Special Supplement on Alternative Certification Programs

The National Organic Program and Its Discontents

by Jack Kittredge, based on work by Jessica Ellsworth, Cornucopia Institute, Civil Eats, the National Geographic Society, Organic Consumers Association, Fooddive.com, and Allgov.com

From its beginnings on individual unregulated farms to its growth through local and regional networks and to the establishment of a national standard, organic food has traveled an amazing path over the last fifty years. The growth has been continuous, driven both by increasing ecological concerns and heightened consumer demand.

Domestic sales of organic foods have increased every year since 1990, with the accessibility of organic products rapidly expanding in all sectors of the market. The U. S. organic food market was worth $1 billion in 1990, $43.7 billion in 2017 and is expected to reach $70.4 billion by 2025. As this growth occurred, large conventional-food companies like General Mills, Heinz, Smucker, Coca Cola, ConAgra, Kellogg, White Wave and Hain have bought up most of the original smaller stand-alone organic companies.

The Early Organic Marketplace

In 1973, Oregon passed the first state law regulating organic food. In doing so, it provided the impetus for other states to subsequently enact legislation relating to organic food products. From then through the 1980s the organic industry waged an internal struggle to define organically grown food, to standardize permissible production methods, and to establish record-keeping requirements, labeling procedures and enforcement methods. Substantial differences arose across the country in state organic farming regulation, however, as to the permissible materials for use in production, the length of time required for a transition to organic acreage, and the allowable production practices. As an example, Colorado required organic products to be certified and organic producers to obtain a license under one set of state guidelines; Maryland required organic producers, processors, distributors, and retailers to obtain a permit under another set of guidelines, and Iowa merely required organic producers to provide vendors with a sworn statement of compliance.

By 1990, there were 22 states with organic food regulations falling into three broad categories: three states chose to operate their own organic certification programs, four states opted to contract with an independent certification organization, and fifteen states defined organic food and production techniques but did not provide any government oversight of certification. Because certification was not mandatory, organic producers, handlers, processors, and distributors in these 15 states had to affiliate themselves with an independent certification association in order to be able to claim or advertise any organic certification status.

Organic farmers and food processors faced both the burden of labeling food to meet conflicting standards and the possibility that food deemed organic in their home state would not qualify as organic across the state border. Food retailers and distributors were concerned about the authenticity of organic items under the varied state laws; consequently, they were reluctant to purchase organic foods, and fewer organics made

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Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue

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A Time To Stand Our Ground

by Dave Chapman

The USDA organic label is being transformed. It is coming to represent an agriculture separated from the soil (if such a thing can be called agriculture). Tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, and berries grown without the plants ever touching the soil are being certified “organic” and are now dominating the market. Chickens and cows who have spent their lives on concrete now produce certified “organic” milk and eggs.

I do not exaggerate. Under the National Organic Program, these practices are being regularly certified as organic on a massive scale. These are not small fringe players that don’t affect the fabric of the garment. According to research compiled by the Nielsen Co, “organic” hydroponic tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers represent over 30% of US sales in each category. I would suggest that in fresh tomatoes the number is actually much higher.

In berries the percentage is uncertain, but based on information presented to the USDA Hydroponic Task Force, we know for sure there are over 1000 acres of “organic” hydroponic berry production.

Driscoll’s President, Soren Bjorn, told Fresh Fruit Portal in November of 2017, “It’s happening. In Europe it (containerized substrate production) is a big part of production, and in Australia we are 100% already, in Tasmania on stone berries it’s 100% tabletop strawberry production... And Driscoll’s claims to sell half of the “organic” berries in America.

In several interviews, Lee Frankel, chief spokesperson for the hydro-organic lobby (the Coalition For Sustainable Organics) has proudly claimed $1 billion in annual sales of hydroponic organic, and growing rapidly.

In dairy, we see enormous certified “organic” CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) operating in Texas, California, Idaho, Colorado and other arid Western states, while family dairy farms in California, the Midwest and the Northeast are going out of business. The price of dairy is crashing as the CAFOs flood the market with their cheap milk.

It is difficult to know exactly how much CAFO milk is now on the market. Most experts have I asked have deferred to Cornucopia’s Mark Kastel. He estimates that over half of the milk on the organic market is coming from CAFOs.

If CAFOs account for half of organic sales in dairy, that represents $3 billion in annual fauxganic sales. USA Today famously quoted the USDA) that 6 Tex as “organic” CAFOs produce 1.3 times the volume of milk as compared to the 450 organic dairy farms in Wisconsin. With the rejection of the animal welfare reform known as the OLPP by the USDA this year, the attempt to rein in the poultry CAFOs being certified as organic was defeated. The OLPP reforms were supported by the entire organic community. Even Laura Batcha, Executive Director of the Organic Trade Association, spoke out after the USDA rejected the reforms. “In USDA’s attempt to kill this fully vetted final regulation, they’ve taken a radical departure from conclusions reached over more than 20 years of rule makings regarding organic livestock care, and have assumed an aberrant view that has no historical basis or legal justification... But despite the clear evidence of the public sentiment, USDA is acting against the will of the public, and the will of the organic sector.”

In eggs and poultry, CAFOs now account for over 80% of certified “organic” sales, according to former NOP head Miles McEvoy. That would account for $2.3 billion in annual sales.

Annual fraudulent grain imports are estimated to be over $250 million by John Bobbe of Ofarm. Bobbe has been instrumental in alerting the USDA about ships bearing fraudulent shipments. Apparently they are unable to stop any shipments on their own.

I estimate $6 billion in annual “organic” sales that aren’t organic!

This flood of fake organic in the marketplace is having profound consequences on real organic farmers. Because these large fauxganic producers are playing by different rules, they are able to produce food much cheaper. That means that real organic farmers are being pushed out of the marketplace. Eaters’ choices in the stores are shrinking rather than expanding.

Real organic farmers are an endangered species. There is still some real organic food in the stores, but which food is it?

In dairy, organic farmers are going out of business in droves. This year, according to Mark MacAfee, 10% of the California organic farms have gone out of business at the same time that Aurora, the largest “organic” CAFO operator in the world is expanding. The same thing is happening in berries. Reports from Florida describe new mega-operations that laser level the fields, spray with Roundup, cover the ground with weed fabric, load up 7-gallon to 25-gallon pots with coco coir or pine bark, and grow blueberries for 3 years. The berries are immediately certifiable because the coco coir in the pots was never itself treated with Roundup (but only the soil under the pots). This is being certified by USDA as organic. Extension is even offering free workshops in Florida explaining how to do it!

And of course, it is not only organic farmers who are suffering from all this fraud. Eaters, spending money for organic food, are being misled on a regular basis. They are paying more for produce they think was grown in nutrient-rich soil. They are paying more for milk and eggs they think came from animals living a good life outdoors. And what happens when they find out they have been cheated?

The organic community faces the same challenge that other groups face when they keep quiet about corruption. No group or cause wants to go public with its failures -- for fear that they will turn people away and undermine support for all the good that they do. So they hide the news and allow bad actors to get away with their deeds. This ends up doing much worse damage than simple honesty in the first place.

Now the organic community faces the same dilemma with the fauxganic producers. If we speak the truth, we will undermine the public trust in the organic label. If we are silent, then we become complicit in the fraud that will eventually destroy the credibility of the organic label.

And when our customers find out, they are going to be pissed off.

Many of us have spent years trying to reform the National Organic Program. We failed, and the standards and enforcement have continually gotten worse. The USDA is currently led by Sonny Perdue, who has made clear in interviews that he neither understands nor supports organic farming. And yet HE is in charge of approving the standards and selecting the members of the NOSB to advise on those standards.

It seems crazy to trust the USDA to define organic.

That is why people are confused. They should be confused. We need to create our own labels to represent how we farm. The vast majority of certified...
farms are real organic, but not the majority of certified food products. A relative handful of agribusinesses and industrial producers have taken over the federal label, and they aren’t giving it back to us.

The Real Organic Project is one of a number of groups trying to reach consumers with a label they can trust. It is not true that eaters don’t care about these things. If it were true, then the hydroponic producers would proudly label their products as hydroponic instead of denying it and hiding it as they consistently do. The CAFO producers would proudly show on their milk and egg cartons pictures of animals in confinement instead of fake images of animals on pasture.

In a stream of interviews and statements, Driscoll’s and Wholesome Harvest insist to their customers that they are NOT producing anything hydroponically. They have been supported in this whopper by their lobbyists at the Organic Trade Association. Aurora Dairy, the largest organic CAFO in the world, insists at every opportunity that they are in full compliance with the NOP Pasture Rule, and that their animals live outside on grass. Unbelievably, they are supported in this story by the USDA.

We are dealing with fraud on a massive scale. The Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) community is the very heart of the organic movement. Many in the rest of the country look to us for guidance. What can they trust? How long can we support a broken USDA label whose main strategy for survival is in the hope that nobody notices the truth? Instead of protecting the BRAND, let us protect real organic. Some will say that we should abandon all labels. Know Your Farmer. And that is the best of all paths.

We believe that real organic farms provide superior nutrition and critically important climate benefits. We are all affected by poor agricultural practices, even if we never eat the inferior food produced. As urban food activist LaDonna Redmond has said, there is only ONE food system. And we are all a part of it.

At a meeting in Vermont following the Jacksonville disaster, thirty organic farmers came together to decide whether to accept the degeneration of the organic label, or to act. They were unanimous in their decision to act to create some other way of identifying real organic.

The Real Organic Project grew out of that meeting. We have created a pilot program for an add-on label to the USDA organic seal. This label requires growing in the soil and insists on legitimate access to the outdoors for all animals. There are over 30 farms participating from all over the country. Our standards embrace the basic foundational organic standards first created (and then slowly set aside) by the NOP. In 2019 we will take the program to the next phase, offering certification to many real organic farms now participating in the USDA program.

Our standards are set and reviewed by a fifteen member standards board. All board members are highly qualified. They understand organic. Included on boards are 5 current members of the NOSB and 9 former members. We represent the core of the organic movement. Some of our members helped create the National Organic Program, and some have been the protesters, but all have been deeply committed to organic. This is a stark contrast to the current NOSB, where many members seem to have little idea what organic means. Nor does the Secretary of Agriculture who appoints them.

This Fall we are meeting with European organic leaders to build a united defense against the corporate invasion of our movement. It is one food system, and one movement. As we face global corporations who are actively trying to dominate the world market, we must work together to protect ourselves and our planet.

At a phone meeting of over 30 organic advocates sponsored by the National Organic Coalition, former NOSB member Colehour Bondera applauded the effort of the Real Organic Project. Then he asked the group, “Does anyone on this call have a better idea of how to deal with these serious problems?”

There was total silence for a very long time. So I ask the same question to the readers of the Natural Farmer. What better idea do you have? How can we better act to preserve the principles of real organic? How can we better act to build an alternative to the conventional model of quick profit at the expense of our future? It is easy to sit back. It is hard to take action. But if you have no better idea, please join us so we can reclaim the organic movement. Together.

For details, and to sign up to receive ongoing news, please go to realorganicproject.org.
by Joseph Heckman, excerpted from a longer history, reprinted from Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems, Rutgers University, September 2006

Many people active in organic agriculture today are unaware of the important role played by Sir Albert Howard and others of his generation, including F.H. King, Walter Northbourne, Lady Balfour, J.I. Rodale, and Louis Bromfield, in the development and diffusion of organic farming concepts. The recent rapid growth of the organic movement has resulted in a loss of connection with the historical figures and roots of organic agriculture. Scientists conducting organic farming research, farmers considering organic transition and the general public may benefit from knowing more of this history.

Telling a history of organic farming - as with other great movements, such as alternative medicine - requires exploring the interplay between science, social values, economics, and the recalcitrance of established organizations to adopt new approaches. In tracing the historical trajectory from the genesis of Howard’s major organic concepts and practices (a living connection between soil fertility and plant and animal health, the Law of Return and composting) to the widespread adoption of these beliefs and practices, one encounters a series of battles between intellectual and economic stakeholders. Although support for the organic movement has grown with public awareness, opposition to it has never gone away. These issues are reflected in the history of Howard’s contributions to organic farming. The story of this development of organic concepts in the 1930s to their fate as expressed in the current USDA National Organic Program occurred in a series of stages - the development of organic concepts and methods, polarization around them, then their recognition, accommodation, and finally their further extension.

Organic Farming Concept Development

Although some concepts of organic farming predate his work, today Sir Albert Howard (1873-1947) is regarded by most as the founder and pioneer of the organic movement. Born into an agricultural life, he never strayed far from it. Raised on a farm in England and educated at Cambridge, he served for a time (1899-1902) as mycologist in the Imperial Department of Agriculture for the West Indies, before returning to England to teach agricultural science from 1903 to 1905 at South-Eastern Agricultural College at Wye. He then moved to India where, for 26 years he directed several agricultural research centers before permanently returning to England in 1931. It was after his return that he became well known for his concepts and philosophy of organic farming. By drawing on his many years of agricultural research experience, he wrote several widely read books espousing his concepts and theories of composting, soil fertility, and health and disease.

A Brief History of Organics in the US: Transitions from Sir Albert Howard’s War in the Soil to the USDA National Organic Program

Telling a history of organic farming...
In 1943, Howard published the book *An Agricultural Testament*, in which he described a concept that was to become central to organic farming - the importance of utilizing available waste materials to build and maintain soil fertility and humus content. According to what he called ‘The Law of Return’, he strongly advocated the recycling of all organic waste materials, including sewage sludge, back to farmland. Recalling his experiences in India, he described his original ‘Indore’ (after a region in India) method of composting. Here, he prescribed a certain pile size, heat, moisture, aeration, and mix of plant, animal, urine-soaked earth, and ash materials as a proper composting recipe. Especially important to a good mix of composting materials, Howard stressed, were residues from both plants and animals. He was not alone in his thinking and found support for his ideas on soil fertility and the need for effective recycling of waste materials to farmland in H.H. King’s book, *Farmers of Forty Centuries, Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea, and Japan*, which appeared in 1911 but then lay in relative obscurity. Such a sustainable soil fertility management was vividly described by Victor Hugo: ‘Not a Chinese peasant goes to town without bringing back with him, at the two extremities of his bamboo pole, two full buckets of what we designate as filth. Thanks to human dung, the earth in China is still as young...’

In *Farming and Gardening for Health or Disease* (later published as *Soil and Health*), Howard introduced the idea that disease, whether in plants, animals, or humans, was caused by unhealthy soil and that organic farming techniques would make the soil, and those living on it, healthy. As evidence he cited his observation that animals fed with crops grown in humus-rich soil were able to rub noses with diseased animals without becoming infected. More generally, he argued that crop and animal health was a birthright and that the correct method for dealing with a pathogen was not to destroy the pathogen but rather to try to learn from it or to ‘make use of it for tuning up agricultural practice’.

Howard’s concept of soil fertility was centered on building soil humus with an emphasis on a ‘living soil’. More generally, he argued that crop and animal health was a birthright and that the correct method for dealing with a pathogen was not to destroy the pathogen but rather to try to learn from it or to ‘make use of it for tuning up agricultural practice’. Although Howard knew that certain nutrients could be severely limiting in some soils, he opposed using chemical fertilizers even though they could more easily correct specific nutrient limitations than could the use of compost. Thus, Howard’s extreme position against any use of chemical fertilizers created a challenging situation for organic farmers attempting to balance nutrient supply. Howard’s hard-line position against the use of chemical fertilizers, however, was not shared by some of his contemporary supporters who felt that the use of artificial fertilizers could sometimes be justified. Howard was, however, open to the use of some naturally occurring mineral sources such as pulverized rocks.

In Howard’s long and distinguished career as a scientist, he made discoveries and contributions relating to a wide range of areas beyond composting and soil fertility. These areas included plant breeding, irrigation, mycorrhizae, root systems, soil aeration, fruit tree cultivation, post-harvest produce transport, weed management, and diseases of plants and humans. For these sound contributions to agriculture, he was knighted in England. While having earned the respect of his scientific peers, in his later years Howard became extremely critical of the agricultural establishment. His ideas on humus, soil...
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A true comparison of organic farming to non-organic farming, Howard argued, would not be an easy task. For example, he suggested that such a comparison should begin with ‘two large areas of similar worn-out land side by side’, a period of at least ten years, and that a minimum of five years was required for the conversion to an organic system. He further suggested that such a study should compare responses of soils, earthworms, crops, and livestock. Clearly, Howard favored the study of whole systems over reductionism. Such a study comparing organic and non-organic farms was attempted from 1939 to 1969 in England by Lady Eve Balfour. Her observations from this comparison of whole farms were described in her widely read book The Living Soil and the Haughley Experiment first published in 1943 and republished in 1974.

Although Howard was a passionate advocate of organic farming, he did not coin the term ‘organic’ in reference to this system of agriculture. But in 1940, in An Agricultural Testament, Howard describes the main characteristics of what he called ‘Nature’s farming’. ‘Mother earth never attempts to farm without livestock; she always raises mixed crops; great pains are taken to preserve the soil and prevent erosion; the mixed vegetable and animal wastes are converted into humus; there is no waste; the processes of growth and the processes of decay balance one another; ample provision is made to maintain large reserves of fertility; the greatest care is taken to store the rainfall; both plants and animals are left to protect themselves from disease’.

Walter Northbourne was apparently the first to apply the word ‘organic’ in application to farming. In 1940, Northbourne published an influential book, Look to the Land, in which he elaborated on the idea of the farm as an ‘organic whole’ - in the philosophical sense, ‘organic’ refers to ‘having a complex but necessary interrelationship of parts, similar to that in living things’. This concept of organic is similar in many respects to the holistic ideas more recently expressed by James Lovelock in the ‘Gaia Hypothesis’ and Lynn Margulis in her book Symbiotic Planet, but on the smaller scale of a whole farm as a symbiotic unit. In this respect, the organic farmer functions in concert with the symbiotic unit by being in daily contact with and having a feeling for the whole farm organism. It is also important to distinguish this meaning of ‘organic’ as it applies to a system of farming from the common misunderstanding that ‘organic’ specifically refers to the carbon-based chemistry of the fertilizers that are often used in organic farming.

Polarization into Organic versus Non-organic

While Howard played a pivotal role in developing the concepts of organic farming and popularizing them around the world, he was also a polarizing figure. The period from about 1940 to 1978 may be called the era of polarization of agriculture into organic and non-organic camps. During this period, there was little dialogue between the organic community and conventional agriculture. American businessman and publisher Jerome Rodale was an early convert to organic farming as a result of reading the works of Howard. So moved was Rodale by Howard’s organic vision - which he described as being hit by a ‘ton of bricks’ - that he purchased a farm near Allentown, PA, and began experimenting with composting and organic farming techniques. In 1942, Rodale began publishing Organic Farming and Gardening magazine with Howard serving as the associate editor. Through this magazine and other publications, Rodale diffused and popularized organic concepts in the US. Rodale’s 1945 book Pay Dirt, with an introduction by Howard, summarized organic farming concepts for a wide audience. His missionary zeal for promoting organic farming in the USA is suggested by the title of his 1948 book, The Organic Front, which followed on the heels of Howard’s book, The War in the Soil. Both Howard and Rodale saw the conflict of organic versus non-organic agriculture as a struggle between two different visions of what agriculture should become as they engaged in a war of words with the agricultural establishment.

Initially, agriculturalists from the non-organic establishment largely ignored the organic farming movement. Agricultural colleges and experiment stations, however, were increasingly besieged with letters of inquiry from the public and it became impossible to ignore the organic movement.

Notable American advocates of building soil fertility included Louis Bromfield and Edward Faulkner, both of whom were popular agricultural writers but not organic purists. In addition to novels that were made into movies by Hollywood, Louis Bromfield published the widely read books Out of the Earth (1945), Malabar Farm (1948), and Out of the Earth (1950). Edward Faulkner, author of the best selling book Plowman’s Folly (1943), was a controversial figure in his time but is now regarded as a pioneer of no-till and conservation tillage farming.

In agriculture, the publication of Silent Spring by Rachel Carson in 1962 began a change of focus and attention as it ignited the environmental movement.
while raising concerns about the excessive use of pesticides in agriculture.

Over the next two decades, public interest in the organic method continued to grow. For example, the circulation of Organic Gardening magazine increased from 260,000 in 1960 to 1,300,000 in 1980. Many factors, such as the migration of some people from the cities to the country, the growing environmental movement, and the antiestablishment social revolution, were responsible for the increasing popularity of Rodale Press publications.

Recognition for Organic Agriculture

The period from 1979 to 1990 may be described as the era of recognition for organic farming at a national level in the USA. With a growing public interest in organic food and farming, interest in establishing standards for organically produced foods also increased. As a sign of the new times, in 1979, California passed a law establishing a legal standard for organic production.

Under the direction of President Carter’s Secretary of Agriculture, Robert Bergland, the USDA began surveying the organic farming sector. In 1980, the USDA published the Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming for the expressed purpose of “increasing communication between organic farmers and the USDA.” In 1981, the American Society of Agronomy held a Symposium on Organic Farming to examine the question ‘Can organic farming contribute to a more sustainable agriculture?’ They concluded: ‘The most probable answer is that it most definitely can...’ and also that ‘...the soils for the two farming systems may be quite different, each with its own unique chemical and biological properties and crop production capabilities’. Although the USDA publication did not cite Howard’s work, it most definitely can...’ and also that ‘...the soils for the two farming systems may be quite different, each with its own unique chemical and biological properties and crop production capabilities’. Although the USDA publication did not cite Howard’s work, it most definitely can...’ and also that ‘...the soils for the two farming systems may be quite different, each with its own unique chemical and biological properties and crop production capabilities’. Although the USDA publication did not cite Howard’s work, it most definitely can...’ and also that ‘...the soils for the two farming systems may be quite different, each with its own unique chemical and biological properties and crop production capabilities’. Although the USDA publication did not cite Howard’s work, it most definitely can...’ and also that ‘...the soils for the two farming systems may be quite different, each with its own unique chemical and biological properties and crop production capabilities’. Although the USDA publication did not cite Howard’s work, it most definitely can...’ and also that ‘...the soils for the two farming systems may be quite different, each with its own unique chemical and biological properties and crop production capabilities'.

This new attention and recognition led to a backlash among the professional organization to support sustainable agriculture, now known as the Henry A. Wallace Institute, Garth Youngberg, later established an effective professional organization to support sustainable agriculture, and debate continues between the different philosophies of organic farming and even within the USDA and the US political structure were not ready to promote widespread adoption of organic farming.

In spite of the changing political situation at the national level, the already published USDA Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming continued to be read, and served to stimulate a growing interest in organic farming. A few land-grant colleges began to offer courses in organic farming to serve the interests of applied agricultural students.

It was also around this same time that some advocates for organic farming began supporting the term “sustainable agriculture” in hopes that it would invite respect for organic farming. One of those advocates, Garth Youngberg, later established an effective professional organization to support sustainable agriculture, now known as the Henry a. Wallcase Institute for Alternative Agriculture. Under the broader umbrella of sustainable agriculture, this institute has been an important supporter of organic farming. While organic farming and sustainable agriculture are both part of the alternative agriculture movement, these terms are not synonymous.

Accommodation for Organic Agriculture

The passage of the Federal Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 marks an era of accommodation for organic farming in the USA. This Act set out to:

1. establish national standards governing the marketing of organically produced products,
2. assure consumers that organically produced products meet a consistent standard, and
3. facilitate inter-state commerce in both fresh and processed organic foods.

The writing of the official USDA rules for what defined organic farming and organic food required more than a decade. Initially, the proposed standards did not prohibit the use of sewage sludge, food irradiation, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). But these initial allowances resulted in public protest; people from the cities to the country, the growing environmental movement, and the antiestablishment social revolution, were responsible for the increasing popularity of Rodale Press publications.

Although it is impossible to know today what Howard would think of the USDA rules, it is interesting to note that he encouraged the use of sewage sludge because the recycling of human manure was consistent with the Law of Return. Nevertheless, given Howard’s concern over poison sprays, it seems unlikely that he would approve of the contaminating substances that are now known to be present in some sewage sludges. Although GMOs were not an issue in Howard’s time, his statement against artificial insemination would seem to suggest opposition to other such ‘artificial’ technologies. The USDA rules, which allow for the use of some synthetic micronutrient fertilizers, when a need is demonstrated, would seem to collide with Howard’s opposition to the use of any chemical fertilizer.

As far back as 1942, J. J. Rodale presciently predicted: “One of these fine days the public is going to wake up and will pay for eggs, meat, vegetables, fruits, grains, and almost anything, according to the years that early years of the organic movement and before there was a significant market for organic products, organic farming was done out of a passion for the philosophy. Today, with growing demand for organic products, price premiums are, in some cases, attracting new converts to organic farming for financial survival. While organic farming and organic food continue to be the targets of skepticism by agriculture and science, USDA Certified Organic appears to be here to stay.

Beyond USDA Certified Organic

The establishment of USDA standards for organic production was an important milestone in the organic movement. It also served to formally define organic as ‘A production system that is managed in accordance with the Organic Foods Production Act and regulations to respond to site specific conditions by integrating cultural, biological and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity.’ This definition, however, has not satisfied all within the organic movement. Some would like to see a greater emphasis placed on issues such as locally produced foods, biological diversity, raising livestock humanely and on pastures, certified raw dairy foods, renewable energy, environmental stewardship, subtle energies, and social justice.

While much of Howard’s passion and vision for an organic agriculture has not come to fruition in the National Organic Program nor in the current status of organic farming in the USA, Howard and other organic advocates did inspire generations of farmers, gardeners, and consumers to change their philosophical views on waste materials, soil management, soil quality, health and disease, pesticides, synthetic materials, and the environment. Tension and debate continues between the different philosophical, political and scientific ideas and ideals of organic and non-organic farming and even within the organic farming community itself. As these differences play out on the political stage, renewed efforts to stimulate new lines of agricultural research leading to more environmentally sound and sustainable agriculture, provided there is open communication and the prevailing agricultural paradigms are allowed to be questioned.

The Natural Farmer
The Role of Fair Trade and Fair Labor Labels in the Movement for Food Justice

by Anna Canning, Fair World Project

The original goal of the movement for organic farming was care for the soil and the watersheds, for the health of the animals and for the many hands that tend the crops. Yet, as organic standards have developed, much of the emphasis has been on growing methods and too often, the farmers and workers who do the work have been left behind. A variety of voluntary ethical and labor justice certifications and programs have been created that can fill that gap. Although their standards, tools and theory of change vary, they share a common goal: safeguarding the people who grow the food.

A Broken Food System

Any examination of ethical and labor justice certifications would be incomplete if it failed to address the massive imbalances of power that exist within the food system. As a reader of The Natural Farmer, we don’t need to tell you that our food system is broken. Here in the U.S., and around the globe, corporate-driven, industrial agriculture is polluting our planet and exploiting people.

Farming has never been a lucrative vocation. Yet increasing corporate consolidation squeezes farmers as fewer and fewer companies control every aspect of our food system. According to the Farm Business Owners and ranchers in the U.S. receive only 15 cents out of every dollar spent on food. The rest goes for costs beyond the farm gate: wages and materials for production, processing, transportation, distribution, and marketing. That’s less than half what it was in 1980.

Massive mergers between some of the biggest companies mean that seeds, inputs, processing, and trading are all controlled by just a few companies. That consolidation continues at just about every step of the supply chain. Just ten companies own the majority of brands on supermarket shelves, whether conventional or organic. Those supermarket shelves are themselves owned by fewer and fewer companies, as Walmart, Target, and now Amazon-owned Whole Foods take more and more of the money spent on food.

Of course, imbalances of power are not a new element of our food system. In the U.S. and around the globe, there is a long, long history of land theft and displacement of indigenous people for farm land. Plantation owners around the globe have exploited workers and artificially reduced production costs. The legacy of slavery in the U.S. farming system exists in the United States in most states, exempt from many of the basic protections of labor law, exempted from minimum wage and overtime laws and excluded from the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA)’s guarantees of freedom to organize and join a union—all the results of New Deal Era compromises (for a more comprehensive history on this topic see the National Farmworkers Association’s brief-history-farmer-worker-wages-us-current-requirements/).

Thus, it’s little wonder that so many of those who grow our food struggle to put food on the table for themselves.

The Role of Voluntary Certification

The inequities and challenges in our food system are huge, systemic, and long-standing. It would be naïve to think that a single label could change these things alone. Yet some of the best programs out there do provide frameworks that can both improve conditions and guide buyers towards products and producers that do.

Fair World Project’s analysis reviews the standards behind the labels through this lens.

Assessments and recommendations below are based on two reports, Justice in the Fields: A Report on the Role of Farmer Worker Justice Certification and an Analysis of the National Seven Labels (2016) and Fairness for Farmers: A Report Assessing the Fair Trade Movement and the Role of Certification (2018). Justice in the Fields reviews labels in the U.S. market that intend to benefit farm workers (and, in some cases, farmers) both in the U.S. and globally. Fairness for Farmers evaluates the labels in their intention to benefit small-scale farmers in the Global South, although a few may also allow participation from U.S. farmers who meet certain criteria.

Standards that benefit farmworkers are different than those that intend to benefit farmers, however it is important to note the many certifications that use the same label on all certified products. Fair World Project believes it is important to make a distinction between these standards because the intentions are clearly different. This confusion in the marketplace is becoming more and more relevant as Fair Trade USA, one of the most prevalent ethical labels in the U.S. marketplace continues to broaden the scope of products that may bear their label and there is nothing to denote whether a product came from a small-scale farmer in the Global South or a massive indoor farm in the Global North.

Further, while “fair trade” emerged as a term to describe a movement for solidarity-based ethical trade in products grown in the Global North and South based on values of transparency, democracy, empowerment, that definition has shifted in the marketplace. In recent years, the label shifts the balance of power between trading partners, too often, the term has been reduced to designating Corporate Social Responsibility programs. While fair trade originald as a movement focused on North-South trading relationships, some have broadened the definition to include North-North trading relationships.

An Overview of Certifications

Ethical labels give buyers a chance to choose products that are in line with their values. Just as those values are diverse, so too are the certifications and labels available. Below we include a short description of the various certifications in the marketplace.

Fair Food Program (FFP) is the label of the Coalition of Immoklee Workers (CIW). Developed by and for tomato workers in Florida, their standards focus on working conditions and using binding legal contracts to hold corporate buyers accountable for their supply chains. Their model has been adopted by the Milk with Dignity program in Vermont, and inspired other initiatives around the globe.

Fair Life (FLL) is a fair trade certification program developed by the Fair Trade Connection Foundation and the Institute for Marketecology (IMO). FFL criteria focus on fair trading relationships, working conditions, and environmental responsibility.

Fair Trade Certified is the label of Fair Trade USA (FTUSA). Initially developed as a fair trade label for North-South trading, this label now appears on products grown, manufactured or shipped around the globe, including in the U.S. and Canada. Standards focus on social criteria, working conditions, and some environmental components.

Fairtrade is the label of the Fair Trade International (FTI). Developed as a label for North-South trading, this label continues to focus on producers in the Global South. While not a certification option for U.S. farmers, this is the most common fair trade label globally.

Food Justice Certified is the label of the Agricultural Justice Project (AJP). Founded by farmworker and farmer associations (including NOFA), and its strong standards and focus on the needs of northern farmers and workers set it apart from most other programs. Food Justice Certified requires organic certification as a complement to its label. They also recognize that building a fair supply chain requires participation of all players and their standards address farmers, workers, and retailers’ roles.

The World Fair Trade Organization’s Guarantee System takes a different approach than all the other labels. Instead of focusing on product certification and tracing a single supply chain, their process evaluates the entire supply chain — only organizations that meet their high standards for membership are eligible to put the label on products. The label is most...
commonly seen on artisan-made handicrafts instead of foods, at least in the U.S., however the organization has recently broadened their definitions of marginalized producers to include some farmers in the Global North. These are just a few of the innovative models that exist. To learn more, including full length reports and in-depth point by point comparisons, see https://fairworldproject.org/choose-fair/certifier-analysis/

Another label will soon be seen on packaging in the U.S. with the upcoming launch of the new Regenerative Organic Certification (ROC) Label. The ROC is a product certification that builds on organic certification as a baseline with the holistic goal of encompassing animal-based animal welfare, fairness for farmers and workers, and robust requirements for soil health and land management. The ROC works with existing fair labor and fair trade certifications to address the social components of the standards. The Role of Fair Trade and Fair Labor Labels in the Movement for Food Justice 

Bring a roomful of food advocates together to ask the question how best to fix our broken food system and you’ll likely get a multiplicity of answers. Likewise, there are multiple certifications seeking to assure buyers that the people who grow their food were treated fairly.

At its best, a certification label represents a clear, high bar standards crafted with the input of the farmers and workers they intend to benefit. A label can be a short-hand for a broad movement whose organizing for change goes beyond a single transaction to build solidarity between buyers, farmers, workers. Globally, fair trade organizations like the World Fair Trade Organization and Fairtrade International have been at the forefront of this work here in the U.S., the Committee of Immokalee Workers is mobilizing for change both in the fields and in the streets. Strong standards can provide a roadmap to those who want to do the right thing, and certifying organizations can provide connections between like-minded producers.

Unfortunately, a label can also support the greening up efforts of multinational corporations. Fair Trade USA’s Fair Trade Certified label is one of the most prevalent in the U.S. Yet their standards come closer to Corporate Social Responsibility in many regards (Fair World Project’s in-depth discussion of the topic can be found here: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/approach-with-caution-an-assessment-of-fairtrade_us_3909f0e54808459b94f9ddd). Even more troubling, they recently certified a melon plantation in the midst of a long-standing, unresolved labor dispute. Not only does this fail to protect workers and fail to make change in our food system, it contributes to cynicism and suspicion of anyone making ethical claims.

Not all labels are created equal. Whether shopping in the store, or making decisions for your own business, it pays to do the research. Part of Fair World Project’s mission is to do that research, evaluating standards with the long-term goal in mind: how does this contribute to building a better food and farming system for all people?

Raising the Bar: Regenerative Organic Certification

by Jeff Moyer and Zoe Schaeffer, Rodale Institute

The Path to Regenerative

The path to regenerative organic agriculture started over seven decades ago. In 1942, J.I. Rodale wrote a few simple words on a black board: “HEALTHY SOIL=HEALTHY FOODS=HEALTHY PEOPLE.” In so doing, he set us on a path that links our personal health to the health of the soil, dictating that the way we farm makes a difference in human health and the health of the planet. In the later 20th century, as the organic community tried to create inter-state and inter-national trade in organic food and fiber materials, it became clear that a national standard was needed. Such a standard could unify the many voices in the organic community, help grow the numbers of organic farms and products; and communicate to consumers through a forward-facing USDA logo representing the certification process and the standards themselves.

The first step in getting a USDA standard created was passing the Organic Food Production Act of 1990, which gave the Department of Agriculture the authority to create regulations and standards for the production, processing and handling of food and fiber products. The National Organic Standards Board was also created to interact with and advise the USDA. It took 12 years of shared work between the organic community and the USDA before the release of the first official USDA organic standard in 2002.

The Case for a New Standard

It’s been more than 15 years now since the first national standards were established. Those rules assure consumers that their purchases are produced without the use of harmful chemicals. While the current organic certification is a necessary and important benchmark for both farmers and shoppers, the original standards haven’t changed much in the decades plus since their inception. Additionally, those standards don’t address a number of issues important to today’s consumers, including soil degradation, labor injustice, animal welfare and an increasingly unstable climate. It’s time to go forward. It’s time to raise the bar and encompass the full spectrum of values important to organic farmers, customers and brands.

In the 1970s and 80s, the food and fiber industry got busy marketing the word “sustainable.” At the same time, Robert Rodale (who shunned the word sustainable for several reasons) chose a different word, “regenerative,” to better describe how to improve agricultural production. To sustain something means you’re happy with the way it is. There is no need to improve it, only to maintain the status quo. Regeneration, on the other hand, implies improvement.

The new Regenerative Organic Standard recognizes producers that farm organically and adhere to the principles of improving the resources they use while using them. This is particularly important when applied to soil health. If we focus our attention as farmers/producers on soil health instead of yield exclusively, then we will, by default, sequester more carbon, enhance the biodiversity of the soil, improve water management, and improve the resiliency of the entire system.

In recent years, many organizations have begun to use the word regenerative. Many of these organizations have chosen a path that does not connect the words organic and regenerative. Instead, they tend to use the word in whatever way is easiest for them to market, cherry picking carbon sequestration, for example. The position of Rodale Institute and many supporting brands is that you cannot be regenerative unless you are first organic. While sustainability is focused on minimizing the negative impacts of agricultural activities, regenerative organic is focused on maximizing the positive impacts of agricultural activities based on organic principles.

The existing USDA organic standard commands a powerful place in the market, but it also contains gaps on issues that matter to consumers, namely animal welfare, soil health, and worker fairness. The standard is not overly dynamic or easy to change by design. It has proven difficult to incorporate additional language or regulation around these key issues and others that consumers have identified as important.

It’s time to address soil health, animal welfare, and farm worker fairness while embodying the concept of continuous improvement. All these issues were included in original concepts of organic and J.I. Rodale’s idea that healthy soil leads to healthy people. They were lost in the translation to a certifiable USDA standard.

To address these issues in a meaningful way, we need to step outside the confines of the regulatory agency and build additional language around the USDA organic standard. The goal of Regenerative Organic Certification is not to diminish the decades of work that went into the creation and marketing of the powerful word organic, but to build on the legacy of both the concepts and regulations of organic. In order to do that, Rodale Institute has worked in partnership with the movement to create the Regenerative Organic Standard and Certification.
Regenerative Organic Certification’s Three Pillars

**Soil Health**

Introducing Regenerative Organic Certification

Regenerative Organic Certification (ROC) is a new, holistic agriculture certification program encompassing robust, high-bar standards for ensuring soil health and ecological land management, pasture-based animal welfare, and fairness for farmers and workers. The standard and certification applies to farmers, processors and brands. Eligible applicants must already be USDA certified organic.

ROC was created to model an ecological and ethical system for agricultural production that addresses the problems of factory farming, climate change, and economic injustice locally and globally. ROC, which requires farmers to also hold USDA NOP certification (or the international equivalent), utilizes the standards that have helped organic grow to the movement it is today — then takes them a step further.

ROC was created by the Regenerative Organic Alliance, a group of farmers, ranchers, brands, and experts in animal welfare and social fairness led by Rodale Institute and spearheaded by Dr. Bronner’s and Patagonia. The Alliance’s executive director is Elizabeth Whitlow, former director of certification at EarthClaims and fellow at the Leadership for a Sustainable Future. Founding members include Compassion in World Farming, Demeter, Fair World Project, Grain Place Foods, Maple Hill Creamery, White Oak Pastures, and Rodale Institute.

The unofficial launch of ROC was made in 2017 at the Natural Foods Expo in Baltimore. Following that “soft launch” we asked for public comments — and we got them. After the comment period, we pulled back the standard, rewrote it to incorporate the comments we received wherever and whenever reasonable, and relaunched the standard at the Natural Foods Expo in Anaheim in March of 2018. The Regenerative Organic Alliance will continually reevaluate the certification guidelines and update them as necessary. For now, NSF International will administer the standard.

The Philosophy

There are several methods that can be employed to write a standard:

- Philosophy, Testing, Practices

If one chooses philosophy as the backbone of a standard, acceptance can be limited to those for whom the philosophy already holds value. If the standard is based on testing, then the challenge to the producer becomes one of passing the test at the lowest cost and in the easiest manner — otherwise known as a race to the bottom, not a striving effort for a higher bar. However, if a standard is based on practices that are known to improve the system, then everyone who agrees to the standard (and thus the practices) is on the same road moving in the same direction, even if they do so at different speeds. Testing, which is part of the ROC standard, becomes a tool to monitor improvement or progress. Those who participate in the measures against themselves. The goal of continual improvement is to do better than you did before.

We need to shift our focus to clear, calculated changes to our food and agricultural production to make regenerative organic agriculture the new model for health and globally. Customers who purchase products with the ROC label will know they are buying products that address the full suite of supply chain responsibility concerns and values they bring to the marketplace. That includes fair treatment of the environment and animals, fair and safe working conditions for farmers and farm workers, and mitigating climate change.

Goals of ROC

The primary goal of ROC is to build a certification that exemplifies the complete value chain that consumers want and deserve. Consumers shouldn’t have to choose between organic and fair trade or organic and animal welfare-approved. We need an all-inclusive standard that sets a truly high bar, leading the way towards systems that actively improve the resources they use instead of destroying them. Instead of minimizing the negative impacts of food and fiber production, our goal should be to maximize the positive benefits.

To that end, goals of the Regenerative Organic Certification include increasing soil organic matter over time, sequestering carbon in the soil, improving animal welfare, providing economic stability and fairness for farmers, ranchers, and workers, and creating resilient regional ecosystems and communities, all while eliminating food and fiber contamination from synthetic pesticides and other harmful inputs found in conventional production systems.

Regenerative Organic Certification does not aim to compete with or negate current organic standards. The certification uses the USDA’s National Organic Program (USDA Organic) certified organic standard (or its international equivalency) as a baseline requirement and adds criteria in the areas of soil health and land management, animal welfare, and farmer and worker fairness.

The Three Pillars

The baseline for Regenerative Organic Certification is the USDA National Organic Program standard. The certification then adds three pillars: soil health, animal welfare, and social fairness. Farms and producers earn one of the three levels — bronze, silver, or gold — depending on the number of regenerative practices employed. These tiers keep the concept of continuous improvement embedded in the certification. Again, participation in ROC requires current organic certification under a USDA NOP approved certifier or an IFOAM approved agency.

The full framework, available online at www.regenorganic.org, outlines in detail all the practices encouraged or required for farmers seeking ROC. Here’s a quick snapshot:

**Soil health:**
- Producers incorporate the use of cover crops on an annual basis and land maintains adequate cover year-round
- Tillage is infrequent and only occurs when necessary, never deeper than 10 inches except during preparation and planting of certain perennial, like orchards and vineyards
- Operations that include livestock utilize rotational grazing and do not graze sensitive areas (e.g., habitat for declining and rare species) when grazing could negatively impact the ecosystem
- Hydroponics and other soilless practices are not eligible for ROC
- Producers track soil health tests and track emissions and sequestrations
- Operations minimize use of off-farm inputs and recycle on-farm biomass

**Social Fairness:**
- Animal welfare:
  - Animals are not raised or fed in a manner that meets the EPA’s definition of a CAFO
  - Feed for monogastric animals comes from regenerative organic, organic, or on-farm sources
  - Ruminant feed comes from grass/forage/aleage/hay or organic sources
  - The environment considers animals’ welfare needs and is designed to protect animals from physical and thermal discomfort, fear, distress, and allows them to perform natural behaviors
  - Livestock shall generally live, eat, and sleep outdoors on pasture
  - Producers promote compassionate care and handling of animals

- Social fairness:
  - Operations do not discriminate in any aspect of the employment relationship
  - The operation does not interfere with worker efforts to assemble, strike, or hold elections in an independent manner
  - Large farm operations have process to listen and address worker complaints in a transparent process
  - Workers earn a living wage as calculated based on the region’s cost of living and typical expenses
  - Operators shall not require workers to work more than the regular and overtime hours allowed by the law of the country where the workers are employed

The goal of the certification process is to utilize existing certifiers already accredited by the USDA NOP. The certification process for ROC does not intend to disrupt any existing relationships between the producer and their current certification agency, therefore any USDA NOP accredited certifier can apply to become a ROC agency as well.

The builders of ROC recognize that each certification organization or agency is a service provider. ROC will simply become an additional service the certifier can supply to clients and customers. We understand that the audit protocols and expertise will be different to accommodate ROC’s three pillars; certification providers will likely need to train, hire or contract for the additional expertise.

What’s next?

Regenerative Organic Certification is currently in a pilot process. 22 brands and farms have been chosen to help develop a greater understanding of how ROC standards can be implemented on the ground. The pilot program will inform the creation of training materials, audit tools, guidance documents, and more. The Regenerative Organic Alliance is hopeful that the first Regenerative Organic Certified products will be available for purchase sometime in 2019.

We know that when we improve the health of the soil, we can improve human and planetary health. The ROC standard, based on organic certification, creates a dynamic path forward.

In our vision or the future, farmers are valued for the quality of the food and fiber they produce along with their positive impacts on the health of our soil, the animals in their care, and the workers who contribute. Regenerative Organic Certified farms represent the true power of agriculture to have a positive impact.

For more information on ROC and to view the full framework, visit RegenOrganic.org. From there, sign up to become an ally and receive regular updates.
farms and handled solely by certified organic operations, with the determination of certifier accreditation to be made by the USDA. The OPF left room for the certifier to be either a private certifying agent or a state certification program. In addition, the OPF exempted small farmers with less than $50,000 in annual gross organic sales from having to comply with the national regulations.

The goal of Congress in enacting the OPFA was not to create federal preemption of state regulations. Congress wanted an organic product standard to exist as a uniform federal certification law which would partially pre-empt current state law but leave enough flexibility to allow individual states to continue achieving their own goals. However, Congress directed the USDA to consider possible adverse human and environmental effects.

Congress’ concern with false and misleading labeling in the organic food market was further magnified by concern that the higher prices charged for organic foods would be passed along to consumers, creating a false impression that the organic food was not produced at a uniform level. Consequently, the USDA was directed to consider labeling languages which had been used in the program from the beginning of the period! In the face of such public outrage, the USDA had no choice but to withdraw the proposal.

The Final Rule, December 2000

After considerable redrafting, USDA issued a revised proposal in March 2000. This proposal still inspired controversy, but after reviewing public comments USDA made substantial changes and issued the Final Rule on December 21, 2000, to go into effect 18 months later.

When USDA announced the final rule, the organic industry, generally led by the Organic Trade Association (OTA), a national organization representing organic growers, processors, certifiers, distributors, retailers and others in the organic products industry, rallied in support of USDA’s efforts as strengthening consumer confidence in U.S. organic products and achieving consistent standard and labeling requirements. The chief executive of a leading organic food company reported that the final federal rule: “...is acceptable to our industry and is consistent with what we have been doing.” Farmers and consumers were also largely pleased with the final rule. The California Certified Organic Farmers reported: “[t]he new federal standards are a good working definition of organic production and are true to the organic concept and approach that has gained the confidence of many consumers.”

The small northeastern organic farming groups like MOFGA and the NOFAs, which had been reluctant participants in the drive for federal regulation, swallowed hard and hoped that becoming an industry would not destroy the best aspects of what had been the organic movement.

Tensions About Standards

From the beginning the new National Organic Program (NOP) rules created conflicts for Northeastern organic farmers. While the states of New Hampshire and Rhode Island had set up public certification programs, which (still continue) where these programs were often leading farmers active in the chapters. But the NOP prohibited such self-certification as conflicts of interest and would not accept such programs. In order to get these programs into the NOP, farmers and organizations had to meet the rule requiring “outdoor access” for organically raised animals.

More stressful than such organizational adaptations were early demonstrations of “muscle-flexing” by corporations involved in producing organic foods. The clearest example was that of The Country Hen, an egg producer in Hubbardston, Massachusetts. In 2002 the firm applied for organic certification from the NOFA/Mass certification program (which had been ‘spun-off’ by the chapter and was now independent) but were denied because they kept their hens inside large warehouse-like buildings and refused to meet the rule requiring “outdoor access” for organically raised animals.

Rather than discuss ways to meet the program rules, when denied certification Country Hen CEO George Bass immediately hopped onto a plane and flew to Washington, DC. He met with NOP administrator Arturo Mattews and laid out his plans for a plan to create “porches” on his buildings as a way to qualify for outdoor access. The NOFA/ Mass program was not willing to accept porches as valid outdoor access and still refused to certify The Country Hen. Mathews then directed the program to certify the company. They refused and filed suit to overturn the USDA regulations. The decision was based on the fact that they are arms of the USDA. If the NOP works out exemptions for corporate farms, the certifiers must allow those exemptions and have no independence to use their own judgment.
This paper was to repeat itself many times. The reality that certifiers had little room to exercise any integrity – and also that businesses seeking certification could choose whichever certifier they wanted – 34 had little room to exercise any integrity. Selected to get the preferred, high fee, well and rigorous certifiers ending up with the smaller farms that could not afford to pay much but strictly adhered to the rules. Violations Spur Emergence of Watchdogs As rule violations, as seen from the point of view of organic advocates, increased, organizations dedicated to aggressive enforcement activities on major fraud and alleged violations of organic regulations occurring with “factory farm” livestock activities – all clenched in secrecy. The USDA’s (USDA) commitment to preserving consumer trust in the organic label. The USDA needs to envision by the founders of this movement,” wanting “organic” to remain the gold standard, and that advocates believe that hydroponics is an approved method. In a controversial decision in November, 2017 the NOSB, after years of debate, finally agreed by changing organic standards. Nonetheless, many organic advocates believe that hydroponics production is contrary to the NOP. They cite a requirement in the law that farms must be operated under an organic plan “designed to foster soil fertility” through crop rotation, cover crops, crop diversification, avoided the use of synthetic inputs, and follow other provisions of the law also emphasize soil fertility, health and preservation. In the Cornucopia Institute’s view this language clearly bars organic certification of hydroponic production which is soilless and in which crops are grown in an inert medium like peat moss or perlite and irrigated with nutrient-infused water. “The law requires building soil fertility, but how can that be accomplished without soil?” says Kastel. Apart from their philosophical objections, of course, critics also see hydroponics as posing an economic threat to organic farmers. They are currently about 100 certified organic hydroponic operations in the U.S. These highly mechanized hydroponic greenhouses are tremendously productive, however, reducing the cost of production. “They are cornering the market for popular produce crops, such as peppers, tomatoes and cucumbers,” Kastel worries. But hydroponic operations tend to require a lot of capitalization, so if such production methods are to be scaled up, they’re more than likely to be sustainable only by well-funded companies. Other. Leaving aside the look of food grown with miles of plastic piping inside what amounts to a translucent shoebox, the organic hanger. The question is whether agriculture needs is to continue on the path of corporate domination of the market, which is already well underway.

Animal Welfare When you go to grocery stores and shell out a little extra cash for food with the Department of Agriculture’s green-and-white “organic” logo on it, you’re paying a premium in exchange for a promise. The label guarantees, for the most part, that what you’re buying was grown or raised without synthetic pesticides or fed organically-grown grain. But, despite what many people think, the organic label doesn’t promise that the food is grown humanely. In fact, the current organic standards say very little about how to raise animals, and what is going on is so vague, critics contend, that they’re exploited by producers who want to cash in on the organic label. The USDA proposed new standards late in the Obama administration that detailed how livestock producers would have to raise animals, especially poultry, a move meant to bring the organic label in line with what most consumers think they’re getting. The standards would have meant that organic animals have enough space to lie down, stretch and turn around. They would also have banned de-beaking of poultry or docking the tails of cattle or sheep. Producers would have to take steps to minimize pain for surgical alterations and to greatly transport animals. But hydroponics, being perhaps most importantly for the average consumer, the standards would explicitly say that “outdoor access” for poultry actually means that birds should be able to go outside on some regular basis. “Country Hen!” Of the roughly 12 million organic laying hens in the country, only about six million were actually going outside. “For a long time we recognized that the definitions and requirements for animal welfare within the reg- ulations have not kept pace with change,” says Nate Ledbetter, a staff attorney for the Organic Trade Association, which represents the balloononing number of organic producers. “There’s definitely a need for clarity because we want ‘organic’ to remain the gold standard, and that includes animal welfare.” The proposed changes, though, didn’t come without years of debate among government regulators and players in the booming global organic market.
“After the big guys got into organic production using porches, more and more of the organic egg market was coming from birds that never went outside,” says Dena Jones, who directs the farm animal program at the Animal Welfare Institute. “If you ask any organic consumer, nobody would think of a porch as being outdoor access. It just wasn’t what the consumer expects.”

The new rules said that “outdoor access” meant there’s no solid roof overhead and that half of the ground surface should be dirt that chickens can scratch and “bathe” in. Those requirements were more in line with the organic standards of the US’s biggest agricultural trading partners, including Canada and the European Union.

But giving the birds access to the outdoors means producers have to find more space and spend more money, so some had pushed against any clarification on change in the current law. Conventional and organic egg producers who didn’t provide outdoor access said that allowing birds outside invites disease and higher death rates. They also said it would cost millions to retrofit barns to accommodate the new standards, which would drive up egg prices.

With the change of administrations in 2017, the proposed animal welfare standards were first postponed, then permanently shelved. Most observ- ers interpreted it as a victory for the “big guys” who didn’t want to shell out what it would cost to make the changes. Even the OTA, which normally represents the larger corporate organic companies, opposed shelving the animal welfare rule, knowing it would leave a bad taste with consumers. They have filed suit over the NOP’s failure to implement the new rules, and been joined in it as co-plaintiffs by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI).

Challenges to the NOSB in the 2018 Farm Bill

There have been a rough few recent years for the organic label. From scandals over fraudulent organic grain imports and the revelation of several factory-scale farms producing certified organic milk and eggs, to controversy around the inclusion of hydroponic or “soilless” farming and the reversal of comprehensive animal welfare rules, one thing is clear: The organic industry’s rapid growth may also turn out to be its downfall.

Organic is the fastest-growing retail food segment, valued at $50 billion per year, and an increasing number of multinational corporations want a piece of the pie, leaving the integrity of the USDA’s certified organic seal in question. Now, however, in the new Farm Bill, organic certification faces an attack from Congress, which has proposed re-shaping the NOSB. By allowing more corporate entities to question the organic label and suggest which farm chemicals and other inputs farmers are allowed to use on their organic fields, industry insiders worry the proposed changes could further erode the strict standards of organic production that distinguished it from conventional agriculture and built a thriving market.

Congress is proposing two big changes to the NOSB. Allowing employees of organic farmers or processors to be permitted to occupy board positions, and allowing politicians to sidestep the NOSB’s authority to approve substances such as the fertilizers and pesticides used in organic production—changes that raise alarms for some in the organic industry.

Certainly, the legal clarification for NOSB roles may seem like the least contentious issue in the 2018 Farm Bill, which also proposes major overhauls to SNAP food assistance programs and farmland conservation funds. But for organic insiders, it represents a significant erosion of the board’s authority on matters of organic law.

Jay Feldman, executive director of Beyond Pesti- cides, sat on the NOSB as the environmental representative from 2010 to 2015. He’s concerned about the change. “There are so many large companies getting involved with organic that do not have the history with organic, and that makes them less than optimal members of the NOSB,” he said. “They don’t have the insight into organic practices.”

While Congress has never tinkered with the structure of the NOSB before, the greatest concern stems from the proposed “expedited process” for approving substances for the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances. Until now, the NOP has granted NOSB the exclusive authority to approve agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides for certified organic crop and livestock production. It also expressly prohibits the Secretary of Agriculture from adding any synthetic materials (generally prohibited) such as pesticides and herbicides, and non-synthetic or natural materials (generally allowed), such as essential oils and copper sulfate, to the National List without the specific recommendation of the NOSB.

But the House’s proposed farm bill would change the status quo. Under it, the NOSB would be re- quired to consult with the FDA and EPA when considering non-organic substances approved by those agencies. Also, the Secretary of Agriculture could force the NOSB to “expedite” a review of a petition from industry for non-organic substances “related to food safety”.

These provisions trouble organic advocates because the NOSB currently uses a much higher set of standards than those agencies or the Secretary do.

“My many of the critics of organics are really steeped in the pesticide side of the input regulation and not familiar with the degree to which organic farmers are monitored by the compliance process,” said Feldman. He cited the use of copper sulfate as a fungicide that includes strict compliance standards and oversight.

The goal of organic agriculture is to incentivize alternate products and practices in the market. What happens to the process, critics like Feldman wonder, when an NOSB member from a multinational corporation questions why the company cannot use a substance that’s been approved by the EPA or FDA? The ultimate danger is that the Secretary or a petitioner backed up by the EPA or FDA could override the NOSB. If passed, these statutory changes could...
ultimately eliminate the difference between conventional and organic foods.

“My biggest fear, bottom line, is that if we allow the chipping away of this statute we will destroy the integrity of this label and the public will no longer pay the premium in the marketplace,” said Feldman.

Alternative Labels

The consumer and small farmer erosion of confidence in the integrity of the USDA organic label has escalated in the last few years. Commercial pressures and federal officials have chipped away at the independence of the NOSB and the rigor of the standards, as documented above. Now at least two significant efforts have emerged to create alternative labels that include but go beyond the NOP.

ROC Label

Most recently, the Regenerative Organic Alliance has come together to launch Regenerative Organic Certification (ROC) in the spring of 2018. Led by the Rodale Institute, the ROC emerged in reaction to concern that the USDA definition of organic is broad and subject to debate and lobbying pressure. The entire National Organic Program is part of the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service and the explicit objective of the service is to create domestic and international marketing opportunities for farmers. As a result there is a legitimate argument that health and environmental concerns are beyond the scope of its jurisdiction.

The Regenerative Organic Certification (ROC) aims to encompass the organic label but include several others. The baseline for entry into the ROC process is a USDA Organic or equivalent certification. Additionally, producers must meet animal welfare and social fairness requirements for one of several certifications, such as Certified Humane, Animal Welfare Approved, Fairtrade and Fair for Life. The ROC also focuses on soil health as a means of regenerating the soil, improving ecosystem function, and mitigating climate change. The program will be facilitated by NSF International. The alliance set out a four-year timeline for transitioning to its organic certification. It also established three levels of certification at the producer level depending on the operation.

The cost structure of the ROC is as yet undetermined. It is unclear how much certification will cost, the cost of maintaining certification and who will pay for it. This could be a substantial hurdle for the movement. If producers are expected to pay the certification and maintenance costs, it will need to translate to higher-value market access.

The other new label has grown out of opposition to the NOP’s certification of hydroponic and CAFO operations.

ROP Label

“I think that a lot of farmers, especially young farmers, feel that the organic label no longer describes the way they farm, and we’re trying to recapture that. We are taking matters into our own hands because we know it is what the consumer wants and expects when they choose organic,” said Linley Dixon, a vegetable farmer in Durango, Colo. She is a senior scientist for Cornucopia Institute, and is also on the standards board of the Real Organic Project, a new certification program that is creating an “add-on” label to the USDA organic certification.

The group said its proposed add-on label, which requires adherence to standards above and beyond USDA organic certification, would only be available to agricultural products that have already been certified organic by the USDA. The program aims to implement new standards that will provide consumer transparency by “distinguishing organic farms that grow their crops in the ground, foster soil fertility and adequately pasture livestock according to foundational organic standards and principles.”

The Real Organic Project add-on label to USDA organic certification, expected by spring 2019, will increase transparency under the organic seal by allowing consumers to trace retail products back to the farm, according to the release. The inspection process includes a video interview of the farmers on their land explaining their organic production practices, the group said.
Maple Hill Creamery Goes Regenerative Organic

by Jack Kittredge

Central New York, the rectangle comprised of Albany, Ithaca and the area perhaps 60 miles north and south of the line connecting them, is exceptional dairy country. It is graced by emerald green, rolling country, small towns still with farming dealerships, moderate temperatures, 40 inches of rain and 180 days of sunshine per year. Not the world’s greatest soil for vegetables, it is excellent for grass.

It was here, almost 10 years ago, that a creamery was started which was quickly to become a beacon for over 200 struggling local dairy farmers. The central idea was that an organic yogurt, made with 100% grass-fed milk, would appeal to a growing consumer segment. And with the premium from such a product a reasonable price could be paid to small farmers for their milk—a price high enough to keep them in business.

The creamery was the brainchild of Tim Joseph, at the time a struggling dairy farmer himself. But he didn’t start out that way.

“When I was 13,” he relates, “I told my parents I wanted to be a farmer. I didn’t have a farming background at all, but I was fascinated by it. My grandfather on my father’s side was an Armenian from Turkey. I never knew him, but he was a baker and bought land in Long Valley, NJ to raise cows to milk for cheese for his baked goods. The price of milk went so low, though, that he soon found it was cheaper to buy cheese than raise it.

“As a young man,” he continues, “I started working for my friend who had a company in Westchester County. We made dental imaging equipment. I was involved on many levels, but finally was a product manager. We were bought and sold a number of times and it ended up being owned out of Atlanta.”

But Tim had been working at home and thought this might be a good time to scratch his farming bone. He was looking to buy a house, but realized that the price of a fixer-upper ranch house was such that he could buy a whole farm in Central New York for the same price. His wife Laura was supportive, and they both felt raising a family on a farm was a good way to do it. So in 2003 they bought a 250 acre old dairy farm, Stone Creek Farm, in Little Falls, New York. Tim kept his day job to pay the bills and they decided to raise sheep and hogs.

Within a year they realized that was a mistake. Besides not having any experience with livestock, Joseph realized there wasn’t a stable revenue stream in the sheep/hog business. “But I wanted to just farm,” he says, “to support their growing family. So they thought they would try milking cows.

“In 2004,” he sighs, “we bought 64 cows and became dairy farmers. We had no background or knowledge to help us, and we had a lot of on-the-job training from neighbors. But we made an awful lot of mistakes. It was a tremendous amount of work but Laura and I pitched in and tried to make a go of it. I still had my day job with a good deal of travel necessary, so Laura ended up with a lot of the milk handling.

“Once they stopped feeding grain and corn silage it became obvious to Tim that a lot of the subtle chronic problems the cows had were from their diet and lifestyle. With cows those problems are even more pronounced than with humans, because cows are production animals and we are pushing their biological limits. One of the first things to show up is feet and leg issues—the dairy farmers know that lameness is a big culling signal.

“A year after we changed to grazing,” Joseph recalls, “the guy who came each year to take care of their hooves said he didn’t think we needed him anymore. Now the cows were out wearing down their hooves grazing and didn’t need him for trims. Our farm had a heavy slate of milk and were being paid more than the hills all the time.”

Tim knew that making yogurt was one proven way to add value to milk, and he thought there might be a market niche for a grass-fed brand. He experimented with different recipes on the kitchen stove, trying the results out on the kids, and finally came up with a creamy yogurt that became their hallmark recipe. A neighbor had an old barbeque restaurant storefront in Little Falls that Tim converted to a yogurt and cheese making facility. So after a few years of grass-fed dairying, in 2009 Tim and Laura started Maple Hill Creamery (named for the beautiful maple covered hill behind the old restaurant). Joseph gave up his day job to throw himself fulltime into building the business.

It was a lousy time to make that decision, however, and leave the only steady income they had.

The recession was peaking and he and Laura quickly ran out of money. They couldn’t afford groceries or to heat their drafty old farmhouse, and were just scraping by on the farm. At this point Tim’s sister, Julia, and her husband, Pete Meck, decided to quit their dependable, well-paying jobs in New Jersey, and join Tim and Laura in order keep the business alive.

Things got worse before they got better—the electricity was shut off, the family car was repossessed and, at one point, the farm was in foreclosure. But, somehow, things began to turn around. The yogurt gained a loyal following, especially at farmers’ markets in Manhattan. The grass-fed philosophy began to catch on with conscious consumers and the business started to grow. Two other 100% grass-fed dairy farmers (the Van Amburgs of Dharma Lea, and the Kings of Hidden Camp Farm) joined with the Josephs, and with the extra milk supply they were able to increase production and distribute their...
yogurt across the Northeast into natural food and specialty stores. By 2012 it was clear that the little creamery could no longer support the increasing orders so the families sold the farm and moved to Stuyvesant, NY to a much larger facility.

In the few short years since then Maple Hill has become one of the fastest-growing dairy brands in the natural channel, available from over 6,000 retailers across the US in all 50 states. Over 200 farms, all 100% grass-fed, supply milk to the creamery. In 2014 Pennsylvania Certified Organic (PCO) began certifying their farms to validate the grass-fed label.

Of course the change to grass-fed dairying is not always easy. For one thing, milk production goes down when a cow starts relying on grass. Across all the herds now supplying milk to Maple Hill, Tim estimates that when a cow goes from grain to grass the farmer experiences a 20% to 35% drop in milk production.

“We didn’t really have anyone to talk to then about how to manage this,” he admits. “But the right answer is to put more cows on an acre. If you are managing well you can do that. You are pushing on a string to try to get more milk out of a grazing cow, but if you are grazing properly and getting your pastures working, you are able to support more animals on that pasture. More hooves and mouths on the grass actually creates more grass and that equals more milk.”

In making that transition to grass a farmer has an income gap until things even out. The creamery that buys the milk has to make up that gap by way of milk prices. But in the long run the farmer’s better management can improve the financial picture even more than just pricing alone, with lower input costs, higher milk quality and better herd health.

Maple Hill has a seasonal pricing model. Tim uses it to tell farmers when they want more milk. Creamery prices are lowest in the spring when there is a spring flush and everyone is drowning in milk. The price goes up slowly over the year until, in December, January and February it reaches a peak. That is when Tim needs more milk, the market for yogurt is good, and farmers can have a lot of costs to buy and store hay.

“On a year round average,” Joseph estimates, “our farmers are making $39 to $40 per hundredweight, depending on how they are managing their herd. If they do a good job on quality and follow seasonal pricing to freshen their cows in July, they can make $42 or even $43.”

Tim heard about the Regenerative Organic Certification program when it was just being put together. “For us,” he affirms, “it just seemed like a confirmation of what we were already doing. We have always been trying to leave the soil better than when we started. That is what we spend a lot of time on with our farmers. That is the only way they can make it work better for their farm – to make the land better than when they started.”

ROC serves as a way for Maple Hill to separate their brand from others in the market. For more and more consumers, he says, how the food is raised...
The ROC is just forming itself right now,” Tim explains, “and we all are moving forward in parallel together. Of course the organic claim is the foundation of this all and we can check that box, but the others are important. We’re 100% grass-fed, so we can check that box. We do a massive amount of on-farm monitoring of soil and have more data than I think anyone has on their farms — pasture cover, soil organic matter, everything. When the time comes for that box to be checked we’re ready to clearly show our work on soils. Animal welfare is important to consumers and of course us too. 100% grass-fed systems are healthier for the cow in a number of ways. There are a number of animal welfare organizations doing certification, there is other stuff coming together in organic, and I don’t think we will have to trouble checking that box over the next year.

“We will have to deal with the social justice issue too,” he continues, “when we do the ROC audit. We survey a lot of information from our farms, not just biological, and on 98% of our farms the person doing the milking is the owner of the farm. The tricky thing about that is that the owner of the farm is often not operating at an economic level that you would consider just, or right. I know it is hard to come up with a standard for justice or fairness that applies to any group, but we’re forming the non-profit as we go and 2019. Maple Hill will migrate there, and PCO will become a part of that. It will be an additional add-on label to organic. Up to now it has been just a working group, but we’re forming the non-profit as we speak. We hope to be rolling out an organic grass-fed certification,” he announces, “that will be available through all independent accredited certifiers in 2019. Maple Hill will migrate there, and PCO will become a part of that. It will be an additional add-on label to organic. Up to now it has been just a working group, but we’re forming the non-profit as we speak.

Third World conditions as well as domestically, but I think we will work that out. I just don’t know if we are going to go for a separate existing certification program or what.”

Already a national leader in grass-fed dairy products, Tim has been working with PCO, NOFA-NY, Organic Valley and others for a couple of years to create a national grass-fed certification program.

Colorado’s 416 Fire was called that because it was the 416th emergency incident in 2018 called to the attention of the San Juan National Forest’s Durango Interagency Dispatch Center.

Last winter was one of the driest years in history for the U.S. Southwest. In June the ‘416 Fire’ started in the hills less than a mile from our farm. For six weeks we lived and worked in smoke as more than 55,000 acres burned, one of the largest fires in Colorado history. It cost taxpayers more than $27 million to contain and much more to our local economy.

While inspecting farms across the country for The Real Organic Project, I observed similar climactic extremes. In Pennsylvania, fields were under water. To the north in New York, Maine, and Vermont, it hadn’t rained for months. In September, Hurricane Florence dropped over 35 inches of rain in the Carolinas causing billions in damage. In October, hurricane Michael struck the Florida panhandle resulting in “one of the four most powerful hurricanes ever to strike the United States.”

The prevalence of extreme precipitation events has risen substantially in the last 40 years. California is in the midst of a decade-long drought. These climactic extremes are thought to be a result of warmer poles, reducing the strength of the jet streams.

The scientific evidence for agriculture’s effect on climate change is unequivocal. How we farm matters. While inspecting farms in California, where much of our food originates, I drive past miles and miles of bare soil. Upon arriving at farms participating in the Real Organic Project, I found a haven of covered soil from cover crops, pasture, hedge rows, and biodiverse perennial plantings.

Everyone in the organic community knows that vegetated ground prevents erosion, sequesters carbon and nutrients, feeds soil life, and traps moisture. But it is lesser known that vegetated ground can actually make it rain again in dry regions. California needs this now more than ever. How marvelous for us all that some organic farmers are keeping the soil covered year round and are financially successful doing so.

But there are not enough of them and the National Organic Program (NOP) is actually encouraging the loss of these climate friendly farms by changing the definition of organic.

More than a decade ago, the National Organic Program allowed the invasion of conventional poultry practices under the USDA Organic seal. Instead of requiring poultry to move around on pasture, the NOP changed the definition of “soil access” to include a small wooden porch. Massive 50,000 bird buildings stacked side by side suddenly became organic.

It should be no surprise that while visiting diversified organic farms this summer, poultry was the most likely portion of a farm to be uncertified. Poultry products are also the most likely to carry other labels such as “pastured” “free-range” and “Certified Humane.” No wonder the consumer is confused - organic failed to be the gold standard so other labels filled the niche.

The same thing is currently evolving in organic dairy today. Smaller organic dairies meeting and exceeding the required pasture rules are being squeezed out by larger organic dairies that have more cattle than their land base can support. These larger cow dairies are feeding purchased total mixed rations, then sending their cows out to already grazed pasture close to the barn with bellies full.

We Need a Strong, United Organic Community Now More Than Ever

by Linley Dixon

The Natural Farmer
How are the dairies that are truly meeting the grazing requirements going to compete? The hard truth is that many of them are not and they’re disappearing quickly. Will the same thing happen to vegetable farmers that are caring for their soil? We’re likely already losing them due to the cheaper input-substitution practices of hydroponic production of berries, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, lettuce and herbs. It is no coincidence that these hydroponic crops are also the most profitable vegetables for diversified ecological organic producers -- who use them to subsidize the production of less profitable crops.

If the National Organic Program is not going to implement and enforce rules for protecting our soil -- and ultimately our climate -- the organic community must come together and do so ourselves, before all the real organic farms are gone.

But what is the best way to ensure that farmers are meeting the standards? Despite all the paper trails and certifying agency audits, our National Organic Program is failing us when it comes to enforcement. I took the time to discuss the issue of integrity with our pilot farmers this summer, many of whom have invested their life’s work in helping to build the USDA organic label.

Surprisingly, some felt we should abandon the NOP all together – let the younger generations build something they believe in. Others felt that by walking away we would be handing the word “organic” over to Driscoll’s, Wholesome Harvest, Aurora, the Country Hen, and the like.

Most farmers felt that more “boots on the ground” was essential. The certifiers I have talked to find it frustrating that they report the same non-compliance on the same farms, year after year, and yet these operations remain certified. What good is “boots on the ground” if there is little follow-up beyond a letter?

A few farmers told me that they wanted more surprise visits. For example, The Real Organic Project should decertify an operation if an inspector shows up during the grazing season on a comfortable 80 degree day and the cows are not grazing. One strike and you’re out. There’s simply no reason for the cows to be off pasture.

Others felt that inspections should be more locally driven - a network of local stakeholders that build integrity off of a foundation of transparency, shared vision, and information exchange. IFOAM has paved the way for how these participatory guarantee systems might work.

Having visited every pilot farm myself in the Real Organic Project’s first year, I feel comfortable that we have integrity in our program - for now. In fact, a few farms failed to pass the inspection and will not be part of the program this year. But how do we keep this level of integrity as we grow?

Answering these questions will take all of us coming together in support of the idea that, of course, we must do something before we’ve lost the organic label for good. If only we had started the Real Organic Project a decade ago. How many operations could we have saved?

We need a united front to win back the organic label, to entice young and beginning farmers to join us, and to give farmers and eaters a reason to believe in organic again.

Given the significant global implications of how we farm, we must push forward together. Our project’s name, controversial as it is to some, is a testament to the fact that we believe the organic label is worth saving.

Linley Dixon is the Associate Director of the Real Organic Project. She has a Ph.D in Plant Pathology and a MS in Soil Science. Her post-doctoral research was with the USDA Agricultural Research Station at the Fungal Systematics Lab. She directs markets vegetables from her farm in Durango, Colorado with her husband and brother.
Food Justice Certification – More than Just an Add-On to Organic

by Elizabeth Henderson

Food Justice Certification is still in the early adopter stage. The entities that certify are highly ethical farmers and food businesses that want to bring the public’s attention to the possibility that farmers could be paid fair prices and farmers can provide safe, respectful jobs with living wages to farm workers. GreenStar, an outstanding food co-op in Ithaca, NY, believes FJC best demonstrates that it has good labor policies and also that it is paying fair prices to the local farms that supply the store. Brandon Kane, General Manager of GreenStar Co-op, says that FJC expresses the values of co-op members.

In a letter to other NE co-ops, Kane wrote: “Food Justice Certification through the Agricultural Justice Project has become a critical component of Green-Star Co-op telling its values story and backing it up with hard facts.” AJP and NOFA are partnering on a project that will last 4 years and will improve the labor policies and engage food co-ops in the region in more joint promotion with farms on shared values.

Despite national consumer surveys by Consumer Reports showing that significant percentages of those surveyed highly value food grown with good labor policies (86% in 2014, 89% in 2016), there are few markets that offer premiums for food grown by happy workers. International fair trade has been able to pass on the message that if farmers in developing countries deserve a fair price to survive, though most programs do not include improving conditions for workers on these farms. The message that FJC allows us to share fair prices only during periods of more severe crisis, like the late 70’s and again recently, for dairy farms.

The group of farming stakeholders that designed Food Justice Certification (FJC) deliberately set out to create high bar standards for US conditions and that include standards on farms to make sure that there are farms that have attained them. What the Agricultural Justice Project has never managed to do is to raise enough money to provide FJC for free or some set of programs that verify humane conditions for animals. In the absence of either a premium or very low cost for certification, the rate of adoption by farms has been very slow.

Announcing the Certification of Soul Fire Farm

The latest farm to receive FJC is Soul Fire Farm in Grafton, NY, the first farm to be certified FJC without also having organic certification. Soul Fire meets and surpasses organic standards, but has chosen to focus on racism and training farmers of color. Soul Fire is a small, highly diversified farm that provides weekly doorstep deliveries of in-season, farm fresh, Certified Naturally-Grown food to hundreds of individuals in the Albany inner city living under food apartheid and targeted by state violence. Soul Fire Farm is committed to ending racism and injustice in the food system. As stated with passion and conviction on their website, the Soul Fire farmers “raise life-giving food and act in solidarity with people marginalized by food apartheid underpaid, overworked or treated without respect?”

The point of farming organically if the workers were underpaid, overworked or treated without respect? The Food System of Soul Fire Farm aims to move to retail sales, and having this certification sets us apart from all the other farms. In the local community’s mind, FJC is a step toward the public seeing the farm and the people working there.

The entities that certify are highly ethical farmers and food businesses that want to bring the public’s attention to the possibility that farmers could be paid fair prices and farmers can provide safe, respectful jobs with living wages to farm workers. GreenStar, an outstanding food co-op in Ithaca, NY, believes FJC best demonstrates that it has good labor policies and also that it is paying fair prices to the local farms that supply the store. Brandon Kane, General Manager of GreenStar Co-op, says that FJC expresses the values of co-op members.

Jim Cochran, farmer at Swanton Berry Farm, helped design its audit method that includes both a certification of farm labor is a founding principle of Swanton Berry Farm – FJC is a Step towards Human Rights for Farm Labor

Jim Cochran, farmer at Swanton Berry Farm, helped in creating FJC, providing his farm for AJP to develop its audit method that includes both a certification agency inspector and an inspector from a worker organization. His farm was one of the first two to be certified in California, along with Pie Ranch, an educational farm a few miles up the coast from Swanton. Cochran lays out his reasons: “The dignity of farm labor is a founding principle of Swanton Berry Farm. From the beginning, we wanted to present our customers with a product produced under the best working conditions possible. What would be the point of farming organically if the workers were underpaid, overworked or treated without respect? Just carrying the California Certified Organic label did not address these important issues.”

Cochran was also the first (and perhaps the only) organic farmer to invite the United Farm Workers to unionize his employees. While the cost for FJC certification is similar to organic, the cost of the UFW union is significantly higher with the employer paying for the excellent health program and a pension plan for employees. Cochran is definitely willing to put his money where his mouth is. In an interview a few years ago, Cochran explained his motivations:

“As with the organic label, Food Justice Certifi- cation is a whole philosophy. Just as the organic method is not just about using organic inputs, but it’s also about understanding soil ecology, the farming environment, and water, it’s similar when you look at social or labor issues. You have human beings who have families and needs and wants. It’s a complex fabric. In my opinion, having organic certification is only half of the equation. …I think labor certification is going to become increasingly important. There are many people on the farm doing the harvesting, watering, cultivating, record keep- ing, and other farm work that the public doesn’t see. People are concerned about whether their clothes are made under sweatshop conditions in other countries, but they’re not thinking about these issues here in the United States. This label is a step in the right di- rection…It’s only in the last two or three years that you hear people talking about worker issues more, and I’m happy for it. I hope that raising awareness will spark some other farmers to start thinking about them as well. I’d be happy to talk to any farmer who wants to give me a call and ask me about our prac- tices. Our purpose in going through this program is not to highlight ourselves as better than other farms but to get the ball rolling on something that we hope becomes more widely adopted.”

The Family Garden – FJC Highlights Values of a Fair Farm

Jordan Brown’s farm, The Family Garden, had its home in Bell, Florida where they produced certified organic vegetables on 25 acres, before relocating to 20 acres in the larger city of Gainesville in 2015, keeping fruit production in Bell. He considered FJC for over a year before making a commitment, but then he wrote: “As my workers and I learned together about AJP’s social justice standards, I became even surer that I had made the right decision for my farm and the people who work alongside me and my family here… We’re taking a big step together, being the first farm in the southeast U.S. to participate in this program. I’ve learned a lot from the process and am excited to see the program grow. …As organic vegetable farms get bigger and bigger the only way for farms our size to stay in business is to move to retail sales, and having this certification sets us apart from all the other farms. In the local food scene, this is something that nobody really
As an educational farm wouldn’t meet the FJC standards because of their organized and keep records the way we do, but they of guidelines. At the same time, I think that organize and records. It took some time to get everything in order with Workers Comp, filing taxes, and start keeping better minimal benefits that would be associated with most work environment, and trying to offer people some paid holidays off, we pay 2 hours a week of sick pay so folks can add it up and don’t have to worry about missing work, and at the end of the season they can collect a check which lets folks take off a couple of weeks, all the produce the care to take from the farm, and one of the long term goals is to offer overtime pay.

The FJC process has also been helpful to Brown as he has expanded his farm: “The growth of our farm, from being a real small operation to where we are now, is closely tied to becoming Food Justice Certificat; it helped me get more organized because FJC standards required me to start running payroll, get Workers Comp, filling taxes, and start keeping better records. It took some time for me to try everything in order and get organized because we do have to meet a lot of guidelines. At the same time, I think that organizational component has greatly benefited the farm. There are lots of larger farms that are already very organized and keep records the way we do, but they wouldn’t meet the FJC standards because of their on-farm practices.”

Pie Ranch – FJC Provides Framework for Teaching about Fairness
Pie Ranch has been training young farmers and providing educational programs for high school students since 2003. The Mission of Pie Ranch is “to cultivate a healthy and just food system from field to table through food education, farmer training, and regional partnerships.” Program Director Nancy Vail explains their decision to apply for Food Justice Certification: “Becoming and remaining Food Justice Certified has been an important way for Pie Ranch to stay accountable to our values of social justice and fairness. Having written policies in place and ongoing trainings help to make our evolution as an organization transparent to all. Building empathy for the human side of agriculture is part of what’s needed for people to start valuing FJC in the marketplace. We still have a long way to go with this, and simultaneously we need to keep pushing for policies that help to keep food accessible for all people. I think we could focus more on how we advertise FJC on our products to help with increasing revenue.”

FJC is a way to assure that the apprenticeships Pie Ranch offers are ethical and not just a form of cheap labor. They want to pass on good practices to the young farmers they train so that they get their own farms off to a good start. In addition to introducing their own apprentices to FJC, Pie Ranch partners with the much larger training program at University of California Santa Cruz’ annual programs on Food Justice. According to Vail: “As an educational farm that engages with thousands of people a year, being Food Justice Certified has been useful as it offers a framework for how we talk about fairness in the food system. Each year we offer classes on the Agricultural Justice Project and FJC to participants in our Emerging Farmers and Youth Programs. It helps to center the people in the food system, especially brown and black folks who have been and continue to be the ones most affected by exploitative prac-

When asked if there were ways besides certification to achieve the same things, Vail replied: “I think we could achieve some things without certification, but to really stay accountable means we need an outside organization like the AJP helping us to do that.”

Fairness and Justice for All
Ultimately, deciding to engage in Food Justice Certification amounts to a commitment to agrarian justice for farmers and farm workers. As Jordan Brown puts it, “Having more farms participate in the Food Justice Certification Program will help grow a greater awareness of the labors and unfair working conditions in the agriculture sector across America. Ultimately, more farms getting this certification will bring more money back to the farm and the farmer. Real change is needed in the farm labor sector and will happen in one of two ways: wholesalers taking smaller margins or higher prices at the retail counter that reflect the actual cost of food. People generally don’t care about any type of injustice until they are confronted with it. I think that if more consumers understood the injustices that happen to farm laborers in America and how difficult of a job it is for such a little amount of money, perhaps the Food Justice label would help open peoples’ eyes to those injustices.”

Jose Manuel Guzman, a former mushroom worker and Lead Organizer at the farmworker organization CATA, sums up the significance of AJP to people who work on farms: “The Agricultural Justice Project is of vital importance to farmworkers and their families. It promotes organic agriculture, helping workers to have a better understanding of how food can be grown in a natural, healthy way without putting them at risk of exposure to pesticides. The workers’ rights standards set by the project are more than just basic workers’ rights. They allow workers to collectively bargain and organize and create a space for dialogue between workers and farmers. They guarantee a fair and just treatment for all involved.”

The Salatin Semester
A Complete Home Study Course in Polyface-style Diversified Farming
JOEL SALATIN
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In this amazing multimedia production, Joel Salatin presents his farming system in professionally edited live-cut videos, engaging audio and in a detail-rich reference guide. Polyface Farm services more than 5,000 families in 10 retail outlets and 50 restaurants through on-farm sales and metropolitan buying clubs with salad bar beef, pastured poultry, eggmobile eggs, piggator pork, forage-based rabbits, pastured turkey and forestry products using relationships building.

Four-Seasons Organic Cow Care
HUBERT J. KARREMAN, V.M.D.
A well-known veterinarian Hubert Karreman calls on his nearly thirty years of experience in organic agriculture to holistically medicine to guide you on how to recognize, treat and prevent a year’s worth of problems with your cow. With biology and managing animals, there are no hard-and-fast rules, however, there is a rhyme and reason explaining why certain conditions are associated with each season. From pneumonia in the winter to heat stroke in the summer, this farmer-friendly book will introduce early detection techniques, prevention methods, and the most effective organic-certified treatments available for livestock.

Healthy Soils, Sick Soils
MARGARETH SEKERA
Now available in English for the first time, this popular 1943 treatise on biology and biologically correct farming of soil from the pen of the famous soil scientist Prof. Dr. Franz Sekera, carefully edited and expanded by his wife, scientist Margaret Sekera, over the years, has been widely acclaimed by farmers and soils scientists in its original German. Starting with the basic concepts of “tilth” and “soil structure” and moving on to the symptoms of unhealthy soil and the behavior of plants on non-tiltable fields, Sekera investigates the complex inter-relationships in the soil as well as the practical measures to preserve and improve soil tilth.

Secrets of Fertile Soils
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Secrets FERTILE SOILS

SECRETS

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ERHARD HENNING
This stimulating book provides a highly practical window into the complex, interdependent relation-. high soils scientists in its original German. Starting with the basic concepts of the soil — microorganisms, water, air, humus — and explores natural fertilization techniques using compost and rock dust, the author offers insightful information. Translated from its original German, this book will help farmers everywhere understand humus better.

Secrets FERTILE SOILS

SECRETS

| FERTILE SOILS |
Participatory Guarantee Systems – What they are and why we should consider them as part of our Plan B

by Elizabeth Henderson

Whether or not the third party organic certification system presided over by the National Organic Program loses interest or focus, movement for organic food and farming needs a Plan B. At the NOFA Summer Conference in my contribution to the discussion of the future of organic (https://foodfirst.org/organic-news), I suggested that we look to Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) for inspiration. This article is a quick introduction to PGS with resources for those who would like to learn more.

Since the 2004 joint IFOAM-MAEA Alternative Certification Workshop that I attended in Brazil when IFOAM launched its campaign to define and support PGS, IFOAM has been encouraging the development of these systems as a way to provide an organic guarantee for small scale farms (smallholder) that cannot afford third party certification and to build local markets. (MAEA is the Movement for Agroecological Agriculture of Latin America and the Caribbean, a coalition that is deeply committed to building local markets for organic foods, as opposed to export markets.) IFOAM established a PGS Working Group with representatives from around the world. Ron Khosla, founder of Certified Naturally Grown (CNG), was the first NA representative, and Alice Varon, current Director of CNG, took over from him. This is the definition of PGS from the PGS Working Group: “Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange.”

The IFOAM Policy Brief: How Governments Can Support PGS, distinguishes them from third party certification: “Participatory Guarantee Systems have a much more intensive interaction between the farmer and the guarantee organization and uses different tools to maintain integrity. PGS integrate capacity building and allow farmers and reviewers to help solve practical problems which will enable producers to follow the standards. The direct relationship to the process, and the fact that it is owned by the farmers and related stakeholders, encourages more responsibility and active involvement in the design of production and certification processes.”

Before the 2004 workshop in Brazil, together with other participants, I had the chance to get acquainted with a large, flourishing PGS, the Eco-Vida Network in the Porto Allegre region. Laercio Meirelles, director of Eco-Vida, explained that the network had developed its own organic standards and verification system where inspection teams of volunteers perform educational visits to the farms. An inspection team consists of a group that includes farmers, members of the food co-ops that buy from the network and other non-farmers. The network has been very supportive of Eco-Vida and provided space for the workshop. We toured a network member fruit farm. The farm occupies 10 acres of very steep land where they grow bananas, passionfruit and other tropical fruit. Climbing the rocky path to the banana trees, I wondered at how the farm would fare under the banana trees, and to improve pest control by inter planting the bananas with other fruit. When the network comes to inspect his farm, they ask about how the experiment is going and share information from other farms.

We also visited one of the food co-ops that sells Eco-Vida products and one of two big farmers’ markets with dozens of stalls, including the farm in Porto Allegre. Farms access the right to sell at these markets by joining the Eco-Vida network. The network has also hosted a dinner party for our group at a village where almost all of the farmers were members. They told us that one farm family was not invited because the farmer’s brother had bought him using a prohibited material. The network has a system for handling complaints and disputes through an ethics committee on the county level so that neighboring farmers are not hearing complaints against one another. Eco-Vida is a good model of the main features of a PGS: the members define and update their own standards; volunteer participation is critical; top priorities are education of farmers and consumers, building local markets and economic opportunity for smallholder farmers.

IFOAM publishes The Global PGS Newsletter with reports on new and established PGS, and on the response of governments to them. You can subscribe to this newsletter for free through the IFOAM website: https://www.ifoam.bio/en/get-involved/sign-up-receive-organic-news. In several Latin American and African countries, governments recognize PGS for use in local markets while third party certification is mainly for export. The EU, like the US, only recognizes third party certification. IFOAM offers trainings in PGS development – IFOAM NA could sponsor one in the US.

Every two years, IFOAM - Organics International conducts a global survey to collect data on PGS initiatives. On the website, you display a map of the recognized PGS initiatives. From the data collected in 2017, IFOAM estimates that there are at least 241 PGS initiatives worldwide of which 115 are under development and 127 are fully operational, with at least 311,449 farmers involved and at least 76,750 producers certified. PGS initiatives exist in 86 countries; among them 43 countries have fully operational PGS initiatives in place.

In the US, the main example of a PGS is Certified Naturally Grown, which involves over 750 direct sales farms. CNG is especially strong in the Southern states. Unlike most PGS, at the time of its founding in 2002, CNG did not go through a process by which farmers and their customers developed a set of standards, but simply adopted the NOP standards. Since that time, they have added standards for honey, mushrooms, aquaponics, and additional standards for livestock similar to the provisions in the Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices that the NOP recently cancelled. To qualify for the CNG label, farms apply and then arrange for inspection by another CNG or certified organic farmer. Applications and inspection reports are shared publicly on the CNG website. Because CNG farms are so widespread, it does not have the community building and mutual education features of some of the best PGS in other countries.

An outstanding example from France is Nature et Progrès, a not-for-profit association combining consumers and farmers in the same movement. Founded in 1972, Nature et Progrès is a federation of 30 local chapters and the oldest French organic organization. The local chapters have a lot in common with NOFA chapters and depend to a large degree on volunteers. They led the successful fight against GMOs in France. Since about 1980, they have maintained a participatory guarantee system through which peasants, consumers, doctors, retailers, and processors created a common charter including ecological, economic and social objectives to which all subscribe. The charter is a guide to moving towards a society that respects humans and all living things. The name Nature et Progrés functions as an independent collective brand. Inspections are done by local committees that include both farmers and trained non-farmers.

Nature et progrès stands for:
• An agriculture that respects humans, animals, plants and the planet
• An agriculture characterized by biodiversity which alone is able to satisfy the pleasure of flavors and to provide a guarantee of health
• An agriculture that preserves the rural fabric and peasant’s calling giving it new value
• An agriculture that supports peasant know-how and peasant grown seed
• An agriculture that is ethical, rigorous, and free of complicity in the neoliberal market economy

The rapidly growing CSA movement in China has formed a national network that includes a PGS. I witnessed the launching of the PGS at the Urgenci International CSA conference in Beijing in 2015. CSAs work together with PGS in several countries and IFOAM currently has a project call “Education Towards the Creation of Alternative Food Systems” (EATingCRAFT) to research the synergies between PGS and CSAs. The announcement of the

Presentation of the Chinese PGS at the Urgenci conference in 2015.

photo courtesy of La Hamonier
project explains: “On one side, we want to explore the ways PGS can contribute to the CSA approach offering a system to ensure quality and a continued improvement of practices. On the other side, we will showcase examples of how CSA can inspire PGS in building a robust solidarity economy and cultivate relationships between producers and consumers.”

In introducing PGS, IFOAM emphasizes that each PGS will be different, based on local community and cultural values: “The very life-blood of these programs lies in the fact that they are created by the very farmers and consumers that they serve. As such, they are adapted and specific to the individual communities, geographies, politics and markets of their origin.” The PGS section of the IFOAM website has ample materials to assist in the development of new systems. ([https://www.ifoam.bio/en/pgs-basics](https://www.ifoam.bio/en/pgs-basics))

Creating a single PGS that would replace the NOP would be a tremendous challenge and would probably violate the participatory spirit of PGS. More practical might be to return to the more regionalized approach the organic farming movement adopted in our early days. With our fairly dense networks, the NOFAs and MOFGA could get off to a good start on our own regional organic guarantee.
How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence

by Michael Pollan

published by Penguin Press, an imprint of Random House

2018, $28.00, hardbound, 414 pages

review by Jack Kittredge

This is an intriguing book. Of course that is not a remarkable thing to say about a work by Michael Pollan. He has established a reputation, at least among folks I know and respect, for thoughtful analysis of important questions. Prior books like “A Botany of Desire” and “The Omnivore’s Dilemma” have secured a place for him as a person who asks the right questions and probes far enough below the surface to reach answers that truly satisfy.

Even so, this is a new direction for him. As an intellectual, he rightly prizes his mind, gravitates toward scientific explanations of phenomena, and readily admits he doesn’t think he has ever had a ‘spiritual, ly significant’ experience. As he puts it: “My default perspective is that of the philosophical materialist, who believes that matter is the fundamental substance of the world and the physical laws it obeys should be able to explain everything that happens.”

So why is he investigating something that flies in the face of his background, training, and comfort zone?

He was drawn to this topic in 2010 when reading a NY Times front page story: “Hallucinogens Have Established and Inspired Interest into the Neurochemical Basis of Mental Disorders.”

This discovery fundamentally altered the psychiatric establishment and inspired interest into the neurochemical basis of mental disorders.

In this book Pollan is talking primarily about:

• LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), first synthesized in 1938 by Albert Hofmann while working for the Swiss pharmaceutical firm Sandoz,

• Psilocybin, (called teonanacatl by the Aztecs) produced by a little brown mushroom and used for thousands of years by indigenous people of Mexico and Central America as a sacrament,

• 5-MeO-DMT (the smoked venom of the Sonoran Desert toad Incilius alvarius) which is one of the most potent and fast acting psychotropic drugs discovered, and

• Ayahuasca (a tea brewed from two Amazonian plants, one a vine and one a leaf) central to some Peruvian shamanic traditions that creates physical discomfort when swallowed because of its viscous feel and acrid taste.

The chemistry involved, for Pollan, boils down to various ‘molecules’ which sometimes had natural origins in plants, sometimes not, but which, in miniscule amounts, could unleash symptoms ranging from mystical consciousness to psychosis.

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The Garden, Our Expulsion and Likely Return

During the nineteen fifties and sixties the role of neurotransmitters in the brain revolutionized brain science, and numerous efforts to treat disorders such as alcoholism, depression, and anxiety were started, often using psychoactive molecules. Most of these were easily available and many researchers considered them akin to miracle drugs. Despite encouraging results, however, the connection between psychotropic substances and a counterculture which used them for expanding consciousness became a major concern as stories of ‘bad trips’, flashbacks, psychotic breaks and suicide were pushed in the popular press.

By the end of the sixties psychedelics substances were outlawed and popular proponents such as Timothy Leary (of ‘turn on, tune in, and drop out’ fame) at Harvard were called to testify before Congressional committees, dismissed from their jobs, and if they continued were given stiff prison terms for drug violations.

It wasn’t until the late 1990’s that psychedelic researchers began to resurrect the field, quietly, getting licenses to experimentally use these class one drugs at universities and hospitals. Part of Pollan’s book describes the remarkable progress made in this work treating addiction, depression, and terminal illness.

Toward the end of the book Pollan describes the 2001 discovery of the DMN (default mode network). This is the set of brain areas linking the cerebral cortex to deeper and older brain structures involved in memory and emotion. It was initially discovered by use of fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) equipment that measures brain activity by detecting changes associated with blood flow. It relies on the fact that cerebral blood flow and neuronal activity are coupled.

When volunteers sit quietly at rest to establish a ‘baseline’ for neural activity, it is the DMN that lights up with activity. It seems to be the set of brain areas that work at a remove from processing sensory inputs, instead engaging in such ‘metacognitive’ processes as day dreaming, self-reflection, moral reasoning, and mental constructions. The DMN isn’t operational until late in a human child’s development and has been described as the brain’s ‘orchestra conductor’, charged with ‘holding the whole system together’ so that chaos is averted. Some see a strong resemblance here to Freud’s construct of an
The Worm Farmer: Handbook of Mid to Large Scale Vermicomposting for Farms, Businesses, Municipalities, Schools, and Institutions

by Rhonda Sherman
$29.95, paperback, 236 pages

(review by Ben Goldberg)

As an Extension Specialist and head of the Compost Learning Lab at North Carolina State University, and an author of the vermicomposting guide, VermiConferencing Conference, Rhonda Sherman is a dedicated and motivational voice for vermicul and vermicomposting. Her book, The Worm Farmer’s Handbook, is the printed version of this dedication.

Starting with a brief history and rationale for worm farming, Rhonda clarifies the terms vermi culture, vermicomposting, and vermicast, and sets a path mainly in the direction of vermicomposting enterprises. She then sets out to provide a guide to starting a commercial scale worm farming operation and gives the essential steps for success. What emerged as a result is a book brimming with information for worm farmers. Rhonda’s research work in this area shows that worm farming is a valuable method for handling organic waste, improving soil quality, and enriching the ecosystem. Her knowledge of the diverse and fascinating world of worms is also apparent throughout the book.

Starting with the basics of worm biology and behavior, Rhonda explains the various stages of worm development, including reproduction and growth. She then moves on to the practical aspects of worm farming, including the selection of appropriate worm species, setting up the worm farm, and managing the composting process. Throughout the book, Rhonda provides clear, concise, and easy-to-understand advice on a variety of topics, including worm feeding, bedding, and composting. She also offers information on how to troubleshoot common issues that may arise during the farming process.

One of the most valuable aspects of the book is the emphasis on sustainability and environmental stewardship. Rhonda encourages readers to think about the impact of their actions on the environment, and to consider the broader implications of their efforts. She also provides information on how to reduce waste and prevent pollution, and how to ensure that the worm farm is a safe and healthy environment for the animals.

The book is richly illustrated with photographs and diagrams, which help to convey the information in an accessible and engaging way. The language is clear and concise, and the tone is professional and informative. The book is intended for those who are interested in worm farming, whether they are novice farmers or experienced practitioners. It is also a valuable resource for educators, researchers, and anyone who is interested in the environmental benefits of worm farming.

In conclusion, The Worm Farmer: Handbook of Mid to Large Scale Vermicomposting for Farms, Businesses, Municipalities, Schools, and Institutions is a comprehensive and practical guide to worm farming. It provides clear and concise information on the basics of worm biology and behavior, as well as the practical aspects of setting up and managing a worm farm. The book is richly illustrated with photographs and diagrams, and is written in a clear and concise style. It is a valuable resource for anyone interested in worm farming, and is a must-read for anyone who is looking to start a worm farm or to improve their existing one. The book is highly recommended for anyone interested in the environmental benefits of worm farming.

Holistic Goat Care: A Comprehensive Guide to Raising Healthy Animals, Prevent Common Ailments, and Trouble-Shooting Problems

by Gianacinto Caldwell
$39.95, paperback, 368 pages

(review by Christy Bassett)

Few animals on the farm are as charismatic and curmudgeonly as the goat. Their attitude, their tem- porful eyes and playful bounds win over visitors without much effort. Because of this, goats are often an early interest of many gardeners and would-be homesteaders.

But under the doglike, facade, goats are complex ruminants that require an advanced skill set and a close eye to raise successfully, especially when being raised for food production.  It was interesting to read that book's content like Holistic Goat Care is a godsend for when the inevitable health problem arises, and the newbie goat owner needs a crash course in health care.

Caldwell reflects this sentiment in her introduction, recalling her own personal learning curve as she transitioned from a conventional medicine user to holistic health care giver. As a goat dairy owner, she uses examples from her own experiences as she takes the reader through the chapters and sections of Starting Out Right, On the Farm, Managing Herd Health, The Productive Herd- Making Babies and Milk, and Solving Goat Health Problems.

Although I found the first several sections of the book accurate and useful in describing the selection of a breed and understanding goat needs as a semi-experienced goat owner I was most interested in the final section on solving goat health problems. Lucky for me, this section makes up a good portion of the book's contents.  Holistic Goat Care is formatted as a resource book, with excellent labeling, indexing and searchability.  The diagrams and tables are useful visuals that correspond well to the sections and treatments that are shared.  Chapters within this section are separated into the various systems within the body, making it easy to refer to and read about the conditions you are faced with specific symptoms in your herd. Each chapter also includes a chart that identifies signs or symptoms that may appear along with a list of possible causes, allowing a quick glance at possible diagnoses.

Most common ailments that the small-scale goat owner will experience are covered well, beginning with a description of each condition and the typical cause of the onset. The author then breaks down the disease, its prevention, and treatment plan for each condition reported, being clear that these statements do not replace a veterinarian’s input. I appreciate Caldwell’s focus on organic and conventional medicine, the common fact that farm management and preventative care are the keys to maintaining a healthy herd, while recognizing that there is a balance between conventional and organic medicine.

Unfortunately, for strictly organically managed herds, there are some suggestions that are simply not pos- sible, and I think Caldwell’s book is a great resource for goat owners in this regard. It is a good starting point for anyone interested in raising goats on an organic farm, and provides valuable information for those who are already raising goats. The book is well-written and engaging, and is easy to read and understand. It is a valuable resource for anyone interested in raising healthy and happy goats, and is highly recommended for anyone in this field.
From an agricultural perspective, probably the most interesting passages in the book were the ones that discussed New Englanders’ relationship with their apples. When Europeans first arrived, the only apples they found here were crabapples, but soon colonists began taking apple seeds and scions from England and grafting English varieties onto native rootstock. They chose to propagate varieties based on the basis of productivity, beauty, flavor, and ability to store well through long, harsh New England winters.

In the eyes of many New Englanders, however, the highest use of apples may have been to make cider—especially, hard cider. The author quotes a 1901 book as explaining, “English grains did not thrive well those first few years of settlement, and were costly to import, so New Englanders soon drifted from beer-drinking to cider-drinking.” Cider soon became cheap, plentiful, and the most popular beverage in the region. In the most remarkable quote I read in Denizens, the author cites the same 1901 work of history describing the population’s infatuation with hard cider: “All the colonists drank cider, old and young, and in all places. . . . Infants in arms drank mulled hard cider at night, a beverage which would kill a modern babe. It was supplied to students at Harvard and Yale colleges. . . . Old men began the day with a quart or more of hard cider before breakfast. Delicate women drank hard cider. . . . All laborers in the field drank it in great draughts.”

If producing fruit for cider was the highest use of apple trees, perhaps their lowest function was a certain work of decomposition performed by their roots: we learn that an apple tree ate the bones of Roger Williams, the seventeenth-century religious leader who founded Rhode Island; and those of his wife. According to an 1871 publication titled The Apple Culturist, when Williams’s descendents decided to move him and his wife’s remains from their original location, near an apple tree, they found that one of the tree’s roots “had pushed its way through the earth till it reached the precise spot occupied by the skull of Roger Williams. There, making a turn, as if going around the skull, it followed the direction of the backbone to the hips.” And so on. Rev. and Mrs. Williams’s bones were gone, displaced by roots. “The fact proved conclusively,” said The Apple Culturist, “that bones, even of human beings, are an excellent fertilizer for fruit-trees.”

The author also researched the flowers grown by her ancestors and learned that lilacs from Europe were being grown in New England within a few years of the landing of the Mayflower in 1620. She read documents telling that a passenger on the Mayflower had brought lilacs from Holland and grew them in Duxbury, Massachusetts, and that lilacs thought to be from England were growing near the home of one of her ancestors in Stonington, Connecticut, as early as 1629.

Here I’ve reviewed the portions of Denizens that I think would be of most interest to readers of The Natural Farmer, but for history buffs, Denizens affords a wealth of additional information about life in southern New England in the seventeenth century, including abundant quotations from primary sources most of us don’t have access to. It would also be an excellent resource for purchase by the libraries of towns, cities, colleges, and universities throughout the region.

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book, but also the practical and realistic approach to holistic goat management. As stated in Chapter Two, “Not everyone is lucky enough to have the acreage to manage goats more extensively, nor fortunate enough to have organically produced feeds readily available or affordable. I believe the most realistic approach to reaching this goal is to find a balance between what you’re currently comfortable with and what you can envision as the most organic and extensive management choices possible for your farm.”


review by Anna Muhammad

Farming While Black is a great resource that provides both ‘how-to’ for the new and novice farmer while giving historical context to injustice and theft of lands from Black farmers and farmers of color.

In Farming While Black, Leah Penniman provides historic notes and clear explanation on the damage that white supremacy and racism has done to Black farmers and farmers of color. At the same time, Leah provide resources for farmers to plan the farming enterprise and tools to be successful and assist with diversification of crowdfunding organizations, USDA farm financing agencies and other organizations can provide funding for new farmers. Leah also gives a clear description of the road that she took to establish her farm and the community that drive encourage her to take on such a great task. Her story and the book provide real world examples of the pitfalls, mistakes and mis-steps that slow down any new farmer.

Lastly, between the resource listings and budget planning, Farming While Black lists how African, Latinx, Caribbean and other people of color grew food using age-old organic practices. There are constant references to how food was grown organically by ancestors of all countries. (Yoruba, Haitian, Cuban, Ghanaian, Native American and US Southern farmers). Critical information for planning crops, soil testing and sampling, soil enhancements, and cover cropping are included that both the new farmer and experienced farmer can learn from. Wonderful recipes from the African Diaspora complete the readers’ travel experience and acquaints them with what freedom feels and tastes like.

This book is certainly a complete anthology into the footprints of the ancestors through tragedy and triumph of farming, while celebrating the freedom and liberation of people of color. It gives any potential farmer or active farmer the needed knowledge, history and tools to be successful and assist with dismantling racism in US Farm practices.

Denizens: A Narrative of Captain George Denison and His New England Contemporary by Katherine Dimancescu self-published $22.50, paperback, 486 pages

review by Bob Banning

In about 40 essays, Denizens offers a series of narratives showing how the author’s seventeenth-century southern New England ancestors participated in the history of their times. In reading the book, we learn about a variety of features of life in those times in parts of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, including a few things about food, drink, and agriculture.

One of the author’s ancestor’s, William Cheseborough, settled land including salt marshes on the banks of Wepcoqueock Cove, in present-day Stonington, Connecticut, because “salt marsh hay was prized as a food source for livestock until grazing pastures could be established.” Online, I found various sources expressing concern about the health of salt marshes of the Northeast. In early colonial times, the health, and even survival, of human beings may have depended on using salt marsh hay for fodder.

From an agricultural perspective, probably the most
Sidehill Farm: a Real Organic One!

by Jack Kittredge

The Natural Farmer
Winter, 2018-19

The hill towns of western Massachusetts separate the Pioneer Valley on their east from the Berkshire Mountains on their west. Having neither the agricultural soils and climate of the valley, nor the majestic scenic appeal of the mountains, the hill towns are sparsely populated throughout the year. With an elevation of 1750 feet, compared to some of the Berkshire towns at over 2000 feet, and a density of less than 11 people per square mile, ranking it 34th out of the 351 cities and towns in the Commonwealth, Hawley is a typical hill town.

It had the distinction for a number of years, however, of being the site of the largest certified organic farm in the state. The sixth of nine children and a pioneer in the organic movement, Ivy Donovan took over her father’s 800 acre Hawley potato farm in 1987, had it certified organic, and produced spuds for Whole Foods as well as other retailers in the Northeast. For a few years he and his wife Cinni even made and marketed organic potato chips. In 2012, however, they retired and sold the farm to Amy Kliippeinstein and Paul Lacinski who had been looking for a site for a dairy farm. Ivy died of throat cancer in 2017.

Despite his name, Paul is half Italian and grew up in Queens and Long Island in a very large garden tended all summer by his Italian grandfather. Amy hails from New Hampshire. The couple met as seniors at Amherst College, thrown together by living across the hall from each other. Paul was an American Studies major. Amy majored in English and Russian, also completely unrelated to dairy farming.

“There is a lot I have to say,” she admits, “a liberal arts education has been pretty darn useful -- having training in critical thinking, in making connections between every different thing, being able to work with people with diverse interests, being interested in a lot of different layers of a project instead of doing the same thing every time.”

“The writing skills have been useful,” Paul offers.

Upon graduation they thought they would be home-steaders, he recalls, not farmers. When it came to that little issue of making a living, the couple started a construction company, building straw bale houses.

But the pair’s passion was to grow their own food. They started out growing vegetables because that was fun and found that it was easy to grow a few more than they needed and sell them. Enlarging the home garden they had in Ashfield, they started selling vegetables to restaurants in 2001. In 2002 they started the Ashfield farmers market and branched out to greenhouse tomatoes and winter salad greens.

“By then I wasn’t home a lot,” Lacinski relates. “I was traveling all over the world doing straw bale construction. I worked in China and Mongolia. That was great, but I was away a lot. We had a little crew and I’d be gone all week. I’d get home late on Friday and get up early on Saturday to be there for the farmers market. After 10 or 12 year running our own company, I decided I wanted to stay home.”

But the couple’s garden space was limited and none of their neighbors wanted to lease them land to expand their vegetable farm.

Paul muses that perhaps that was a blessing: “Trying to grow vegetables for a living in Ashfield, when 12 miles away in the Pioneer Valley there is some of the best soil in the world, and it is also flat and warmer, makes no sense.”

Although the neighbors didn’t want to lease them land for farming, the couple found some willing to let it be grazed. So Paul and Amy sold the construction company and decided to expand by making raw milk and yogurt. In 2006 they got their first cows.

“The vegetables and cows overlapped for three years,” Paul recalls. “We had our first raw milk in 2007, and our first saleable yogurt in 2008. At the high point we were grazing our cows on the land of 14 different landowners in Ashfield. Mostly we walked them back and forth for milking from the closer fields. The heifers and steers stayed on land farther away, and we would move them through trails in the woods.”

The name Sidehill Farm comes from their friend Albert Fuller (now deceased.) Albert lived over the hill from them, milked 3 or 4 Jerseys, made butter, and sold it at the Greenfield Farmer’s Market. His farm was on a long, steep slope of north facing land - a true New England side hill farm. He was one of the first old-timers and locals to take Amy and Paul’s farming plans seriously, and taught them a huge amount about perspective and levity while farming. When they bought their first piece of farm land in Ashfield - a sloping 23 acre parcel - Albert said, as a way of congratulations, “Now you have your own side hill farm!” And it stuck.

When Amy and Paul were looking to expand again in 2012, Ivy and Cinni’s farm in Hawley seemed ideal. It is a total of 225 acres, with some fields right near the barn which are good for fulltime pasture, some that are far away or very rocky and are ideal for hayfields, and some in between that can be hay for the first cut, then grazed, or some combination.

The site is scenic (you can see Mount Monadnock and Mount Wachusett from the farm) and very quiet.

“It is so attractive,” says Paul, “that Ivy and Cinni Donovan built their retirement home right over there (points). They built an underground house and Ivy got a real kick out of that. ‘Here I am living under ground like a tuber’, he would say.”

The land was under the state Agricultural Restriction program, so the development rights had already been sold off and that was how the pair could afford it.

“We borrowed as much as we could from the Farm Services Agency,” says Lacinski, “for the purchase. The loan rate then was excellent! We got an EQIP grant to pay for half of the buildings.”

Winters in Hawley are tough, the couple admit.

“It is intense up here,” says Paul, “cold and windy. We like to cross country ski in the woods, but if you make a trail in the open, 20 minutes later it is gone. The cows are in the barn most of the time during the winter, but not in headlocks, just moving around. The manure pack gets higher and higher until the cows are 4 feet up in the air before winter is over. We hire some large equipment to come in and move the manure pack out in the spring (if we did it with our little machines it would take 2 weeks solid work). We window it and turn it for compost, then spread it in the fall.”

Although one might think a place like Hawley, with only 337 people and miles from any population center, would be a bad location for selling raw milk, it is not.

“When we first moved here,” says Amy, “I wasn’t certain it would work. But right now we are selling about 120 gallons a week. People in convenient locations may sell more, but this is not a bad location.”

The Hawley location was just right for Sidehill Farm to expand. They bought more cows, hired more people (they have 10 employees now) and their sales have increased dramatically. The farm now ships out yogurt four days a week, with their own trucks making deliveries throughout Western Massachusetts and distributors carrying it as far as Boston.

Amy feels that they have reached a size where they now benefit from efficiencies of scale.
The Natural Farmer

Winter, 2018-19

“...250,000 each of quarts and 6-ounce cups of yogurt in a year,” she reports, “and we pay a living wage. We can take this tool that we have here, this creamery, and use it to help more dairy farmers.”

Besides their own milk, Sidehill buys in all the milk from a certified organic dairy farm in Lee. They were bottling their own milk from 30 Jerseys, but trying to farm and process was too much. So Paul and Amy buy it in, pasteurize it and use it for yogurt. They feel they pay well and can help dairy farmers stay in business. They can only buy certain kinds of milk, however.

“Holstein milk is not high enough in protein to make firm yogurt without additives,” explains Amy, “so we can’t use that. There are really only a few breeds that do have enough protein to make a good yogurt – Jerseys are one, Normandies are another. Our herd is Jersey and Normande. Swiss would work, but we don’t know anyone who has an organic Swiss dairy.”

Right now the couple could about double the production they have, given their space and processing capacity, Paul calculates that they might have to use refrigerated trucks as back-up cooler space on some days, however, Amy repeats that if they expanded, it would definitely be by trying to bring in milk from more farms.

According to Paul about 15% of Sidehill’s own milk goes to raw sales, the rest mostly to yogurt. The margin on raw milk is better, and there is just a lot less work that goes into it. Plus, he says, they believe in it. The milk is bottled right from the bulk tank, by hand. But they couldn’t justify anything more automated than that for the volume they do, he says.

“We have groups that come from Wendell (38 miles), Shutesbury (35 miles), and two from Northampton (28 miles),” Amy relates. “They tend to be groups of families or friends who buy for each other and take turns driving. I doubt if anyone comes that far every week.

There was a time when the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) had strictly enforced the state law which says only the ultimate consumer can buy raw milk, and has to go to the farm to get it. But that time seems to have passed.

“MDAR has been great,” says Laciniski. “Ever since Scott Soares (Massachusetts Commissioner of Agriculture from 2009 to 2012) said: ‘Hey, if people can eat raw oysters they should be able to drink raw milk’, that clarity has made it clear where the state stands. I think they understand that only the dairy in this state that are breaking even and not mining out their infrastructure to keep going financially are the ones that are selling raw milk.

“They have totally backed off trying to prevent group buying of raw milk,” he continues. “What they got upset about, and I don’t really blame them, was people who were making a business of it -- people who were going, picking it up, charging a fee, and essentially selling it on, without calling it that. That was basically being a distributor, but it was completely unregulated. They didn’t want to penalize 4 or 5 neighbors who took turns coming with coolers.”

Sidehill’s cows come in from the pasture at 6 am and 5 pm to be milked. After milking they proceed to the barn where they gather and eat hay (with a little molasses topping they love), before going out to pasture again in the next paddock. The cows in the barn are in headlocks for this stage because otherwise the first ones to come out will eat all the molasses.

The actual milking takes place in a four stall milking parlor from which vacuum pipes take the milk right to the milk parlor from which vacuum pipes take the milk right to the bulk tank. The raw milk can be bottled right from the bulk tank, but milk for yogurt has to be pasteurized, by federal law. Besides, it won’t get as firm unless other competitive microbes are killed off.

“So the yogurt milk goes by pipe to the vat,” explains Paul, “where it is heated to 185˚F for pasteurization, and inoculated with the cultures when it cools to 103 degrees. Then it is incubated at 101 degrees for the cultures to work.’”

Laciniski has always loved yogurt and felt he and Amy would have a cow and make it for themselves. But learning to make it on a commercial scale was daunting.

“We’ve gone to all the NOFA workshops on cows and animals,” he says. “When we pitched the idea to our neighbors of leasing their land for grazing, they were all for it. We had been making yogurt in our kitchen all along, doing R & D.

“But the transition from the scale of a kitchen operation to having a 50 gallon vat to make yogurt was a surprise,” he continues, “and distressing to us. We tried to scale up what we had been doing in the kitchen and it was not working. We had already spent all our money making a little creamery, but the yogurt wasn’t coming out right. The interns that year ate a lot of yogurt we didn’t want to try to sell!”

Biological processes are inherently more variable than industrial ones, the pair feel.

“So we get new yeast for every batch,” Amy states. “If you try to keep a starter, it changes from batch to batch – even over short periods like a week.”

“The yeast is actually a mix of five different cultures,” Paul explains. “If you keep a starter, in-evitably you will favor one or the other yeast just because of the conditions during that period. That is just the way biology works. Of course the milk changes quite a bit also, through the seasons. Over the winter it is reasonably consistent, but in the summer it can change a fair amount, depending on what the cows are grazing. There is a tolerable range as far as firmness goes. We tweaked incubation temperature, duration of heating, pH, different cultures. There is not much point in perfecting your system if you are not consistent with it. Another variable is cooling. It is one thing to put little containers in your fridge. It is another to have racks of quarts you are rolling into a walk-in!”

One problem that is plaguing the couple, perhaps because of their isolated location, is finding staff to care for the cows. The problem is so bad that they are calling some of their cows to reduce their numbers.

“We’re milking 14 times a week ourselves,” sighs Paul! “We’ve spent years trying to solve the staffing problem. We have no problem finding staff for the creamery end of it. We have a spectacular crew of them, a lot of people who have been here a long time. But on the farm end of things, I don’t know.”

“I think part of it is that we are really focused on finding the balance between quality and efficiency,” suggests Amy. “It is something that everyone who works here thinks is fun – how can we get more efficient and keep the quality? – it’s kind of a fun game. The people who stay here are people who like that kind of thing. But among the people who like to work with cows there is a pool of people who are young and qualified, but they are ambitious and are going to go on to have their own farm. They only want to be here for a while.

The filling process is pretty automated. The machinery can put 300 gallons of yogurt into cups and quarts in about 2 hours.
Paul and Amy figure about 40 milking cows is about the right amount for them to manage. They now buy in milk from another local certified organic dairy to have enough for their yogurt sales.

“We have had good cow people stay for as much as three years,” she continues. “A lot just stay a year. That is hard because there is a lot of training we have given them. We found with older people who are interested in working with cows that they generally grew up on a dairy or have been milking their whole lives and they are not as interested in that quality/efficiency balance. They are interested in doing what they have always done. Our core values don’t fit well with people who have a vested interest in doing what they have always done. We found with older people that it was hard because there is a lot of training we have given them. We found with older people who have been insistent on it. We have a lot of families with little kids you’d see it as nagging, Paul says, “they see it as learning to do it right. We try to be clear at the beginning about what we want. But people who have been doing it all their lives feel: ‘Just leave me alone, will you?’ But we don’t. We want a certain standard and insist on it. We have a lot of families with little kids coming into this yard and we don’t intend to kill any of them!

One of the things Amy and Paul are insistent upon is management intensive grazing.

“We do two paddocks each day,” Paul explains, “one after each milking. When it gets hot we sometimes do as many as four or five. We have found that we can keep them eating and they will break up their bunching up pattern. ‘Grass follows cows,’ is an old adage. In other words, overstocking is beneficial. Not overgrazing, but overstocking. Plants evolved with ruminants so the more they are being grazed, up to a point, the more they respond with growth. But you do need to move them and manage the intervals correctly. We’re like OCD about doing an Alan Savory-type system with paddocks, and moving the cows quickly onto new grass.”

Although most of the cows’ feed is grass, the couple do feed a little grain. They feel it is possible to do a 100% grass dairy, but it takes spectacular quality grass and spectacular quality management. They are not there yet.

“With decent grass and management,” Paul states, “you can easily grow plenty enough protein for the cows. But getting enough energy into them is way harder. It is possible on paper, but very hard to actually achieve. There is a tendency for milk from 100% grass dairies to be out of balance, with too much protein. You can see it in what their manure looks like – green liquid. The flavor is also often ‘barny’.”

Sidehill struggles with that problem the first week or two in May when they put the cows out on grass. May grass has a very high protein content, something like 30%. So it takes them two weeks to transition the cows off of winter feed and onto a primarily fresh grass diet.

“The ways cows evolved,” Amy reasons, “was to raise one calf and enough milk to feed that one calf. But we are talking about dairy cows who now produce that calf and enough milk for another 5 or 6 calves. The energy demand to produce 5 or 7 or 8 gallons of milk a day is gigantic. As humans are demanding so much more than that grass-fed diet can deliver.”

Paul feels that ‘100% grass-fed’ is a wonderful thing, and there is a market for it, but it is a fundamentalism, too. It is attractive in the same way that fundamentalism is, it oversimplifies.

“We don’t feed that much grain,” he states. “We feed an average of 5.6 pounds per day. A conventional dairy with Holsteins might be feeding 30 pounds. If you figure about 45 pounds of dry matter intake a day is what they get, the grain is maybe 12 or 13% of that, which is pretty low. It’s about one scoop a day for a 1200 pound animal.

“We are trying to support their genetic inclination to produce milk from grass,” he continues, and trying to keep them from getting skinny. ‘We’ve seen lots of skin and bones Jerseys on farms that are trying to not feed any grain.’

Amy and Paul believe a big limiting factor here in terms of grass production is that it was a potato farm. Ivy said in his dad’s time and his they never limed the land. Potatoes like a low pH he said, because it helps with scab. So the couple have been spreading high calcium lime every fall, trying to bring up the pH and the calcium.

The right number of cows to milk at Sidehill is about 40, they feel. This farm could carry more, Amy says, but 40 seems right. Every year they build about 40, they feel. This farm could carry more, Amy and Paul believe a big limiting factor here in terms of grass production is that it was a potato farm. Ivy said in his dad’s time and his they never limed the land. Potatoes like a low pH he said, because it helps with scab. So the couple have been spreading high calcium lime every fall, trying to bring up the pH and the calcium.

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For the pork, Paul and Amy were raising a crop of 20-25 pigs every year. Getting them all back at once from the slaughterhouse (they use Vermont Packinghouse in North Springfield, VT — owned by Black River Produce and certified for organic slaughter — which is the closest USDA approved processor) taxed their storage. They had to plug in a freezer truck for three months until the pork was sold.

Now they have a young pig farmer raise the hogs for them. They send him colostrum, so he is raising them as they did — on forage and organic grain. He staggers his pork deliveries.

Sidehill has a farm store where the raw milk, dairy products, and meat can be picked up. They could expand and carry other things there as well, says Amy, but she's not sure they need more to do!

Amy and Paul have strong values, but running a business has made them thoughtful about how far they can live them and stay viable.

“From what we know of it,” adds Paul, “which we approve of, especially since we don’t have to implement it tomorrow. But with it was the family medical leave act. It is a good thing— decent and humane and civilized— but for small businesses like ours it is terrifying. We have to give people up to 26 weeks off. You get 12 weeks for bonding with a new child, fathers or mothers, 20 weeks to take care of a sick family member, and up to 26 weeks for a sick family member as a caregiver. You don’t only get paid leave if you pay into a trust fund to put the money there, and we don’t have to pay into it because they have exempted employers of less than $50 people. But we need to fill in while those workers are gone.

“We are big on vacations, also,” he continues. “Once you have been here a year you get a week, two years two weeks, three years three full weeks off. We have actually been discussing giving four weeks for five years or longer, and the goal is to get to six. Right now, when someone takes a week we try to get ahead on yogurt the week before so we can have a little bit of a lull that week. But you can’t do that for 12 weeks, or 20. So a big piece of this is just to have a big enough staff than some can fill in for others who are gone. Otherwise, if someone is gone for 20 weeks, it is going to seem like a real emergency.”

“Plus,” adds Amy, “we are going to be paying everyone else overtime to fill in, and the base minimum wage will be $15. Plus if you only have one person doing a certain job, and they go on leave, are you going to hire someone else to do it, train them, and then let them go when the first person comes back? Tell them they have to leave now?!”

“An interesting thing about the business end of things,” concludes Paul, philosophically, “is that it is a real check on the degree to which you are capable of living your values. If someone asked us in the abstract whether we supported these things we would say: ‘Oh, yes. Definitely!’ But if someone says: ‘Okay, now you have to figure out how to make it work on the business end,’ You say: ‘Do I really support this? I want to. But can I make this work?’”

The couple is very conscious of the difficult situation in which many American dairy farms find themselves.

“What has brought American dairy low,” declares Amy, “is the idea that you can just produce as much as you want and somebody is going to buy it. But demand is going down now, so of course prices are not going to stay up.”

From what we know of it,” adds Paul, “it seems like the dairy quota program that they have in Canada keeping down supply has worked really well in keeping family farms viable. They do it with a 250% tariff, I think. But now that is ending under American pressure. I guess now we have to force Canadians to buy American milk under the new trade treaty.”

“We felt everyone who bought our yogurt knew who we were,” Amy explains, “and could come and ask questions. So it seemed like access to your local farmer trumped paper work.

“But when we started distributing in Eastern Mass,” she continues, “we realized we were going to have customers who had no idea who we were. They were never going to come out to the farm and they needed some sense of who we were. They needed some criterion by which to choose their food. It seemed like certifying the product was the obvious way to do that. Organic embodies our core values. Our final yogurt certification just came in during August, with the certification of the other farm that we buy milk from.”

Paul and Amy are not very happy with the National Organic Program, however. They feel it has discredited itself by failing to uphold the values it represented and by allowing industry to get their fingers into it.
In addition to spraying fresh udders after calving, Andrew and his wife Sandy and their sons Charlie and Chris operate Dykstra Farms near Burlington, Washington, where their 400-cow milking herd produces for the organic market of udder management. Always wash and dry teats thoroughly before milking. For external application to the udder only, after milking, as an essential component of udder management. Always wash and dry teats thoroughly before milking. We've been using Udder Comfort™ for over 6 years. We love it mainly for fresh cows and bucket cows. We use it on all fresh animals along with hydroponic barley fodder instead of grain. In addition to spraying fresh udders after calving, the Dykstras say they run prefresh bucket cows. We use it on all fresh animals along with hydroponic barley fodder instead of grain. In addition to spra

Potato Farmer Ivy Donovan farmed the land before Paul and Amy. Although he died in 2017, his spirit is still abroad on the farm.

“We've been using Udder Comfort™ for over 6 years. We love it mainly for fresh cows and bucket cows. We use it on all fresh animals after calving,” says Andrew and Charlie Dykstra during the WOPA conference in November. Andrew and his wife Sandy and their sons Charlie and Chris operate Dykstra Farms near Burlington, Washington, where their 400-cow milking herd produces for the organic market mainly on pasture and grass hay diets, along with hydroponic barley fodder instead of grain.

In addition to spraying fresh udders after calving, the Dykstras say they run prefresh heifers through the parlor and “spray udders before calving to improve milk letdown when they calve.”

“You haven't worked out the technicalities of the project,” admits Amy, “how they label the products, how they publicize the program. But for people who take the time to find out about it, ROP is the program that I think they want. It is what we thought we were getting with the USDA label. Those are the people we are trying to provide food for.

“We would be open to helping promote the ROP label if it would help,” she continues. “There are so many farms transitioning to organic now for the paycheck or premium, but our journey has been all about values and how beings should be treated. It seems like the Real Organic Project could be this shining light that can save things. But if it falls flat, that is the end of organic. People just won't trust the word anymore.”

They are also impressed with the people who are involved in ROP. They feel that with such an outstanding list of participants, excellent farmers and people of integrity, it will be a quality program.

In addition, the ROP doesn't require and changes from Sidehill. All their requirements are things that they are doing already. There are some who support the ROP as a way to help small farmers against the big corporations that have recently been allowed to use the organic label – the Auroras and Wholesum Harvests. But Paul and Amy don't think organic should be limited by issues of scale or lifestyle. For them it is simply about having good rules and following them.

“It is not that we are against corporations getting involved in organic,” Paul insists. “Fundamentally, that is a good thing. It means that there is enough demand that the big people, who are really smart about business, are interested. In our system that leads to positive change on a big scale, not just fiddling around the edges.

“And I don’t really see organics as lifestyle,” he continues. “I see it as a way of producing food that proceeds with tremendous respect for the soil and for the health of people. You can make whatever kind of lifestyle you want within that. There are some corporations out there with some pretty good values. Patagonia for example. Stonyfield is actually a pretty good company too. I think they actually care about trying to do the right thing.

“I think there is going to be room in the marketplace for all different scales as long as we all follow the same rules,” he concludes. “Aurora is probably always going to be able to produce milk cheaper than a hundred family farms in Massachusetts because of economies of scale – mechanization is cheaper than paying for labor, even if the labor is getting low agricultural wages. Our experience has been that if you make the right investment in a piece of equipment, it can add an order of magnitude to a person’s productivity. An example would be our yogurt filling machine compared to trying to fill cups and quarts by hand. We can package 300 gallons in just under 2 hours. We probably could do 50 gallons in two hours when we did it by hand. That’s a six times multiplier.”

Amy supports Paul’s argument with another example: “I used to wash and fill every single one of our glass milk bottles by hand. I got a little submersible...
whirlly brush and that improved things. Then we bought a bottle washing machine out of Canada that washes 20 bottles at a time. It sets the right temperature and does it in 5 minutes. And you aren’t killing your back bending over a sink!”

“Most people can’t actually enjoy the privilege we have had,” she continues, “to grow our own food. They are going to have to buy it. They can research what they buy, make good choices. But not everybody can control that by growing it. We have a substantial garden, but we certainly eat corporate products. We don’t can our own tomatoes anymore. We buy organic tomato sauce -- and it’s delicious!”

“But it is the trying to change the rules that is the issue,” Paul concludes, “compromising the values, not actually grazing the cows, big dairies like Aurora are not following the same rules as we are. That makes the store brand organic milk that they are producing much less expensive than the name brand organic milk.”

Amy Klippenstein and Paul Lacinski on their scenic Hawley dairy farm, showing views of New Hampshire behind them.

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photo by Jack Kittredge

Amy Klippenstein and Paul Lacinski of Sidehill Farm in Hawley, Massachusetts, whose land is already certified organic under the National Organic Program, are among local farmers who hope to ‘add-on’ an additional certification by the Real Organic Project.

This newspaper contains news and features about organic food and farming in the Northeastern US, as well as a Special Supplement on

Alternative Certification Programs