

# The Kansas City Food Circle

## UPDATE

Summer, 1998

### **New USDA Organic Rules Raise Serious Concerns**

In December the USDA proposed rules for organic food production and processing. This proposal has left many in the organic food industry shocked and dismayed. Practices will be allowed that may facilitate the industry's co-option by Big Ag interests. The USDA also has refused to rule out irradiation, the use of sewage sludge as fertilizer and the use of genetically engineered crops. The USDA is accepting comments on the new rules until March 16. Comments are more seriously considered if they are specific to language in the documents. See enclosed "Quick Comment Mailer" you can use to make cogent comments without reading hundreds of pages of sleep-inducing regulations. Also, add that irradiation, sewage sludge and genetic engineering are not your idea of natural, organic production and processing practices for the food you want for your family.

#### **Food Consumer Gag Rule Introduced in Missouri House**

Known as Oprah Winfrey Laws, "veggie libel;" or "food disparagement" laws, thirteen states have passed laws making it illegal to criticize food or agriculture. Describing HB 923, recently introduced into the Missouri House by Rep. Sam Leake, Ken Midkiff (of the Missouri Sierra Club) called it the "Food Nazi Act." Anyway, you get the picture. According to Midkiff, rather than addressing the problems caused by industrial-scale agriculture, or engaging in a dialogue with those critical of concentrated animal feeding operations and heavy use of chemicals in crop production, the Farm Bureau, the Cattlemen's Association and other industrial agribusiness interests have been conducting a nationwide campaign to pass such bills in state legislatures to stifle criticism. Please contact your Missouri legislators and tell them to throw HB 923 in the garbage where it belongs. If you visit your representative, it might help to wear an arm band and jackboots.

#### **Why You Can't Believe Everything Scientists Tell You**

A recent study published by the New England Journal of Medicine (Vol. 338, No.2) found a strong association between the published positions of medical journal authors on the safety of a certain heart medicine and their financial relationships with pharmaceutical manufacturers. 63% of the authors surveyed had a financial relationship with either a manufacturer of the product or a competing product, but only two of seventy articles at issue disclosed the author's potential conflict of interest. What a surprise!

#### **New Books**

**Eating with Conscience: The Bioethics of Food**, by Dr. Michael W. Fox. Michael W. Fox is vice president of The Humane Society of the United States and an extremely articulate and moving communicator.

While a vegetarian himself, he does not judge others who eat meat, rather he seeks to educate farmers and ranchers who are looking for humane ways to raise farm animals, as well as ways to preserve the limited resources of clean air, water and soil. He also seeks to educate consumers so as to reduce support for inhumane factory farms. It is the unsustainable industrialization of animal agriculture that pressures family farmers who would rather do it right. Paperback, \$14.95. See address below.

**Food Pets Die For**, by Ann Martin goes behind the scenes of the pet food industry and examines what's in pet food. Few regulations exist. The author offers healthy alternatives for feeding animal companions.

Paperback, \$12.95 - Both books available at New Sage Press, PO. Box 607, Troutdale, OR 97060 (503) 695-2211, e-mail: [newsage@teleport.com](mailto:newsage@teleport.com)

#### **The Export Connection**

The conclusion of new international trade agreements since 1993, including NAFTA and the new round of GATT, along with other factors, has caused a surge in exports by U.S. pork producers. This has created a very large downside for rural residents who don't enjoy having giant hog factories for neighbors. This trend was reinforced by tightening regulations in Europe which has encouraged Dutch and Spanish pork producers to set up shop in the U.S. and by hoof and mouth disease that has wiped out Taiwan's hog industry, previously serving the Japanese market. Several Japanese firms have also located in Texas and Wyoming. This is what globalization really means: the search for the weakest environmental and social standards.

The January 1998 issue of the National News Reporters lists the following recent evidence of revolt in the hinterlands of the U.S.:

1. North Carolina legislature passed a moratorium on new hog factories until March, 1999.
2. Officials in Hopkins County, Kentucky, asked Vail, Inc., a Spanish company, not to build a \$7 million hog factory in their county.
3. Holt County, Nebraska, officials approved a moratorium on construction of hog facilities for two years or until zoning regulations can be enacted.
4. Davis Co., Iowa, now requires hog operators to post a bond to ensure cleanup if they go out of business.
5. Citizens in southwest Utah mobilized against plans to produce 2.5 million hogs per year.

In Kansas, 19 or 20 counties, which have held referenda, have rejected corporate hog farming by a margin of 2 to 1. A bill to impose a two year moratorium has been introduced into the state legislature. The Asian financial crisis and overproduction by the corporate giants has greatly lowered the price of pork in recent months. While this may slow down the assault on our countryside, it will also put some family farmers out of business. It may take a while, but we believe the best approach is to deal with local farmers you know and bypass this crazy, unsustainable system.

# Proposed National Organic Rules Up For Public Comment

USDA released for public comment its proposed rules for federal standards for organic production and products on December 16, 1997. The deadline for groups and individuals to comment is April 30, 1998.

While issuance of the rules is a milestone for organic farmers providing long awaited recognition for organic production, the response in the organics field has been far from positive. The question that organic farmers, processors and consumers must decide is if this is a good faith effort, or an attempt by the USDA to weaken and co-opt the use of the word "organic." Some industry leaders argue that the rule can and will be improved through the public comment process, but only if organic farmers and processors make their thoughts known.

The organic industry's primary concern is that the proposed regulations weaken existing standards now maintained by private certification organizations, and thereby threatens the integrity of the "certified organic" label.

The most controversy surrounds what the proposed regulations do not do, which is to specifically prohibit the use of genetically engineered or modified organisms, irradiation, sewage sludge, and intensive confinement of livestock in the production and processing of organic products. The National Organic Standards Board, the 14 member committee of organic farmers, processors and consumer interests, appointed to draft the national standards, had recommended relatively strict standards, including a prohibition on genetically engineered organisms.

USDA Secretary Glickman stated that they deliberately left open controversial questions of bio-engineering and irradiation until after the comment period. Organic industry leaders argue that by not taking a firm position on these issues up front, USDA is showing its alliance with biotechnology, factory farm and conventional agribusiness interests.

Generally, the law seems to be less strict than the rules under which organic farmers operate now. The rules concerning seeds, planting stock and transplants are very similar to the ones in use now. Rules governing soil fertility and pest management substances appear similar to a point, disallowing fertilizers with active synthetic substances, and presenting a hierarchy system for pest control based on cultural practices and prevention, followed by mechanical and non-toxic controls and then botanical substances.

But then the new rule allows some synthetic pesticides and substances to be used in processing, substances which are not approved by some private certifiers, or the National Organic Standards Board, or the California Certified Organic Farmers Association, to name a few.

The proposed rules also have organic livestock producers upset with their allowance of antibiotics, parasiticides, and organic versus non-organic grain ratios in animals sold as organic. Currently most private certification programs insist that any livestock treated with antibiotics must be pulled from the herd and not sold as organic. The new rules open the door for producers to reintroduce treated animals into the market.

In addition to production practices, one section on Labeling ("Use of Terms or Statements That Directly or Indirectly Imply that a Product is Organically Produced and Handled") raises a red flag for not just organic producers. Terms or phrases that directly or indirectly imply that a product has been organically produced will be prohibited on the label unless it was produced in accordance with the Act's regulations. This could affect labels such as "produced without synthetic pesticides," "no drugs or hormones used," "pesticide free farm." In other words, the rules could affect consumer and marketing information for other than certified organic products.

Another issue is the question of whether a state or private certifier can have stricter standards than the federal rule. The answer appears to be no, not if it wants to be called organic.

**How to Make Comments.** A copy of the proposed rules is available by credit card purchase for \$8 from 202-51 2-1 800. Request the National Organic Program Proposed Rule, December 16, Federal Register. Or check your local library to see if they have copies of the Federal Register. The Kansas Rural Center has a copy for review. The rule can also be accessed (about 134 pages) from the USDA website at <http://www.iquest.net/ofma/sidebyside.html>

The Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture is also preparing an analysis of the rules. Contact the Campaign at 914-744-8448 or e-mail: [Campaign@magiccarpet.com](mailto:Campaign@magiccarpet.com)

Comments must be sent by April 30<sup>th</sup> to:  
**Eileen Stommes, Deputy Administrator**  
**USDA-AMS-TM-NOP**  
**Room 4007-S, AGStop 0275**  
**P.O. Box 96456**  
**Washington DC 20090-6458**

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