Support for Organic High as the Critics Keep Coming

Another article, this time a blog post in *Scientific American* online, shows again that as organic grows, so do the critics questioning organic integrity. But first, the good news. A Thomson Reuters-NPR Health Poll released in July finds that 58% of Americans say they choose organic food when they have the opportunity, with the highest percentage (63%) in the under 35 age group.

Addressing the Critics

Now, the claim that organic isn't what it is believed to be and can't feed the world. Here are the arguments: (i) organic uses pesticides, (ii) organic isn't healthier, (iii) organic is not better for the environment because it doesn't allow genetically modified organisms (GMOs) that reduce pesticide use, and (iv) organic and conventional can coexist, so there's no reason to choose sides. Certainly, the pages of this newsletter and Beyond Pesticides' website and *Daily News* have cataloged the (i) small number of inputs allowed in organic production (some select approved pesticides) compared with the thousands of hazardous synthetic inputs used in conventional food production, (ii) health benefits of reducing pesticide residues in organic food production, (iii) documented problems of increased pesticide use and insect resistance with GMOs (*see p19 in this issue*), and (iv) importance of transitioning all of agriculture to sustainable organic practices (which can feed the world) (*see p8, Prince Charles, in this issue*), if we are serious about managing global climate change and protecting the resources we need to survive –air, water, and soil.

Critics are often not familiar with actual organic practices and policy, the organic system plan, farm inspections, the National List of allowed and prohibited substances, the standards of the *Organic Foods Production Act* (OFPA), the public process for evaluating and regulating practices and inputs, the focus on evaluating cradle-to-grave impacts of inputs on health, the environment, and biodiversity, and the restriction on allowing any synthetic material unless its essentiality is determined. Nor do they seem to appreciate how breathtakingly different the organic core values, principles, and legal standards are from the chemical-intensive side, with the regulatory assumption of chemical benefits, and narrow assessment of potential adverse impacts on health and the environment. Missed by critics is a developed discussion of soil health, microbiology, and biomass –the foundation of sustainable organic soil management that rejects the use of synthetic fertilizers with their adverse effects on beneficial soil organisms.

Protecting Organic Integrity

From my vantage point, the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) deliberations, which always come back to organic principles, can feel pretty wonky –should the substance (used or proposed for use as an input in organic production) be considered synthetic, given the production method? Was the chemical change caused by a natural process or did it result from the introduction of a synthetic chemical? If a synthetic chemical was used in the production of the substance but does not cause chemical change, is the residue of that synthetic significant? How do we define significant? While these questions may seem complex, far removed from the farmers' and consumers' expectation of organic, they are actually at the heart of the matter.

The NOSB, as usual, delved into these organic integrity issues at its Spring 2011 meeting. The Board rejected a 'natural' classification for a liquid fertilizer, known as corn steep liquor, which is a byproduct of the corn wet milling production process that introduces sulfur dioxide into the mix to break the chemical bonds of corn. Beyond finding that this is not a natural process, USDA researchers have been concerned about the burning of sulfur, which contributes to acid rain, at many of the corn processing plants. Similarly, the Board rejected a proposal to allow synthetic residues in organic inputs without National List review and up to the tolerance or allowable limits set by FDA or EPA. In so doing, the NOSB is affirming that the standards of OFPA are more protective than other laws.

Antibiotics in Organic Apple and Pear Production

It will come as a surprise to many organic consumers that the antibiotics streptomycin and tetracycline (*see p12 in this issue*) are permitted to be used in organic apple and pear production to control the bacterial disease fire blight. There has been controversy over the allowance of these chemicals in organic fruit production since they were first approved by a split vote in 1995, and now the Board has voted to a phase out in 2014. Concerns include: (i) potential for promoting resistance to the antibiotics in human pathogens, (ii) Inconsistency with the ban on antibiotic use in animals, and (iii) Incompatibility with organic and sustainable agriculture. The market has shifted to varieties that are particularly susceptible to fire blight, including the apple varieties Gala, Fuji, and Pink Lady, and common pear varieties. In addition, some cultural practices, such as spacing of trees and pruning techniques, appear to be a factor. Since organic is about choices that affect public health and the environment, the Board must question the planting of varieties that are reliant on hazardous production practices. Numerous varieties of apples and pears are resistant to fire blight. Our challenge now is to engage the public in the NOSB process, with multiple opportunities for organic voices to be heard through written and oral comments.

More in This Issue

In this issue: (i) in his own words, a former groundskeeper for the Yale University Golf Course describes a story of poisoning and contamination, a cover up, and lack of enforcement, (ii) the Congressional attack on the *Clean Water Act*, and (iii) the fight to stop GMOs. We'll be in touch.

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