

Opinion: Organic standards being eroded

By Ronnie Cummins

The Organic Consumers Association has a long history of defending the integrity of organic standards.

Last September, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, under pressure from corporate interests represented by the Organic Trade Association, made our job harder.

They also made it more important than ever for consumers to do their homework, even when buying USDA certified organic products.

Without any input from the public, the USDA changed the way the National Organic Standards Board decides which non-organic materials are allowed in certified organic. The change all but guarantees that when the NOSB meets every six months, the list of non-organic and synthetic materials allowed in organic will get longer and longer.

The USDA's new rule plays to the cabal of the self-appointed organic elite who want to degrade organic standards and undermine organic integrity. For consumers, farmers, co-ops and businesses committed to high organic standards, the USDA's latest industry-friendly move is a clarion call to fight back against the corporate-led, government-sanctioned attack on organic standards.

The NOSB, a federal advisory committee appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture, decides what is allowed on the National List of non-organic materials approved for use in organic. Prior to last September's new ruling, each non-organic material on the list had to be reviewed every five years, using what's called the "sunset process." Under this

process, five years after a non-organic material was added to the National List, it would be automatically removed, unless a two-thirds majority of the NOSB board voted to keep the material on the list.

The intent behind this process was clear. Maximize flexibility for the organic industry, minimize the use of non-organic materials in organic, and encourage continuous improvement of the organic standard.

But last September, the USDA reversed this process. Now, instead of automatically coming up for review after five years, each non-organic material will automatically – and indefinitely – stay on the National List unless a two-thirds majority of the NOSB board votes to remove it. And that's not likely to happen, given that the 15-member board of the NOSB is stacked with industry reps who consistently vote with industry against consumers.

Should you just give up on the organic label? Absolutely not. With all its flaws, USDA Organic is still the only credible and comprehensive certification program in the natural foods marketplace. The new rules mean you'll have to scrutinize labels more carefully than ever. But even then, you won't get the whole picture when it comes to non-organic substances in organics.

Certain non-organic or synthetic materials can be used in up to 5 percent of a "USDA Organic" product, and in up to 30 percent of a "Made with Organic" product.

Under the new rules, the list of non-organic or synthetic ingredients allowed at those percentages will likely grow. But here's something most consumers don't realize: The National List isn't just about synthetic and non-organic ingredients that are allowed in food. The list also governs every non-organic material or synthetic material used in the production of organic food, from farm to fork. As that list, too, grows,

organic standards will continue to erode. And as a consumer, you'll have a difficult time identifying those materials as they won't be listed on the product's label.

What non-organic materials should you look for on food labels? Here are a few of the worst ones:

- Carrageenan, an additive linked to gastrointestinal inflammation and higher rates of colon cancer.
- Synthetic nutrients including DHA and ARA which have been linked to severe gastrointestinal distress, prolonged periods of vomiting and painful bloating.
- Sausage casings made from processed intestines.

What won't you find on food labels, but should be aware that the NOSB has approved for organic? And because of the new rule, likely won't revisit?

- Synthetic methionine: In 2001, the NOSB approved the synthetic version of methionine, a sulfur-based essential amino acid, for use in livestock feed – but only, as the Rodale Institute points out, after organic poultry farmers realized the substance was already in the feed they were using. As long as synthetic methionine remains on the list of approved substances in organics, organic farmers can continue to keep chickens confined. Why? Because, again according to the Rodale Institute, synthetic methionine keeps confined chickens healthy. Take the synthetic out of the feed, and you have to allow the chickens access to outdoor pastures in order to maintain their health. But wouldn't that be a good thing?
- Genetically engineered vaccines: Genetically modified organisms, and the genetic engineering process itself, are not allowed in certified organic products. But there's one exception. Genetically engineered vaccines can be used in organic livestock production, on the condition that the vaccines are included on the National List. So which

genetically engineered vaccines did the NOSB approve for the National List? All of them. Instead of reviewing the safety of each vaccine individually, as the law clearly intends, the NOSB included all genetically engineered vaccines on the list, as a single group of “synthetic substances.” Now that the sunset process has been weakened, what are the chances of getting genetically engineered vaccines off of the list of approved substances? Next to none.

- Antibiotics: Under organic standards, antibiotics can't be used in animals. But there's a little-known loophole applicable only to poultry, that says the standard doesn't take effect until “the second day of life.” So as it turns out, the eggs that hatch into organic chickens are routinely injected with an antibiotic called gentamicin, which is also used to treat bacterial skin infections in humans. Because of the loophole, the use of gentamicin in organic poultry production has never been subject to the NOSB's sunset process. The process does, however, govern the use of antibiotics sprayed on apple and pear trees to control something called fire blight. Under the old rules, the NOSB voted to end the use of those antibiotics – tetracycline and streptomycin – as of Oct. 21, 2014. But industry is fighting that ruling. If it succeeds, and the NOSB ever re-lists those antibiotics, the changes to the sunset process will make it more difficult than ever to get tetracycline and streptomycin off of the National List of approved substances.

- Mutagenesis: There's another loophole in the “no genetic engineering in organics” standard. It's called mutagenesis. In 2011, the NOSB approved synthetic DHA and ARA for use in organics. As mentioned above, these synthetic nutrients, used in baby formula, are linked to side effects. But what you won't learn from reading the labels on baby formula, or any other product containing DHA or ARA, is that these synthetic nutrients are derived from mutated microorganisms, created through a process called mutagenesis. We believe mutagenesis

is a form of genetic engineering, and others support our position. But when Martek Biosciences Corp., the manufacturer of synthetic DHA, argued that mutagenesis should be allowed because the process is nothing more than a form of classical seed breeding, the NOSB sided with the company. So while consumers can see DHA and ARA on product labels, few will know that they are produced using a technique that has dangers similar to genetic engineering.

The NOSB meets again April 29-May 2. For the first time, it will be operating under the new rule. The USDA didn't give the public an opportunity to comment on its change to the sunset process, but that doesn't mean the agency is immune to public outcry. Starting with President Obama and USDA Secretary Vilsack, we need to press USDA leadership to reverse this disastrous new rule.

Ronnie Cummins is director of Organic Consumers Association.