

# How much of organic food is really organic?

By Barry Estabrook, Atlantic

When is “USDA Organic” not organic? More often than you probably realize. The USDA keeps a “National List” of inorganic products that can legally go into foods labeled as organic. The casings for those tasty USDA Organic sausages can come from conventionally raised animals that have been fed antibiotics. The hops in your favorite organic beer can be sprayed with all manner of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Strawberries can be labeled as organic even if they had their start in a conventional nursery.

According to USDA rules, if 95 percent of a product is made up of organic ingredients, it can be called organic. If it’s 70 percent organic, the label can read “made with organic ingredients.”

For the past several years, public interest groups such as the Cornucopia Institute have complained that the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), which has the power to determine what materials can – and cannot – be used in organic production, too often weakens regulations in the face of intense lobbying by corporations who are more interested in the higher profits conferred by the word “organic” than in strong and meaningful standards.

Recently, five new members were nominated for five-year terms to the 15-member board. The Obama administration has had a schizophrenic relationship with agriculture, on one hand cozying up to the likes of Monsanto Co. by advocating for GM crops, and on the other hand winning plaudits from small farm and organic advocates for programs like Know Your Farmer Know your Food and the White House organic garden.

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