

Organic food movement hits Capitol Hill

By Mary Clarie Jalonick, AP

WASHINGTON – The organic food industry is gaining clout on Capitol Hill, prompted by rising consumer demand and its entry into traditional farm states. But that isn't going over well with everyone in Congress.

Tensions between conventional and organic agriculture boiled over this week during a late-night House Agriculture Committee debate on a sweeping farm bill that has for decades propped up traditional crops and largely ignored organics.

When Rep. Kurt Schrader, D-Ore., a former organic farmer, offered an amendment to make it easier for organic companies to organize industrywide promotional campaigns, there was swift backlash from some farm-state Republicans, with one member saying he didn't want to see the industry get a free ride and another complaining about organics' "continued assault on agriculture."

"That's one of the things that has caught me and raises my concerns, is that industry's lack of respect for traditional agriculture," said Rep. Austin Scott, R-Ga., referring to some organic companies' efforts to reduce the number of genetically modified crops in the marketplace.

At the same time, Scott acknowledged that he and his wife buy organic foods.

Growing consumer interest in organics has proved tough for some Republicans on the committee to ignore. Eight Republicans, most of them newer members of the committee, joined with all of the panel's Democrats in supporting the amendment, which was adopted 29-17.

Rep. Vicky Hartzler, a Missouri Republican who owns a farm equipment business and a corn and soybean farm, said she supported the amendment not only because helping organics is good for agriculture but because many of her constituents eat organic foods.

“Organics are a niche market in agriculture with a growing market share, so it makes sense for me to allow farmers to invest some of their own funds to promote their products,” she said.

The amendment would allow the organic industry to organize and pay for a unified industry promotional campaign called a “checkoff” that is facilitated by the Agriculture Department but is no cost to the government. These promotional programs have traditionally been limited to individual commodities or crops, producing familiar campaigns like “Got Milk?” and “Beef: It’s What’s for Dinner.”

The amendment would not set up such a program for organics, but it would allow USDA to approve an organic promotional campaign if the industry decided it wanted one. Laura Batcha of the Organic Trade Association says one reason the industry would approve a campaign is that many organic producers are concerned that consumers don’t understand that products labeled “natural” aren’t necessarily organic, which requires certification.

The organic industry has exploded in the last decade, with \$35 billion in sales and 10 percent growth just last year. There are more than 17,000 certified organic businesses in the country.

Producers of organic crops and conventional crops have long been at odds, as organic products have grabbed market share – more than 4 percent of food and beverage sales in 2011 – and the industry has advertised organic foods as healthier than other foods. Organic products are required to be certified by

the USDA and are grown without pesticides and genetically modified ingredients, mainstays of traditional agriculture.

Government-managed promotional checkoff programs like the one that would be allowed under the amendment are required to be positive and not disparage other products, and some lawmakers seemed wary that such a campaign would be possible.

“How do I present organic pork without disparaging non-organic pork?” asked House Agriculture Chairman Frank Lucas, R-Okla., who opposed the amendment.

Mike Conaway, R-Texas, took issue with part of the amendment that would allow the organic producers to opt out of other commodity campaigns, an option that isn't given to conventional producers.

“Looks to me like they have a free ride on this thing,” Conaway said, in an at times angry exchange with Schrader.

Despite the rancor, the chances that the amendment will become law are good, as the Senate Agriculture Committee added the same amendment to its version of the farm bill.

Schrader told his colleagues that embracing organics is essential to appealing to consumers in a time when big farms are often demonized by popular culture. He said that many young people are coming back to farms because of nontraditional agriculture.

“American agriculture is under siege,” he said. “Urban folks do not understand where their food and fiber comes from. ... The point here is to hopefully position American agriculture where we're not always trying to catch up to what the American consumer wants.”