprises. But the checklist is only one part of a project that will eventually yield materials for whole-farm planning based on

sheep and goat production. In addition to other NCAT Agriculture Specialists and several sheep and goat producers, project participants include Fort Valley State University, Berea College, North Carolina State University, the University of Arkansas, and the NRCS.

Linda and her family still keep a small flock of ewes and a few dairy goats, and it's hard to talk about her around the office without mentioning her premiere milk goat—Maggie. Maggie, an affectionate Saanen, was the Grand Champion of last year's Washington County (Ark.) Fair, and there's constant competition for her milk. When Maggie was pregnant and "drying out" this past winter, one local chef offered to buy Linda another goat, if that would ensure a year-round supply of milk, but only "if we can get another one just like Maggie."

NCAT Specialists Lead Farmer-Focused Sustainable Ag Projects

NCAT's ATTRA project continues to be cited by its clients as one of the best sources for information about sustainable agriculture in the U.S., and our ATTRA publications have become a standard for basic sustainable agriculture materials. But in addition to answering questions, designing a new Web site, and creating multimedia presentations, NCAT's Agriculture Specialists are also leaders of grant-funded projects that address some of the most pressing issues in sustainable agriculture today. Below are brief descriptions of some of these projects that will provide a perspective on the range of this work.

- **Expanding Markets for Southwest Small-Scale, Alternative, and Minority Producers.** This three-year project, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 2002, is working to increase the number and viability of farms, ranches, and food enterprises in the Four Corners states of Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. It is providing small-scale and minority producers with access to technical and financial assistance, marketing information, and business and marketing training. To date, the project

has—with the participation of local farmer and business-development groups, universities, and Native American tribes—reached more than 3000 people in the four-state area. For more information, contact Teresa Maurer, teresam@ncat.org, or visit the project Web site, <http://www.swmarketing.ncat.org>.

- **Whole Farm Planning.** NCAT Agriculture Specialists Ron Morrow, Ann Wells, and Tim Johnson are working with farmers to produce and market grass-fed beef, while also helping them plan the management of their farms with this marketing goal in mind. The participating farmers from Arkansas and Oklahoma are selling their beef under the common label "Ozark Pasture Beef." This project was funded by USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SARE). Contact: ronm@ncat.org.

- **Nutrient Runoff and Water Quality.** Led by Agriculture Specialist Barbara Bellows, with the participation of the University of Arkansas and the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture in Poteau, Oklahoma, this SARE-funded study is examining how different graz-

ing systems influence nutrient runoff in pastures manured with poultry wastes. This project could not only reveal best practices for fertilizing and grazing pastures, it might also help resolve some issues in the dispute between Arkansas and Oklahoma concerning phosphorous pollution in the Illinois River watershed. Contact: barbarab@ncat.org.

- **Sustainable Livestock Workshops.** Working with funding from a variety of sources, Ron Morrow and Ann Wells have become mainstays of livestock workshops around the country. One project is through an agreement with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to present workshops for NRCS personnel and their clients. The states where Ron and Ann have conducted workshops include California, Iowa, Texas, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Missouri, Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas, Maryland, North and South Carolina, Louisiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Virginia, and Vermont. Contact: ronm@ncat.org.

- **Label Rouge: Poultry Production in France.** Anne Fanatico and Holly Born, both working out of NCAT's Arkansas

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Apprenticeship in Ecological Horticulture. An intensive six-month course in organic and small-scale farming. Offered by the University of California – Santa Cruz. Contact: CASFS, 1156 High St., Santa Cruz, CA 95064. Phone: 831-459-2321; e-mail: apprenticeship@cats.ucsc.edu.

Organic Educational Video. Forty-minute video on organic agriculture and food from California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). \$49.95. Contact: Helge Hellberg, Marketing and Communications Director, CCOF, 1115 Mission St., Santa Cruz, CA 95060. Phone: 831-423-2263; FAX: 831-423-4528; e-mail: helge@ccof.org; Web site: <http://www.ccof.org>.

Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education call for grant preproposals. Special interest this year in R&E projects addressing sustainable livestock production, dairy profitability, food sales to local institutions, farm labor management, and making the transition to a new farm enterprise. Con-

tact NE SARE office at 802-656-0471, nesare@uvm.edu, <http://www.uvm.edu/~nesare>.

Educational and Training Opportunities in Sustainable Agriculture, 15th Edition. U.S. and international institutions that offer education, training, or information in organic, alternative, or sustainable agriculture. Available on the Web at http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/AFSIC_pubs/edtr.htm or by contacting the Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, USDA National Agricultural Library, Baltimore Avenue, Beltsville, MD 20705. Phone: 301-504-6559; e-mail: afsic@nal.usda.gov.

USDA Web Marketing Guide. *How To Direct Market Farm Products on the Internet* provides basic information to farm direct marketers who want to sell their products on-line or use a Web site to publicize their farm or products. Available on the Internet at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/tmd/MSB/msb.htm> or by contacting Errol Bragg, USDA AMS TMP MSB, Room 2646S, Stop 0269, 1400 Independence Ave. S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250. Phone: 202-720-8317; FAX: 202-690-0031; e-mail: Errol.Bragg@usda.gov.

New and Updated ATTRA Publications

- [An Organic & Sustainable Practices Workbook & Resource Guide for Cropping Systems](#) (new)
- [An Organic & Sustainable Practices Workbook & Resource Guide for Livestock Systems](#) (new)
- [Growing Your Range Poultry Business: An Entrepreneur's Toolbox](#) (new)
- Poultry Nutrition (new, funded by Heifer Project International. Available in print only, not on the Web.)
- [Efficient Agricultural Buildings: An Overview](#) (new)
- [Organic Greenhouse Herb Production](#) (updated)
- [Downy Mildew Control in Cucurbits](#) (updated)
- [Flea Beetle: Organic Control Options](#) (updated)
- [Strawberries: Organic and IPM Options](#) (updated)

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Sustainable Ag Projects *Continued from page 2*

office and in conjunction with New Horizon Technologies (NCAT's for-profit subsidiary), received a grant from the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program to study the feasibility of adapting aspects of French *Label Rouge* poultry production to the American market. In France, strict standards ensure that *Label Rouge*-certified birds are raised outdoors, in small flocks, on feeds free from animal by-products and prophylactic antibiotics. With the growing market for "free range" chicken and eggs in this country, the *Label Rouge* model could be the shape of poultry to come. Contact: hollyb@ncat.org.

• **Organic Standards Checksheets and Workbooks.** NCAT has a long history of involvement with projects that advance organic agriculture and assist

organic farmers. For many farm families, organic production is one of the few viable options for staying on the land, while for society at large it holds the promise of better food and a cleaner environment. With combined funding from SARE and the National Organic Program, George Kuepper has created Organic Checksheets and Workbooks for both crop and livestock production, to assist farmers in making the transition to organic farming. Contact: georgek@ncat.org.

• **National Organic Standards and Resource Conservation.** Rex Dufour, who manages NCAT's office in Davis, California, and Ann Baier, a consultant to NCAT, recently garnered a grant from SARE to conduct training for NRCS and Cooperative Extension Ser-

vice personnel in California about the new National Organic Standards and their relationship to resource conservation programs in watersheds in California and other parts of the West. Contact: rexd@ncat.org.

• **Risk-Management Workshops.** In September 2002, the California office signed an agreement with the USDA Risk Management Agency to create a pilot program of risk-management workshops designed specifically for Latino farmers. These workshops will expand the approach to risk management beyond crop insurance and rely heavily on existing resources within the community of Latino farmers to identify the strategies best suited to those clients. Contact: rexd@ncat.org.



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Events

May 5-7. BioCycle 33rd National Conference. Sponsored by BioCycle Journal of Composting and Organics Recycling. Denver, Colorado, Renaissance Hotel. Focus is on managing organic materials and waste to create value-added products. Contact: Ann Miller, JG Press, 419 State Avenue, Ammaus, PA 18049. Phone: 610-967-4135, ext. 22; e-mail: biocycle@jgpress.com.

May 14-17. All Things Organic Conference and Trade Show. Sponsored by the Organic Trade Association. Austin, Texas. Products, regulatory issues, merchandising, and more. Contact: Lisa Murray. Phone: 207-842-5500; FAX: 207-842-5503; e-mail: ato@divcom.com; Web site: <http://www.atoexpo.com/>.

May 18-21. WINDPOWER 2003 Conference & Exhibition. Austin Convention Center, Austin, Texas. Contact: WINDPOWER 2003 c/o RCS, 2368 Eastman Ave., Suite 11, Ventura, California 93003. FAX (for registration): 805-654-1676. Web site: http://www.awea.org/conference/registration_03.html.

May 22-25. Upper Midwest Introduction to Permaculture Workshop.

Garden Farme, Ramsey, Minnesota. Permaculture principles and farming techniques, special workshop on Shitake and Blue Oyster mushrooms. Contact: Paula, Garden Farme, 7363 175th NW, Ramsey, MN 55303. Phone: 612-870-3467; e-mail: permanentagriculture@hotmail.com.

June 2-3. Southeastern US Organics Healthier Living Expo. Food safety, recycling, and composting. Event venue: 7912 Nolensville Rd., Arrington, Tennessee 37014. Phone: 615-395-7176; Web site: <http://www.compostfarm.com>.

June 2-4. Anaerobic Digester Technology Applications in Animal Agriculture—A National Summit. Hilton North Raleigh Hotel, Raleigh, North Carolina. The USDA Technical Standards for Anaerobic Digestion will be released at this conference. Contact: Ms. Kathi Springer, 703-684-2414, kspringer@wef.org.

June 5-6. Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council's 18th Annual Symposium. St. Petersburg, Florida. For information on program content, contact Jackie Smith: Jackie.c.smith@dep.state.fl.us. For registration information, contact Kristina Serbesoff-King: kserbes@sfwmd.gov.

ATTRAnews

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April 2003

ATTRAnews is the bi-monthly newsletter of Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas. It is distributed free throughout the United States to farmers, ranchers, Cooperative Extension agents, educators, and others interested in sustainable agriculture. ATTRA is a primary source of information about sustainable agriculture in the United States. ATTRA is funded through the USDA Rural Business-Cooperative Service and is a project of the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT), a private, non-profit organization that since 1976 has championed sustainable technologies and community development that protect natural resources and assist people, especially the economically disadvantaged, to become self-reliant.

